

The Meaning of Love as Lived

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Abstract

Love is a universal phenomenon that brings people closer together emotionally. However, the literature suggests that men and women may differ in experiencing love and perceiving romantic information. This qualitative study aimed to explore the meaning of love for men from a phenomenological perspective. Twelve participants who identified as men were interviewed regarding their experiences with dating and romantic love. There were several recurring themes across the interviews, with the most important ones being the early experiences of dating; sexual intimacy; early meaning of love, change, and stability of the definition; depth of love; experience of love; inability to verbally describe the feeling of love, tendency to demonstrate love through actions rather than words, and authenticity; and societal expectations and culture. The results of the study suggested that the essence of love is to enter another person's world and be able to relate. Relatability was further divided into past, present, and future categories. This study intended to increase the general understanding of love and its phenomenology, which in turn can aid individuals and professionals in comprehending and resolving issues concerning love.

Keywords: love, relatability, verbal expression, male experience, phenomenology

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The Meaning of Love as Lived

Whether in the bible's teachings or classical Persian poetry, *love* has been spoken about for centuries. Love is a mysterious concept that has been a topic of interest for artists and researchers for decades. Many thinkers have tried to explain different aspects of love. The psychiatrist Moradi (2019) described this complex human experience:

Love is madness; love is betrayal, attachment, loss, confusion, obsession, and compulsion; love is all of them, and at the same time none of them. Love, as universal an experience as it is, remains unknown, unknowable, indefinable, and never the same. (p. 235)

This phenomenon seems more complicated than a single explanation.

A Question Posed

A few years ago, I was sitting at a restaurant, hanging out and having dinner with a man I was dating. It was 2 months into our relationship, so I was fairly comfortable with him. We were having a trivial conversation, and he said something that made me laugh. When I started laughing, I frivolously said, "I love you." He suddenly stopped and looked at me with a great surprise in his eyes and said, "Really!? Thank you!" and I felt completely confused and slightly offended by his response.

A couple of days after that night, I brought up how I was feeling about his response and asked what was going on for him. He answered that he had never said, "I love you," to anyone and he would only say it to someone that he thought he was going to marry one day and have children with. He also thought his definition was what I meant by saying "I love you" to him, so it surprised him to hear it only after 2 months of dating. However, that was not my definition. So,

I clarified what I had meant by the words, which was that I cared about him very much and I was happy that we were together. “I love you” did not mean anything more at that point in time.

Although he and I had the chance to clarify where we were coming from and what love meant for us individually, I wondered why I had never asked anyone else what they had meant by saying “I love you” to me before. Nor had I thought about or clarified what I had meant by saying the words. So, I started thinking more about what love meant to me, what I was trying to convey by saying “I love you” to the people in my life, and what it meant to love someone. However, the questions remained about how other people define love.

I speculated that people might have different definitions of love and what “I love you” means to them, and I wanted to know more. I wanted to understand how people experience love, how they know they love someone, and what they need to know or experience before saying “I love you.”. I also wanted to know whether men had anything in common, as a group, about their beliefs and experiences with love. These thoughts roused my curiosity and prompted me to conduct this research, seeking the essence of love for this population. Accordingly, I outlined the research question for this study as “What is the meaning of love for men when it is disclosed through saying ‘I love you?’”

What is Love?

The literature includes explanations of love from multiple perspectives. Some authors have argued that love is a feeling, some looked at love as a voluntary behaviour, and some supported love within the evolutionary biological discipline. Yet, love does not have a single cohesive definition despite its universality (Jankowiak et al., 2015). The universality of love (de Munck et al., 2016; Jankowiak et al., 2015) suggests that this phenomenon has a biological basis (Sorokowski et al., 2017a) including, neural (Bartels & Zeki, 2004; Shih et al., 2022; Watanuki

& Akama, 2020; Yin et al., 2018), hormonal (Carter & Porges, 2013; Marazziti & Canale, 2004), and genetic components (Walum et al., 2008). Nevertheless, the internal feeling of romantic love privately experienced and perceived by individuals has not been sufficiently researched and fully understood (Bolmont et al., 2014).

Literature Review

Many researchers have attempted to understand love through various lenses. In this section, I describe the theories that dominate the literature.

Love as an Evolutionary Adaptation

From an evolutionary perspective, romantic relationships revolve around reproduction, commitment concerns, and parenting (Simpson, 2017). This perspective, which has also been supported by empirical research (e.g., Chang et al., 2017; Fletcher et al., 2015), suggests that confessing love can communicate a desire to form a long-term romantic relationship which is an advantage for raising offspring (Ackerman et al., 2011). Through an empirical study, Sorokowski et al. (2017b) observed a correlation between love and reproductive success. Using Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Love Scale – a tool for quantifying the qualitative aspects of love – the researchers measured the level of romantic love in members of the Hadza tribe of Tanzania and compared the results to the number of children they had. Sorokowski and colleagues (2017b) chose the Hadza as their subjects because they are hunter-gatherers and their lifestyle is similar to that of the early humans (Apicella et al., 2012). Finally, Sorokowski et al. (2017b) found that commitment and reproductive success were positively correlated in both sexes. Research results also indicated that the number of children correlated positively with passion and negatively with intimacy amongst women (Sorokowski et al., 2017b), a finding I explore further below.

Sternberg's Triangular Love Scale is a widely used and culturally universal tool (Sorokowski et al., 2021); it was developed based on Sternberg's triangular love theory which proposed that love encompasses three components: intimacy, passion, and commitment (Sternberg, 1986, 1997). The *intimacy* component of love includes feelings of closeness and connectedness. *Passion* includes sexual attraction, practices, and satisfaction. Finally,

commitment, also referred to as decision, includes one's willingness or dedication to maintaining feelings for the loved one.

Sternberg (1986) further suggested that love embraces a dynamic construct in which all components interact with each other. For example, lower levels of passion may lead to reduced commitment within a relationship (Carswell & Finkel, 2018). Sorokowski et al. (2017b) explained their results from an evolutionary point of view, suggesting that commitment helps maintain a relationship and a couple to stay together longer, increasing the chance of having children (Ranson, 1998). Sorokowski et al. (2017b) explained the discrepancies between men and women in how reproduction is correlated with intimacy and passion as an evolutionary adaptation.

From the evolutionary perspective, passion can increase the number of sexual encounters (Hopcroft, 2006). Therefore, Sorokowski et al. (2017b) suggested that due to a higher biological investment in parenting for women compared to men (e.g., pregnancy and breastfeeding), sexual attraction or passion may be a more critical factor for women than for men to engage in sexual activities which could result in reproduction. Furthermore, caregiving for offspring demands time, energy, and attention; consequently, there is less of those left for a couple to dedicate to connecting and maintaining intimacy. Among the Hadza tribe, having children decreases a mother's contribution to foraging, resulting in the father's higher activity providing for the family and consequently less availability for intimacy (Sorokowski et al., 2017b), thus explaining the negative correlation.

Love and Lust

Many researchers report that love and lust can be interdependent (Ackerman et al., 2011; Bartels & Zeki, 2000; Levine, 2005). Neuroimaging research has revealed that both love and lust

activate regions of the brain cortex that regulate self-esteem, goal-oriented behaviours, and body image, as well as areas of the subcortical brain that control motivation, positive emotions, euphoria, reward, and addiction (J. T. Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2013; S. Cacioppo et al., 2012). It is also suggested that sexual concerns in partners can interfere with the process of loving and being loved (Levine, 2005).

Nonetheless, many scientists insist that love and sexual interest are two independent experiences as they engage separate behavioural systems with distinct evolutionary functions (Diamond, 2003, 2004; Diamond & Dickenson, 2012; Gonzaga et al., 2006; Hatfield & Rapson, 2005). Neuroscience studies supported that love and sexual desire activate different parts of the insula. The posterior regions of the insula that are involved in concrete sensations, feelings, and responses are stimulated by sexual desire, whereas the anterior areas of the insula that are involved in relatively abstract, integrative presentations are triggered by love (J. T. Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2013; S. Cacioppo et al., 2012). Moreover, the ventral striatum, an area involved in immediate reward for naturally pleasurable experiences, is more activated by sexual desire, whereas the dorsal part of the striatum, a region involved in reward through operant conditioning, is more activated by love (J. T. Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2013; S. Cacioppo et al., 2012; Wyvell & Berridge, 2000). Hence, love and lust can occur independently or in combination; love is not a requirement for sexual desire, and sexual desire does not necessarily lead to love (Bolmont et al., 2014; J. T. Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2013).

Love and lust both involve cognitive and feeling components (Neff & Karney, 2002, 2005). Förster et al. (2009) proposed that love and lust accompany different ways of understanding life. When in love, people may view the world with a long-term outlook, whereas when sexually active, they focus on the present (Förster et al., 2009). Long-term planning and

focusing on the present involve different cognitive processes. Long-term planning engages global processing, which regulates creative thought, whereas sex can elicit local processing, which facilitates analytic thinking (Förster et al., 2009; Friedman & Förster, 2008).

The experiences of love and sexual attraction subsequently lead to different thoughts and behaviours when encountering or thinking about a potential partner. People tend to fixate eye gaze on distinct parts of the person of interest based on the nature of their drives and intentions (Bolmont et al., 2014). Individuals pay attention to a person's body features when focused on sexual desire. In contrast, when feeling or thinking about love, they are more interested in clues about a person's mental state, observed in their eyes and face.

Love as an Emotion

Many of the most intense emotions arise during the formation, the maintenance, the disruption, and the renewal of attachment relationships. The formation of a bond is described as falling in love, maintaining a bond as loving someone, and losing a partner as grieving over someone. (Bowlby, 1980, p. 40)

Shaver and Hazan's adult attachment theory, which was inspired by the work of Bowlby and Ainsworth on childhood attachment theory in the 1950s and 1960s, assumed love as a complex emotion (Shaver & Hazan, 1988). Hazan and Shaver (1987) suggested that love is an attachment process, and every person acquires a certain love style in adulthood which is influenced by the attachment type to their childhood caregiver and other significant relationships, including friendships.

Adulthood love styles include secure, avoidant, and anxious/ambivalent attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Hazan and Shaver (1987) suggested that people with different attachment styles hold different beliefs about the possibilities of romantic relationships, the

dependability of partners, and their own worthiness of love. People with secure attachment find it relatively easy to develop trust in a relationship, depend on their partner, and be dependable for them. In a secure attachment there is no fear of abandonment or worrying about people getting too close.

On the other hand, Hazan and Shaver (1987) explained that with an insecure attachment, people may not experience love as straightforward. People with an insecure attachment are more prone to experience loneliness in a relationship. Individuals with anxious attachment often experience fear of abandonment and worry that their partner does not love them. In an anxious attachment, individuals yearn for intimacy but are constantly concerned about letting others down. So, they may counterproductively use aggressive behaviour to deal with crises and their sense of rejection. Individuals with an avoidant pattern of attachment find it difficult and uncomfortable to trust and allow other get close to them. Therefore, to escape the perceived dangers of intimacy, people with an avoidant attachment may tend to engage in individual activities and emotional withdrawal (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

The role of attachment in childhood is to ensure physical safety of the baby through maintaining proximity to the caregiver (Bowlby, 1969). The adult attachment style is not a continuation of child attachment (Sroufe, 2009), rather it is developed throughout the individual's life and is affected by changes in caregiving environment (Chopik et al., 2014; Fraley et al., 2013), experiences, and hormonal and psychological changes (Konrath et al., 2014). Trauma, emotionally unpredictable, cold, or neglectful environments in childhood and adolescence are usually related to the development of insecure attachment styles where men have a higher chance than women of developing avoidant attachment demonstrated through higher levels of self-reliance (Del Giudice, 2016).

Adult attachment styles are not fixed (Fraley, 2019). Instead, they depend on many elements within a relationship, such as stability (Fraley et al., 2011), conflicts, and support (Chow et al., 2016). Adult attachment styles can change based on the current context of the individual, such as age (Fraley & Roisman, 2019; Jones et al., 2018) and significant life events such as the transition to parenthood (Simpson et al., 2003), trauma (Mikulincer et al., 2011), and overall meaning of life (Davila & Sargent, 2003). In addition, attachment can improve through therapy (Taylor et al., 2014).

The role of attachment in adulthood is to develop relationships with others, to fulfill needs, and overcome interpersonal challenges (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Adult attachment theory distinguishes adulthood attachment from childhood attachment by the ethological concepts of mutual caregiving and sexuality (Shaver & Hazan, 1988). In this theory, Shaver and Hazan (1988) proposed that, evolutionarily, romantic love involves three independent behavioural systems, including attachment, caregiving, and sexual mating. Viewing romantic love as an attachment bond addresses its emotional complexity and takes into account the contradictory feelings involved in love, such as safety and fear, happiness and sadness, care and anger, and trust and jealousy (Güçlü et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, one of the downfalls of the attachment theory is that it assumed monogamy (Conley et al., 2017), which stands in contrast to consensual nonmonogamy (CNM; Moors et al., 2017). CNM describes a relationship in which everyone involved is willing to have more than one romantic or sexual partner simultaneously. CNM can have many shapes and forms, including but not limited to polyamory and open relationships. Polyamory is when a person develops romantic relationships with more than one partner. In open relationships, however, partners only get sexually involved with other people without developing a romantic attachment.

Approximately one in five people in the United States have participated in a CNM relationship at some point in their lives (Hauptert et al., 2017). Nevertheless, not only are relationship theories not inclusive of nonmonogamy, but also, they have the potential to stigmatize those involved in such relationships and research on CNM (Fraley, 2019). Hence, more recent studies include nonmonogamous relationships to broaden the knowledge and understanding of CNM (Katz & Katz, 2022).

Love as a Behaviour

In addition to investigating conceptual, biological, and evolutionary factors, empirical and theoretical approaches to love have also included studies investigating its sociocultural and behavioural constructs. For instance, Chapman (2015) concluded that there are five ways individuals receive and express affection, referred to as *love languages*. The five love languages include quality time, words of affirmation, acts of service, physical touch, and receiving gifts. According to the love language model, people generally use all five love languages, but everyone has preferences through which they feel most expressed and validated. Chapman (2015) also emphasized the importance of knowing the primary love languages of oneself and partners to maintain romance and ensure compatibility and mutual satisfaction in the relationship.

Quality time refers to having the other person's full presence and attention. Examples of quality time include spending uninterrupted time together, hanging out, doing activities together, having a conversation, and being heard. *Words of affirmation* are verbal or written acknowledgements. Examples of words of affirmation include compliments, supportive and appreciative comments, kind notes, affectionate words, social media engagement, and hearing "I love you." *Acts of service* refers to helping and being of service. Examples of acts of service include helping with tasks, having chores completed, and being treated with nice things done.

Physical touch refers to physical intimacy and contact, such as kissing, hugging, holding hands, public display of affection, and maintaining physical proximity. *Receiving gifts* is receiving tangible symbols of care and affection: as a token or symbol of the relationship and partner's commitment, souvenirs, gifts for special occasions, or thoughtful handmade or purchased items as a surprise (Chapman, 2015).

The five love languages model has been widely used in couples therapy and continues to be popular (Bunt & Hazelwood, 2017). However, the model was developed from a cisgendered heteronormative lens and lacks sufficient empirical support (Bunt & Hazelwood, 2017; Egbert & Polk, 2006). In fact, Bunt and Hazelwood (2017) found that neither love language alignment nor implicit knowledge of a partner's love language increased relationship satisfaction, despite what Chapman (1992) reported. On the other hand, Bunt and Hazelwood suggested that self-regulatory behaviours (i.e., adjusting personal goals and strategies based on partner's feedback) as suggested by Wilson et al. (2005), did increase relationship satisfaction. Individuals can employ self-regulatory practices to learn and effectively apply their partners' dissimilar primary love language to maintain their relationship (Egbert & Polk, 2006) and increase relationship satisfaction (Bunt & Hazelwood, 2017; Chapman, 2015).

It is also noteworthy that in addition to the five love languages, studies have shown that other behaviours that are not inherently romantic may be perceived as a sign of love. For example, men's protective, controlling, or jealous behaviours towards women, such as preventing them from wearing revealing clothing or telling them how to behave in public, may seem like a sign of love and commitment to some women in heterosexual relationships (Baker, 2016; Hartwell et al., 2015; Papp et al., 2017).

Gender Differences

Individuals have different interpretations of an early confession of love in romantic relationships. For example, Ackerman et al. (2011) suggested that men believed that women may reveal love early in the relationship to express a desire to increase commitment within the relationship. In contrast, women may perceive that men may make an early disclosure of love as a desire to promote sexual activity (Ackerman et al., 2011). In the United States, men have reported fewer difficulties imagining sex in the absence of love while women's sexuality and sexual satisfaction are generally more emotionally dependent (Hatfield & Rapson, 2005; Levine, 2005). Moreover, Conley and Klein (2022) suggested that women experience considerably worse sex than men do due to possible reasons such as anatomical differences, sexual violence, stigma, and masculine cultures of sexuality.

Older literature reported that people typically associated women with feelings of love and believed that men were did not express feelings as easily as women did (Ackerman et al., 2011). Nevertheless, recent studies provided evidence that women and men experience love and process romantic information differently. For example, Yin et al. (2018), through a study conducted in China, found that men's brains displayed greater activation in the insula and posterior cingulate cortex (areas associated with emotions) and the prefrontal gyrus compared to women when viewing and rating romantic situations with a low level of romance. Hence, Yin et al. (2018) suggested that it may be more effortful for men to process and evaluate the degree of romance with low-level romantic stimuli.

Gap in the Literature

People may generically use the verb "love" to express deep affections or great interest. Nonetheless, the meaning of love within human interactions and romantic relationships appears

to differ from situation to situation and person to person. Romantic love is a universal sentiment with an important place in many cultures. However, it is an abstract concept and because of its high level of subjectivity, studying the phenomenon is challenging. Love is never a mere feeling; it involves determination, commitment, an interactive deal, and an emotional struggle (Levine, 2005). Though, considering the importance and universality of the concept, the human experience of love has not been adequately researched.

Love seems to be universal and yet a unique experience amongst people. Every individual has a personal definition of love, which may mean different things every time they use the term. Literature distinguishes between different types of love, such as maternal, familial, passionate, and romantic despite similarities (e.g., Shih et al., 2022; Watanuki & Akama, 2020). For example, it is evident that maternal and passionate love engage the dopaminergic systems, involved in rewarding experiences, and share a common evolutionary basis and neurobiological mechanism in the human brain (Shih et al., 2022). However, it is unclear whether the nature of love as an emotion is the same or different in platonic, romantic, and sexual love because of an absence of sufficient research support in the literature. Many studies have focused on the distinction of love, a vague and abstract concept, from sexual interest, a more direct and well-defined feeling of wanting to have sex with someone (Manoharan & de Munck, 2017; Thorne et al., 2021).

The first-time assertion of love in a romantic relationship can provoke anxiety and vulnerability (Levine, 2005). The revealer of love may worry about not being loved back or scaring off the other person, especially if it is early in the relationship. Levine (2005) suggested that the first-time declaration of love through saying “I love you” lets the audience know that a critical transformation has occurred in the speaker. Nevertheless, it is unclear what these internal

transformations and experiences are. Hence, there is a gap in the literature regarding the phenomenological nature of love. The purpose of this research study was to deeply investigate the meaning of love for people and provide a phenomenological description of what love can be.

Importance of This Study

Sprecher and Hatfield (2017) reported love as an essential criterion for long-term relationships such as marriage. In addition, many believe that love needs to be present in a marriage or relationship, and that its absence leads to separation or divorce (Crabtree et al., 2018). Restoring love and affinity between partners is a remedy for damaged relationships and can enhance the quality and stability of the partnership (Gottman & Gottman, 2017). As a result, understanding the phenomenology and lived experience of love can facilitate restoring and enhancing the bond between partners.

Most young adults hesitate to talk about – or avoid altogether – critical issues of relationships such as commitment and cohabitation (Konstam et al., 2019). In other words, a minority of couples intentionally plan and decide to be exclusive or move the relationship to the next level, and the majority do so without in-depth communication. Similarly, many people may not want to talk about the meaning of love and their feelings when disclosing love for the first time. Instead, they may only hope to hear the words back and assume that their partner attaches the same meanings to the word love as they do. Hence, learning about other people's lived experiences with love and its disclosure can normalize being challenged by the experience and provide a different perspective, promoting sharing and communication between people within a relationship.

Influenced by the lack of sufficient understanding of love's phenomenology, mental health professionals may avoid discussions about love (Moradi, 2019), even if clients want to

talk about it (Levine, 2005). However, relationship issues can impact other areas of life and individuals' general mood, so they are frequently brought up in therapy. Therefore, a therapist's lack of clarity about love can influence treatment's quality and effectiveness. As a result, it is crucial for therapists, especially sex and couples' therapists, to have more knowledge on love's phenomenology to ensure effective discussions about clients' issues.

Method

“Human beings are members of a whole / In creation of one essence and soul” (Sa’dī, 1258/1970).

Research Purpose

Given the importance of understanding the essence and experience of love for individuals, couples, and professionals, as described above, this qualitative study aimed to provide more information about the phenomenology and lived experiences of people with love. A review of the literature suggests that men and women may differ in experiencing and defining love. Therefore, this research focused on only one gender: individuals identifying as men. More specifically, the purpose of this research was to explore the meaning of love for men when disclosed through “I love you” from a phenomenological perspective.

Research Design

I used Moustakas’s (1994) transcendental phenomenology approach to qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018) for this study to focus upon individuals identifying as men and their lived experiences with love. Qualitative research is the process of exploring and acquiring understanding of a social or human experience. The purpose of qualitative research is to draw a complex and holistic picture through conducting the study in a natural setting, reporting detailed views of participants, and analyzing words (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenological studies aim to understand the essence and common connotations of a phenomenon among several individuals who have lived through a particular experience, while minimizing or excluding personal opinions in the meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In a transcendental phenomenology (i.e., psychological phenomenology) the researcher sets aside biases regarding the topic and relies on participants’ insights and universal structures to gain an understanding of the

phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) provided a systematic procedure with eight steps for data collection, analysis, understanding, and describing a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994):

1. Determine if a phenomenological approach is appropriate for the research topic.
2. Describe the phenomenon of interest for research.
3. Indicate the broad philosophical assumptions of phenomenology.
4. Collect data through interviewing participants.
5. Identify themes through the analysis of data.
6. Generate textural and structural descriptions.
7. State the essence of the phenomenon.
8. Present the understanding of the essence of the experience.

I considered each of these steps in working through this research study and describe them in the following sections.

Step 1: Determine if a Phenomenological Approach is Appropriate for the Research Topic

A phenomenological study aims to describe the shared meaning of several individuals' lived experiences. Phenomenology focuses on reducing individual experiences and finding the phenomenon's universal essence (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The type of phenomenon best suited for phenomenology is something of significance, to gain a deeper understanding about its features or something that can help develop or improve practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, I found love a worthwhile topic to explore with phenomenology. Specifically, I was interested to understand the commonalities in the experience of love and its first-time disclosure within romantic relationships. In the final section of this paper, I recommend practices for

individuals to consider applying in their own relationships and implications for practitioners in their therapy.

Step 2: Describe the Phenomenon of Interest for Research

The aim of my research was to understand the meaning of love when it is first disclosed to a romantic partner through “I love you.” I chose to study young adults because I expected them to have more experience with romantic relationships and dating and a more developed definition of love than adolescents would have. Moreover, it is traditionally during early adulthood when people start having more committed and long-term relationships and choose a partner for life. Therefore, I chose the millennial generation to allow for a wide age range of 25- to 40-years old. Finally, I chose men as my subjects of interest due to personal curiosity about the male perspective and experiences with love.

Step 3: Indicate the Broad Philosophical Assumptions of Phenomenology

Phenomenology is based on the assumption that a phenomenon is a human experience which individuals have lived through consciously (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, a phenomenologist collects data from people who have experienced the phenomenon and develops a description of the essence of the experience that includes “what” they have experienced and “how” they have experienced it (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology assumes that the phenomenon can be analyzed philosophically rather than empirically – “a philosophy without presuppositions” as Creswell and Poth (2018) described; this requires a researcher to engage in *epoche*, that is the suspension of all judgements about reality until they are established on a more certain foundation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a result, a phenomenologist is to detach from all preconceived experiences and knowledge of what is real and immerse into the participant’s experience with curiosity to learn newly.

Recruitment Process

After receiving approval from Institutional Review Board for my study, I sought participants through verbal and poster advertisements (see Appendix A) on my personal social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram. I used snowball or chain-referral sampling through which people, including participants, identified and referred other people who were information-rich and suited to participate in my study. To be eligible for participating in this study, individuals had to be millennials (born in 1981 to 1996) and identifying as men.

Participants

Twelve individuals participated in the study. This number falls within the standard range of the required number of participants to conduct a phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants enrolled in the study due to personal interest; none of them received any gifts or compensation incentives for their participation. All participants were millennial men. I chose pseudonyms for the participants to maintain their confidentiality (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017). Table 1 presents a detailed demographic description of each participant by their pseudonym (year of birth, ethnicity, first language, sexual orientation, relationship status, relationship style, political stance, education level, and field of work).

Table 1*Participants' Demographics*

Pseudonym	Year of birth	Ethnicity	First language	Sexual orientation	Relationship status	Relationship style	Political stance	Education level	Field of work
Aayansh	1988	Indian	Hindi	Heterosexual	Single	Monogamous	None	Bachelor's	Software engineering
Alex	1985	Caucasian	English	Pansexual	Committed	Polyamorous	Post-left anarchist	Postsecondary	Retail
Andrew	1983	British–Chinese	English	Heterosexual	Single	Monogamous	Social liberal	Master's	Economics
Anthony	1988	Chinese	English	Heterosexual	Committed	Monogamous	Left-leaning	Bachelor's	Management
Arman	1988	Persian	Farsi	Heterosexual	Single	Monogamous	Liberal	Master's	Engineering
Charlie	1993	Caucasian	English	Heterosexual	Partnered	Polyamorous	Right-leaning	Bachelor's	Real estate
Chris	1986	German	English	Heterosexual	Single	Monogamous	Conservative	High school	Sales
Connor	1994	Caucasian	English	Heterosexual	In a relationship	Monogamous	Left	Bachelor's	Information technology
Jayson	1994	Caucasian/Prussian	English	Heterosexual	Married	Monogamous	Conservative	Bachelor's	Business
Kaveh	1987	Persian	Farsi	Heteroflexible	In a relationship	Ethically nonmonogamous	Opportunity democrat	Master's	Software engineering
Mark	1983	Jamaican	English	Bisexual	Common-law	Open relationship	None	Bachelor's	Finances
Simon	1994	Caucasian	English	Heterosexual	Married	Monogamous	(No answer)	Bachelor's	Software engineering

Participants were all men and millennials with an age range of 27–38 years and an average of 33 years. All participants were either currently living in or once lived in Calgary. Two thirds of the participants were monogamous and the remaining practiced nonmonogamy. Seventy-five percent of the participants identified English as their first language; the remaining 25% were fluent in English. Amongst the 12 participants, two were married, one was in a common-law relationship, five were partnered or in a committed relationship, and four were single or casually dating.

Procedure

After individuals expressed interest in participating in the study, I emailed the CityU research participation informed consent form (see Appendix B) to them. Participants had to return the signed consent form and fill out a participant demographic questionnaire before the start of the interview. Given the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, interviews took place virtually through Zoom meetings. Before the start of the interview, I reviewed the consent form and answered any questions participants might have had.

Step 4: Collect Data Through Interviewing Participants

Participants were given time through an interview to share their love and dating stories and experiences. I started all interviews by asking the participants to tell me about the time they started dating someone. Through a semistructured interview, participants laid out their dating history, focusing on the most significant relationships. I asked clarifying questions and frequently paraphrased what the participants said to ensure that I understood their point of view correctly and that I was not adding my own meaning in their stories.

The interviews consisted of open-ended questions to guide the participants towards providing information about their experiences with love. I particularly emphasized what love

meant to the participants in each relationship they talked about and what they meant by saying “I love you” to their partners for the first time and throughout their relationships. I was interested to know how their meaning of love or “I love you” had changed within and across different relationships and what situations had influenced their experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I purposefully did not ask any predetermined questions from any of the participants (such as, “Do you think sexual attraction or sex is necessary for love?”) unless it was relevant to their stories. I avoided those questions in order to get descriptions of participants’ actual experiences and perspectives rather than hypothetical answers or opinions that could have been influenced by logical reasonings or attempts to come up with the “correct” answer. The core interview questions are included in Appendix C.

I allowed as much time as the participants required during the interviews. This helped me build rapport with the participants and ensure I was maintaining a safe and nonjudgemental environment in which they could elaborate on their thoughts and experiences, leading to a more detailed and in-depth share and discussion (Bevan, 2014). The prior estimated time for the interviews was 90 minutes. However, they took between 60 and 180 minutes, with an average of 120 minutes across the 12 interviews. Interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and for the purpose of transcription.

Findings

Step 5: Identify Themes Through the Analysis of Data

The first step in phenomenological data analysis is called *bracketing*. Through bracketing the researcher eliminates all biases, as much as humanly possible, to fully comprehend the experience of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The second step of data analysis involves a process called *horizontalization*. Horizontalization is defined as listing the relevant significant statements and holding them as equally important (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The third step is called *clusters of meaning*, in which the phenomenologist groups the statements into themes or units (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Table 2 presents the themes and subthemes drawn from participants' experiences.

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes of Participants' Experiences

Theme	Subthemes
1. Early experiences of dating	Childhood memories Pre- and early-adulthood experiences
2. Sexual intimacy	Early experience Current opinion
3. Meaning of love	Early meaning Changes in the meaning Current meaning
4. Depth of love	
5. Experience of love	
6. Expression of love	Words cannot express Actions speak louder than words Authenticity
7. Societal expectations and culture	Being a man Diamonds and roses

Step 6: Generate Textural and Structural Descriptions

To describe a phenomenon thoroughly, two main components need to be integrated: a textual description and a structural description (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A textual description includes what the participants experienced, whereas structural description explicates the context and what had influenced the participants' experiences. Thus, I use participants' statements to provide textual and structural descriptions of participants' experiences within each of the seven themes.

Theme 1: Early Experiences of Dating. Participants described their earliest experiences with love and dating. Some participants first experienced romantic love before their teenage years, some while a teenager, and others during their early adulthood. I categorized this section into two parts: childhood memories and pre- and early-adulthood experiences.

Childhood Memories. Nine out of 12 participants remembered having someone in junior high school or at a younger age who they either had a relationship with or feelings for.

Participants described earliest experiences with dating and love ranging from a superficial interest to a deep commitment. Many participants believed that they did not yet understand the concept of love at a young age. For example, Mark said, "I don't know if I knew what love was back then. I think you kind of just 'liked' people." Similarly, Andrew said,

The first time I felt love, even though I may not have been sure, was back when I was a little boy so like 5, 6, 7 years old. Back then I didn't know what it was. I mean I guess it was a feeling of attraction and wanting to know this person more.

Andrew added, "from eight to 17 there was always a girl in my class that I liked but I never asked them out or anything like that 'cause I was too afraid of rejection." For some other participants, childhood curiosity led to an experience. Nevertheless, most participants doubted

how real their experiences were as they seemed shallow or simplistic when looking back at them. For instance, Simon explained,

We were just kids and life was truly not that complicated, in fact it was blissfully simple. I was happy to have somebody that I talked to, but we didn't talk about anything that I would deem interesting these days. I felt happy to be in a relationship because it was a source of pride between young boys.

Connor confirmed feeling pride for dating the person. He said,

I honestly don't remember who the first person I dated was, which is probably not good. I don't know like general excitement and feeling good for dating that person because I thought they were quite a catch and other people liked them in school and I like them, so I was like oh yeah well done [Connor]!

Some of the participants did remember details about their first dating and love experiences. For example, Chris explained his childhood experience as love appropriate for the age, although he did not consider it love as he knew it at the time of the interview:

I suppose at a young age I was somewhat "dating" this girl. We're talking like 10- to 11-years old kind of thing you know. We'd go fishing together and you push her into the lake and that's how you share your love.

In contrast, a few participants said that they considered their childhood experiences as true love. Charlie elaborated:

At 10 or 11, I started going out; I thought she was cute, and I really liked her. She was my person. I almost wanna say 10- or 11-years old is more adult like love than 14 and 15. At 10 or 11 I wanted to get to know the person, the personality and it's not necessarily attractiveness to their body type of thing.

Kaveh explained,

For me it started with my dad reading us Persian literature, Hafez and Sa'di poems, and they all talk about love. So, there is a lot of idealization in Persian literature on love like "You are one with your love." What I would consider romantic love, started for me with the same gender. I had this classmate in Grade 6 or 7 that I was like, this is my friend and I'd do anything for him. We were one. That was probably my first kind of encounter or experience with romantic love, a ride or die kind of friendship. A lot of it was circumstantial. Well, I'm talking about a 13-, 14-year-old boy so, I don't think there was a lot of thinking into choosing the right friend, we clicked, and it just happened, but there was a sense of the two of us against everyone else. Yes, absolutely, I loved him.

Hence, participants who had experienced dating during their childhoods recognized that they had felt excitement due to the novelty of the experience. However, most participants did not consider their childhood experiences and the accompanying feelings as love due to a lack of understanding or knowledge of what love was at those young ages. They further described how they viewed those experiences with words such as "lacklustre" or "harmless" due to the lack of complexity and profundity. Charlie summarized it as, "Like it's love but there's elements of I would say intimacy missing. There's compassion for sure but intimacy and the degree of connection wasn't the same."

Pre- and Early-Adulthood Experiences. As participants moved through the timeline of their dating experiences, they expressed that as they got older and matured, the meaning of and insight into what love was grew and matured with them. Anthony expressed it as,

I think at that point in time you start to still feel things out but starting to also develop feelings and caring for someone else. You kinda thought of someone else's needs rather

than just my own. Like I saw this thing and I thought of you right away. Thinking what would she say in this situation, what would she want, what would her family prefer, broadening your horizons and thinking outside of just your own.

Nevertheless, some participants explained that during their teenage years and early adulthood, they had difficulty distinguishing between love and other feelings such as lust and obsession. For example, Charlie said,

At 14–15, it was hard to decipher between infatuation stages and actual love. That's very difficult to distinguish 'cause everything was just high energy and it's like so feeling it must be good must be love, but no, it's not.

Similarly, Arman said about his first experience with a girlfriend in his early 20s, I had to seek her out quite often and meet her at midnight in the alley next to her house like it was all very secretive and kind of an adrenaline rush because it was something new to me and I was thinking of that as love, but it really didn't count as love. I was mistaking obsession for love. Obsession is possession like I want her; she needs to be mine. Love is I genuinely love this person and I want to spend time with her, or I want the best for them I don't care if there with me or not.

Alex explained about his first girlfriend during high school:

It also was something that I confused with love for quite a long time. Because there's a bit of a broken relationship. I was sort of rock for her in a life that was pretty tumultuous. What I actually was in love with was the fact that she really needed me and, in a way, I think that is synonymous with love. However, it was an unhealthy attachment that was happening, so I think moving forward past that, it took me a long time to realize that it wasn't actually what I was looking for or what I ended up believing love actually was. I

actually did feel love and genuine emotions for this person, but I also felt like I could save her, and I actually started almost craving that feeling. I believed that love was this really, really juicy, genuine like I had my fairy tale ideas about what love was and this didn't exactly look like that, but it felt like it.

Similarly, other participants had significant experiences during their early adulthood that influenced their meaning of love and gave them a point of reference to understand love and adjust their definitions later on. For example, Mark explored his sexuality during that stage. He explained,

I dated a lot of girls growing up and then when I was in high school, I dated a guy that was in my class and that was the first time I felt like something was different, so something that wasn't there when I dated women was there when I dated a guy. That was the first time I felt like okay, maybe this is what it's supposed to feel like. With girls it was more just like a friendship thing. When I dated a guy in high school, there was a little bit more depth. We were both in the closet and nobody knew, and it was like our little secret that we couldn't tell anybody else.

Another participant, Connor, expressed that he located his personal values, such as fun and freedom, during that stage. He explained,

We had a lot of fun together, we would go on runs together during our spares in high school, like who does that!? Anyway, we liked each other but I was just very against getting into a relationship at that time and even though I really liked her, and she was great, smart, well-rounded person I didn't want to get into a relationship. I liked just being able to do my own thing and not have to, as bad it sounds, worry about somebody

else. I felt like I was busy enough and I didn't wanna lock myself down in a relationship and have to put all that time and effort into it. I viewed relationships as a lot of work.

For the other participants, dating in early adulthood involved more seriousness. For example, Andrew described it as "back then it was like a really strong attraction, be wanting to spend more time with her, and the hope that it becomes something more successful," and he clarified that by "something more successful" he meant wanting to get married to that person, which is what Jayson had accomplished in that age. Jayson explained that he started dating when he was 18 and at the time of the interview was married to his first girlfriend. On a similar note, Chris said,

I had started a career path that I liked. I was doing well financially at the time of 18. I was ready for a relationship. I spent most of my teen years kind of figuring out what I wanted to do with my life, and I think I had found it at that point, and I decided that having someone in my life would be a good thing.

Overall, participants demonstrated a developmental trajectory from childhood through adulthood which Simon explained with the following description:

In high school when you say, "I love you," it means I will do what it takes to stay with you, to be with you, because you're worth it. And that's significant because I have a better grasp of the curveballs that life can throw at you. There was a depth to the feelings that I think wasn't there in my first relationship. Literally my brain was more developed, and I had more insightful things to think and care about and I had also committed more mistakes as a person, and so for her to like me anyways despite my idiosyncrasies was more significant.

Theme 2: Sexual Intimacy. The topic of sexual intimacy and love came up in the conversation with multiple participants. I divided this theme into two clusters – early experiences and current opinion – as they contain different underlying tones.

Early Experience. Seven participants shared about their first experiences with sex and sexual intimacy. Some participants expressed that their first experiences were special to them and contributed to their feelings of love for the person they had shared them with. However, it was not clear whether one caused the other. It appeared that the two factors (feelings for the partners and sharing firsts) influenced how the participants remembered their experiences interconnectedly. Charlie explained it as, “It’s like you shared firsts together. You create a bond with certain people because we shared those special experiences.” Simon said,

At the time I was physical with these people and that did contribute to my feelings of loving this person, in part for the reason that I was doing things with somebody that I was not doing with other people, and not only that but they’re life experiences, like your first kiss is a life experience that you get to share with somebody and so it becomes totally unrelated to the relationship itself. It’s still your first kiss and so it means something to you.

Anthony explained that the willingness to be vulnerable with the person signified his love:

She was the first person I slept with. So, to me that was significant and obviously that relationship was I think something that I had a deeper connection or feeling with ’cause the fact that I was willing to open up and be intimate with her and that way I hadn’t really done that with anyone else before. So, for me it was a big leap of faith or leap of trust.

On a similar note, Chris explained, “She was the first person who I wanted to sleep with who I really appreciated being around and spending time with and I must have said ‘I love you’ to someone like that, but it’s interesting I don’t remember.” Alex said,

I basically thought that her having sex with me was her expression of her love already. I felt an extreme gratitude because not only is it like sharing one of the most important aspects of being a human, but it was sort of an insight for the first time into that female realm.

Participants explained that having sex for the first time with a partner played a role in their “strong” feelings as Charlie described it. Kaveh explained that sex also affected his feelings after the breakup. He added,

I loved this girl and at no point I could imagine that I can live without her, and I was physically ill all those months going through the break up. . . . Sex definitely played a big role in that. She was the first person I had sex with and that was a big thing for me then.

Arman confirmed that his first experience of sex contributed to his feelings of love for his partner. However, he considered love controlled by physicality as immature. He said,

In the first relationship, the first love, the physical attraction was one of the very bigger portions of it, so it was sort of like a “raw” or immature love. It was still love but it was coming from a different place.

Current Opinion. Four of the participants were nonmonogamous and they all explicitly expressed that sex was not a necessary factor in love or “love isn’t sexually dependent,” as Charlie described it. Three of these participants had experienced love with a partner that did not involve sex. Kaveh explained,

I've loved girls that it didn't start as a sexual thing and then at some point I'm like oh I get to have sex with her too. Like it has also happened that I had really liked someone, we went on a date and then she ends up at my place and I'm like I don't even wanna have sex like I just want to sit down and talk and watch TV or something, I'm not like really attracted. It has happened. Yes, I still consider that as love.

Similarly, Alex explained his experience as,

So at that point we never got physical but we had intimacy. I consider any sort of emotional share on such a profound level to be intimacy. . . . I don't just hold this type of love for romantic partners or sexual partners. Sex is never the goal for me, it's just sometimes nice that happens if things click.

Mark who had not experienced love for a partner without sex said,

Sex is not a love thing for me. I hate it when people put sex and love in the same boat because they are two completely different things, and I don't think you need to be in love to have sex. I don't think just because you have sex, you're in love. So, I feel like it's two completely different things. . . . I believe sex is a huge part of the relationship though. I would never invest into relationship unless I knew that the intimate part of the relationship was good. So, I think all my relationships have started off as a sexual thing that progressed into something else. But I think you can be in love with somebody without the sexual part.

Four of the monogamous participants expressed their experiences and opinions in various ways. Arman considered a love that was "more on the basis of knowing a person, knowing the personality," rather than sex and sexual attraction, as more "mature." Simon said, "I consider it [sex] to be transcendental or loosely related to my feelings." He added, "As far as love is

concerned, I think the question is one of emotions and physicality doesn't play more than 30% role in my books to that emotion." Andrew believed that sex without feelings is "meaningless" and explained, "I never want the physical attraction or that physical feeling to not be accompanied by a romantic sense." He further added, physical attraction is "like a foot in the door. For me it gets my attention at first, although I don't feel that in itself will be enough to hold that." Chris expressed his opinion as,

I think there has to be some sort of physical relationship in order to maintain a high level of commitment to each other. I have never thought of sex as something that's super important, but I do think in a long-term relationship you have to be sexually compatible.

He added that, as a product of environment, he had never said, "I love you," to a girlfriend before having sex with them. He said,

In this day and age, I think it is extremely rare to say to someone, "I love you," before you have sex with them, because our generation and our influences in this world are very sexually driven so we're more likely to have sex with someone and then the more we have sex with them the more we spend time with them. You're sexually compatible so you want to keep spending time with them; the more time you spend with them the more you get to know them; the more you get to know them that's how you develop deep feelings where you want to say, "I love you," so I think it's a product of our environment.

Theme 3: Meaning of Love. I asked the participants to describe the first time they disclosed their love through saying "I love you" to their partners within multiple relationships. All participants except for Jayson and Anthony had more than one partner in their dating history to whom they had said, "I love you." I explored the meaning behind the first "I love you" in each relationship as well as the changes in the meanings across different relationships. I also explored

what the participants perceived in response to hearing “I love you” from their partners. I divide this section into five parts: early meanings, changes in the meaning, and current meaning of “I love you,” perception of love, and partner’s meaning of love.

Early Meaning. Some of the participants, such as Arman, remembered exactly the first time they had exchanged “I love you,” and what had led to it. He expressed that the first time “I love you” was exchanged within a relationship was his second girlfriend saying it to him first after one month of dating and on the night when she threw him a surprise birthday party. He added,

I said it back right away and if I wanted to define love, it is that I care about another person to the point that I put them ahead of myself. When I start putting that person ahead of my own priorities is what I believe is the definition of love. . . . I want them to be happy and always put them first, thinking that it makes them happy.

For many other participants the first exchange of “I love you” was a significant moment. For example, Connor remembered being the first one to say, “I love you,” in his first serious relationship:

Saying “I love you” allowed to kind of take it to the next level where you can express how much you enjoy them. Just like how much I like her as a person, how she makes me feel so good and just how much you like the person and it’s not even just liking them, you get to a point where you actually love them and they’re just very special to you.

Simon also recalled saying “I love you” over the phone in his first relationship which was long-distance and added,

She said, “I love you,” and I said, “I love you too,” and it meant that I had a person who is going to be by my side no matter what. Like the unconditional love you get from your

parents and that's what I thought I was getting. The type of love where if we were to have a problem you wouldn't break up, you would attempt to work through the problem, that was what love meant to me at the time. When I said it back, what I meant was if we were to experience a problem, you're worth it to try to repair that problem as opposed to find somebody else.

Charlie also recalled everything leading to the exchange of "I love you":

In that moment, "I love you" was like in awe of this person who I am for this moment connected. You are this schoolmate, this friend, this person I really like, and we get along and everything and now this is happening and I'm like, I'm entirely overwhelmed and excited and scared and it's every emotion rushing through. I think "I love you" sums it really, really well because I wouldn't want to do this with anyone else and I trust you.

For some participants, hearing "I love you" for the first time was accompanied with some sense of confusion about the significance of the statement and what the statement could mean.

Andrew remembered,

It was long-distance . . . we were texting and talking about stuff, and she said, well she said "love ya," I remember that! And I said it back. And it was that maybe I could see her again or be together with her kind of thing.

Anthony, who had only said, "I love you," to his current partner, remembered frivolously saying "I love you" to her for the first time because she had eaten so much food on their date that it was hard for her to breathe. He added,

I might have meant it jokingly, but I think the undertone of it was sincere because someone could see that as a flaw or would say that's a very unflattering moment of time

for them but despite all of that I still enjoy being in your company and doing these random things and these experiences.

Jayson also remembered wondering about what the first “I love you” signified for his partner until she clarified it for him:

I remember reiterating much of what she had said and, I don’t know mirroring her language entirely would be correct, but at least at the moment it felt the most appropriate, so I remember mirroring her language and saying that I am very happy and when I say, “I love you,” your company brings me joy, I want to be with you, and I want to spend time with you, and I’m attracted to you. In many ways it’s relatively simplistic.

Some participants did not remember the exact events leading to or after saying “I love you” for the first time in their early significant relationships, but they had an idea of what it would have meant back then. For example, for Chris it would have been a significant statement:

At the time because you’re so young, it would have meant everything! Right? It would have meant that I want this relationship to last a long time. I’ve never wanted to get married, but at 18–19 it would have been creating a family together and spending the majority of our life together, buy a house together, financially tide together far more of a commitment to me than getting married.

Similarly, Kaveh explained,

I don’t remember exactly when I told her that I loved her but back then love meant that we are one and this is the truth, like our friendship and bond is eternal and nothing else really matters; nothing can come close to breaking us up.

On the other hand, Mark doubted if it meant anything:

Yeah we said it [I love you], but again like back even in my mid-20s I feel like I didn't know what love was. I feel like it's a word that gets tossed out a lot just because I feel like that's the word people use when they are trying to tell somebody you love them. . . . Back then it just meant that I want to spend all my time with you.

Overall, participants reported that their first-time expression of love to a romantic partner was the means to express that their partner was a significant person in their lives. Alex summed it up as follows:

To me that meant that this is my exclusive girl, and I was starting to look into the future. and I mean I was rational and smart enough to realize that we were like 17-, 16-year-old kids and that this wasn't going to be the last relationship in my life, but we did talk about marriage and kids, and we talked about all those things because like this is the first person that I've been intimate with so of course those were going to come out.

Changes in the Meaning. I asked participants how they thought the meaning of love had changed for them over time. Most participants expressed that the meaning of love had not changed for them. For example, Connor said, "I think it always meant that to me," and Charlie responded, "It's actually been pretty stable. The feeling is honest and it's real and it's consistent." Arman said,

I think it's a still the same. At that point in the first relationship if you would have asked me what love is, I wouldn't have been able to articulate it the way I'm expressing it right now. Many things for me hasn't changed since about 22-year-old that wanted a family. I would still think that for me saying I love you and being in a loving relationship would be the beginning of starting a family.

Similarly, Aayansh expressed that his meaning had been “solidified” over time. He explained,

When you really love someone, you ignore things. Everyone as we grow up, we have certain idealistic figure of the person we want to end up with. When you love someone that figure doesn't matter to you much. You don't try to shape the person you are in love with to match that figure that you have in mind but rather you change the figure that you had. that is something that I've always believed even to this point.

In contrast, Kaveh said that the breakup with his first serious girlfriend after 3.5 years completely changed what he had in mind as what love was. He said,

Eventually I managed to destruct everything that was in my mind from those ideas and rebuild it again so that it matches the reality that yes people can leave, and people are not there forever, people don't have to be there forever, and I had to rebuild my word view around that, and I think that really made me a different person, like night and day. And it has evolved ever since.

However, other participants expressed that the meaning had not drastically changed but it had grown, evolved, or became more significant. For example, Andrew said,

Part of me thinks that it has evolved overtime. I'm more realistic now. I'm still hopeful about it, that it will happen at some point, but I guess maybe it's not as idealistic or as perfect as I had imagined it would be when I was a little kid. I still have hope for it, but I don't have these expectations that it would happen without a certain amount of effort put towards it in terms of expressing it or communicating and keeping it going.

Similarly, Chris expressed,

As I get older and the more people I met, the more relationships I've had, it had to get deeper 'cause I'm growing as a person. So that means people that I'm dating, people that I'm with, those connections are deeper. It has to get deeper otherwise I'd be going backwards. . . . When it comes to love and maybe this might little almost sound jaded, but I think it comes from a place of more understanding, the more I look into love, like the research you're doing, the more I doubt love's existence, as sad as that sounds.

Mark's journey had been different. He explained,

I feel like back in the days I just said it just because I feel like that's something you just said when you were in relationship. Now I feel like it has a lot more meaning to me.

When I say it, I actually mean it and it actually means that you are a person that I want in my life.

Alex had a similar experience. He explained,

This was the first time that I really connected with someone on an intellectual level. Now this is totally different. You can kind of see the theme there's like an evolution of the way that I love, and this was more like I'm so in love with this woman's mind that it was just so interesting.

Simon said,

As I got older, I understood what it really meant to have a girlfriend which is to share these deep personal feelings with and confide them. It wasn't exactly a linear process between that girlfriend and my now wife. I would say it's roughly the same in nature but got deeper and thus means more. . . . So, every time I said, "I love you," my definition of "I love you" thus far has basically been the definition of marriage, doing what it takes to

keep your relationship going, and I think it's kind of funny that in the end well my definition was right, and I got married and it fits perfectly.

Current Meaning. Participants highlighted care and connectedness in their current meaning of love. Arman worded it as “That I am no longer just me. Putting that person pretty much on par with my own needs and my own wants is what I define as love.” Similarly, Charlie said,

Love is connectiveness and oneness. I feel connected to you, I feel with you, I feel a part of you, and I hope that you feel that I'm a part of you too, and I want to be with you, and I care about you, and I want to care about the things you're interested in and LET ME LOVE YOU!

Anthony said,

The meaning is a deeper caring and connection between the two of us. The fact that there's more on the line, there's more to lose in a relationship like if something were to happen to one person, that would affect the other one very drastically. . . . “I love you” does solidify more of our relationship now.”

Mark included an element of trust and vulnerability in his meaning. He said, “I want to merge our lives together. When I'm in love with you I'm letting you into my life.” Andrew said,

It has to be somebody that I really trust, somebody that I really want to be with in the future, somebody that I want to build a relationship with. In an ideal situation I would be expressing it once that foundation has been established or once hopefully that mutual feeling is there.

Similarly, Jayson explained, “That we're gonna be together and I have no intention of searching for this kind of love anywhere else and we were gonna look into having kids and

spending the rest of our lives together.” Similarly, Simon highlighted building the future and described the meaning of “I love you” as,

I like you in my life and my life is better with you in it and I will work hard in fact to make sure that you’re always in my life and should something come up that would get in the way of our relationship, I will work hard to repair that thing at all stakes.

In addition, Aayansh included an element of resolving expectations into his meaning of love. He explained,

I want to be with this person, no matter how the differences are, or whatever mental image I had in my mind, like when we look for people, you have an imagine of someone you want to be with, you have certain things, I had certain things in my mind too. . . when I started having those feelings I kind of was changing my mental image for the person and that’s when I thought like well this is what love is.

On a different note, Kaveh and Alex had a broader and more inclusive meanings for love.

Kaveh said,

What I have in mind now as love is two people on the trajectory of life, there is a moment that they see each other, they say hi, they notice each other, and I’m in their memory and they are in mine and that’s love. And that can be a very brief moment, or it can be really long, maybe you are going parallel all the time or maybe you are going in different directions and it’s a brief moment, doesn’t mean it’s meaningless. Zooming out looking at the universe we are just in an explosion. Love to me is just noticing someone else in the path of life wherever they are in their journey and saying yes, I see you.

Similarly, Alex added,

Essentially if I'm one-on-one spending time with someone, that person is who I'm showing myself to and that person gets all my attention therefore that's the person that I love in the moment. Love isn't solely for partners; love is for everybody. Love is positivity coming towards me.

Perception of Love. Participants described what “I love you” meant to them when they heard their partners say it for the first time. Most participants explained that they thought that the same meaning as what they meant was being reciprocated to them. For instance, Chris said, “I suppose there's an emphasis on the gratification that you feel the same thing towards me, and we want the same things long-term,” and Anthony said, “To me it was gratifying in the sense that I knew she equally shared some of the same feelings that I had for her. . . knowing you had someone else that was looking after you instead of just yourself.

However, Simon thought his partner saying “I love you” had more significance because she was religious. He explained,

It meant the same as I meant, except for more, as in like it had all of the same qualities that I've described and then it had additional qualities because she was religious, as in like for her there was divine repercussions for not living up to that expectation. So, it means more because she is bearing the consequences of a punishment that I'm not bearing.

Hearing “I love you” for some participants brought hope for the relationship. For instance, Aayansh described it as, “I thought that was the time when she started seeing the possibility of having a future with me when she said, ‘I love you.’” Similarly, Anthony said, “I perceived it as validation of the fact that she is getting closer to me and she's opening up to me

and becoming more trusting of me. it was more of she's ready to move our relationship forward.”

Jayson said,

I felt really good to hear it. There was this notion what you're dating someone, and you want that person to be someone of significance you. There is this hope that it would become something more. I think that first time when you hear that you're like maybe this is right maybe there is a chance that this will be the thing that I'm looking for. It's something like a reassurance, can't find a better word but I could come into that notion that I'm on track, I've made the right choice at least at the moment, I receive that validation that this relationship is something that is what I want.

Some participants believed that hearing “I love you” from their partner for the first time was a turning point in the relationship such that they felt closer to them. Connor explained it as, “I felt good, felt warm inside. Like you immediately kinda are on another level with that person, even though it's just a word, it felt like that you're so much closer to that person just to hear it.” Similarly, Chris said “On my end knowing that the person feels the same way that you feel towards them, I think changes the relationship a bit. You do become more comfortable with that person.” In contrast, Alex said,

For me to verbalize or hear something that I already know doesn't mean that much. My mind doesn't work that way. It was the sentiment itself that meant so much and to put it quite honestly there was this really really intense eye contact first and then it was sort of this feeling of oneness and that for me was more profound than the words themselves.

Some participants described what “I love you” meant to them when they heard it at the time of the interviews. Charlie said, “It makes me feel loved and cared for, that she has my interests at heart in mind, that she is on my side when it comes to it.” Similarly, Mark said,

“When he says it, it’s a reinsurance that we’re still good. it’s kind of like that one phrase you use to be, like, whatever we’re going through, we’re good.” Kaveh explained,

So, there’re two different situations. One is that you see the two of you together, like I see myself and this person and our interactions, and then there’s another mode that you see that person and just that person and how interesting, cute, or adorable or whatever they are as a creature that sits there and does something, and I think she loves me the second way.

Partner’s Meaning. Participants were asked to describe what their partners meant by saying “I love you,” and nine out of 12 participants declared that they did not know what their partner’s definition of love was, particularly when they heard it for the first time. Connor explained, “It’s hard to say ’cause like when you have your own definition of love it’s hard to say what another person is thinking and what their definition is. You kind of just think of your definition when they say it back.” Likewise, Jayson explained,

I don’t think I know; I don’t think anyone knows. Like you insert your own words and meaning to it. you make it whatever you want it to be, and I think I likely that moment I put more significance to it than what she meant by it. Thankfully that was a fleeting moment because of that clarification. everyone probably does that, adding whatever your own thoughts and biases, maybe a little bit of hopefulness in there if you’re hoping it will become something more.

Nevertheless, some participants had their guesses. For example, Aayansh speculated about his ex-girlfriend and said, “I think loving is probably a much more intensified feeling of liking [for her].” Arman also explained,

I don't think the same thing. . . . I think probably part of it was the mental comfort or security that she never felt with the previous person. but that's just speculation on my part from what I think. What she really thought it's probably going to be very difficult to explain.

Chris remembered one of his ex-girlfriends and said, "When we said, 'I love you,' to each other we both were on the same page at that time, which was wanting to build a life together." On the other hand, Kaveh and Alex both thought that saying "I love you" was a bigger deal to their girlfriends compared to them. Kaveh explained,

When I said it, it wasn't as a strong of a statement as she thought it was. For her it was like a really strong thing and when I said it, she was like oh I'm not there yet, I can't say it back. She said it a few months after that. I don't wanna say anything 'cause I don't know if I really know what she was thinking. All I can say is my own interpretation and what I think is her expectation of life love was this super complicated strong passionate feeling that she was expecting to experience, and she didn't maybe at that point or maybe she hasn't yet.

Alex considered,

It definitely meant more for her in that the words themselves, and I would say this plays into like her love language, being receiving words of affirmation. So, for me the nonverbal communication is bigger than verbal and for her is probably flipped a little bit the other way, so even though maybe she knew we were feeling it, for her to actually hear it was like monumental at that time.

Hence, most participants assumed that the meaning of love for their partner was the same as what they had in mind. Nevertheless, only one of the participants, Jayson, expressed curiosity

by asking for clarification about the meaning of love with his partner once it was exchanged for the first time and ever since. He explained, “She said it first and I was like let’s talk about it. It was a sweet moment. It wasn’t awkward like let’s sit down and have a conversation.” He added, “through any significant point when maybe I love you had meant something more, we would clarify that.”

Two other participants, Kaveh and Simon, also expressed having to talk about it with their partners after the first time of saying “I love you”. Kaveh explained, “When we had the argument about why I said this so soon, I started opening up and told her what was going on my side, and she told me her side that she wasn’t feeling that excitement.” Simon explained,

Me stuttering got me in to some long conversations. To her, my judgement didn’t cross her mind. To her my stutter was, do I mean this or not, or am I just saying it because she said it. So, what I had to do was I had to communicate to her that I meant what I said and as long as I meant what I said, she was happy. At the end of the day, I convinced her.

Theme 4: Depth of Love. Seven participants who had been in a long-term relationship and remembered how their love progressed within a significant relationship, stated that the meaning of love did not necessarily change for them. However, their love became deeper and stronger. They described the evolution of their love as follows:

Jayson who had been married to his wife for five years said,

As our relationship progressed so did that definition. And the last time we redefined it, it was at the point that it meant I wanna spend the rest of my life with you. Saying “I love you” obviously has a huge amount of significance to it now. We’ve reached the point where the hope for where this might lead, or excited about where we would go, all those things faded away and it became a given; there’s no question or doubt about it. It now has

that weight of experience and that evidence, but I don't think its meaning has necessary changed or changes anymore. Ask me again when we have children. I imagine we will have a greater appreciation for each other, and the depth of our love will be greater when we have children, but I can't say for sure now.

Anthony, who had been dating his girlfriend for 2 years, said,

As time goes on and as the relationship progress, the word "I love you" has more meaning or more weight behind it. There's more of a significance to it now. I don't think the meaning changed but I think it has a deeper meaning or understanding on both sides now. There's more seriousness behind it now. I mean when you look at the evolution of our relationship, I think it's kind of also the evolution of the meaning and how significant it was to each person.

Simon explained that within the first year of dating his wife he became religious, and his current definition of love had gained religious significance. He explained how love changed for him as follows:

My love deepened for her because up until I became religious there was nothing that was worth my life and when I became religious this change came up within me, which is my marriage is worth my life. I would die for my marriage, and this isn't on its own a religious concept. You talk to any person who's married, any husband, any mother, and they will probably say I would die for my wife, and I would die for my children.

Everybody would echo this but for me it also has religious meaning. To die for your partner is to receive life in the afterlife and so as I became more religious, I have loved my wife so much that I would die for her on an unreligious note. I would go fight a war

for her, that doesn't have anything to do with religion, I just love her so much that I want to keep her safe.

Kaveh who had been dating his girlfriend for 6 years said,

It has changed from oh this is exciting and new into we have been through a lot of shit together. It's like less excitement and more trust. There's a lot of nonverbal communication that you just understand each other just by each other's looks. It's like old people's love.

Mark said,

When I first started dating him it meant more of like I want to integrate our lives together but after 9 years, I don't think you can get any more intertwined than what it is. So, when I say, "I love you," now it's more a reminder that I'm still here and I don't plan on going anywhere; I feel like I'm telling him that I'm going to be with you for the rest of my life.

Alex had gone through a divorce after 11 years of relationship including 5 years of marriage. He talked about his current (at the time of the interviews) love for his ex-wife and said, It's a more complete love than I probably felt or maybe anybody could. Now there is nothing about it that is conditional, it's 100% unconditional and I mean I wish I could have said that when I married her as well like I know that should go along with that, but it didn't and now it does.

Charlie said that he felt a growth in his love for an ex-partner after about 8 months. He explained,

It evolved. At first it was like the excitement, I think you're amazing person, you're exciting and you're really good for me and you keep me honest, and communicative,

you're improving the kind of person I am, what I felt. and now you're making me a better person in these ways and that's what I genuinely felt. I felt real growth with this person.

Hence, the meaning of love appeared to be constantly evolving for the participants within their relationships as more time passed with their partners.

Theme 5: Experience of Love. Participants expressed that within different relationships they had experienced different kinds of love. Chris explained his experience of being in love varied and he gave the reason as, "I am who I am, but I did tend to change my behaviour in ways that I felt were more pleasing to those women." Nevertheless, he added, the meaning of love or "feelings of what love was, did not change between those relationships." Other participants had similar experiences. Charlie, who practices polyamory, explained his experience of falling in love with a new person, whom he named "Ginger," while dating his primary partner, pseudonymized "Calgary." He said,

I'm very much like a mirror, when it comes to kind of like an energetic feel. Whatever the other person is I can match that really well. . . . There's love there but it's not the same, with more intensity; it's different, it's charged, it's new so it's exciting, OK, it's kind of like love with Ginger was like being struck by lightning. You know it's there and it's intense and then it fades a little, but you still are still feeling the zingers and I was ever present. Love with Calgary, it was like standing in the ocean, waiting for the tide to roll in and then all of a sudden you realize you're floating.

Alex described one of his relationships and compared it with his other experiences. He said,

It was a different sort of love, like it was love and comfort. It didn't mean any less, but it wasn't this like immediate passionate sort of feeling. It was like very matter of fact and

straightforward. It was more like a contract in a way where we were like I love you; I can take care of you kind of thing. It was less about desire, and it was more about compassion.

Arman talked about his experience of love with his two major relationships. He explained,

The love and the emotional attachment that I had with S, who was from my culture, was different in nature from A. I really loved A genuinely, but I couldn't necessarily make that connection with her emotionally because we could never have that level of understanding when we were talking to each other. With A there was a lot of differences culturally and everything else so the little bits and pieces of similarity that we had in terms of personality and a little bit of similarities in culture become very bold because they were the only thing that would make us close to each other. . . . In S's case we had all the fundamentals and everything similar to each other.

Simon said that his experiences of love in his previous relationships were different in each one. However, he had difficulty explaining why he thought that was the case. He described his feelings of love for his ex-long-distance girlfriend as follows:

I would say it seems less significant because there wasn't an emotion that jumped out at me as particularly meaningful. We have intellectual thoughts, and we have emotions that well up from within us, and in this particular situation I just didn't feel like there was a lot of welling of emotions. There wasn't an aspect of the relationship missing. I loved her, I talked to her all the time on Skype, and I did all the things that I described to you earlier. I shared complex thoughts, I communicated to her that I would do what it took to be together, we saw each other, we were physical with each other, I would say all the

checkboxes are there. I don't know, maybe it wasn't novel. This was you meet people, like them, you are with them, you say, "I love you," and then for whatever reason it doesn't work out and it didn't feel particularly emotional to me when it didn't work. It meant a lot to me, don't get me wrong. It's significant but I guess I knew how to process that event better. I don't know.

Mark expressed his experience and opinion as follows:

I think we were in two completely different places in our lives, and I didn't really invest too much into being in love with him. I just loved him as a friend, and it was right for me at that time. I think we all go through different phases in our lives, and we need people for certain stages, like you could have dated somebody that was perfect for you while you were going through X, Y, and Z; now that you've moved past these and you're dealing with other things, then that person no longer fits in with what you need out of them."

Theme 6: Expression of Love. Within the experiences of expressing love, three themes appeared in participants' shares. Firstly, many participants explained that they preferred not to express their love verbally as they could not find precise words to describe how they felt. Secondly, participants added that they preferred expressing love through their actions rather than saying "I love you." Lastly, some participants added that verbal expression of love is not necessarily always truthful to its meaning, and they shared their experiences concerning the authenticity of the words.

Words Cannot Express. Some participants expressed that they could not explain their experience of love through words accurately. Chris articulated his concern as "That's such a hard question, is how can you possibly quantify the feelings you have for someone in words. They're feelings, not words." He continued,

Lately I've looked at love as something that just doesn't make any sense. It's unquantifiable. There's a great line in the movie, *Wedding Crashers*. She asks, "What does love mean?" and his response is, "Love is when your soul finds its counterpoint in another." It sounds very simple. That's the best way to word it, your soul finds something that it wants in another human being. It finds its counterpoint in another, like that's perfect. 'Cause everyone says love is a feeling, but I think love is more of a umm . . . it has to be quantifiable and love is a thing that exists, we just don't have a lot of words for it.

Simon explained,

It's counterintuitive but the definition of romance is that there is no definition. It's something that is intrinsically felt. It's something that we can feel but we can't put a word to or describe, for example, *déjà vu*. Everybody knows the word *déjà vu*, but how do you describe to somebody that you're having this feeling that you've been here in this particular situation before, other than the fact that other people have felt that feeling too. Your descriptive of the situation isn't helping that person understand that you're experiencing *déjà vu*. What's helping them understand is that they've also felt the feeling of *déjà vu* so they can sympathize with you, and I think romance falls into that category where it can't be easily described but it is very known to every person.

Some other participants stated that saying or hearing "I love you" did not always convey their true feelings accurately, and the words alone did not deliver the depth of the message.

Rather, what helped them express the feelings is the context and the ambiance of the connection.

Chris explained,

I've learned that I can use the word love frivolously because there's a difference when you're looking into someone's eyes, and you say, "I love you," versus running up to the side of the truck because you see a friend that you haven't seen in a little while and say, "I love you." It's a different feeling.

Charlie said,

I get partners tell me I know you care and love me by the way you look at me. Because when you like someone or you love someone you look at them very differently, and I've heard that time and time again it's like it's how you look at someone and that's how you talk to someone it's in composure in tone and everything that you can tell you really care and when you don't it is freaking clear.

Alex explained, "For me the nonverbal communication is bigger than verbal. It's also interesting to me that these words have that much weight." He continued jokingly, "Like what if you looked at someone deeply in the eyes and said 'potato' but in this really beautiful profound way like shouldn't it sort of mean the same thing?"

Mark and Connor thought that there were not enough words to describe love and affection within different contexts and with different depths. Connor expressed that he had only said, "I love you," to two people, however, there had been other times where he "really, really liked" a person but it was not love. He explained the difference between the two as follows:

I'd say it's along the same feelings but on a different magnitude, I guess. You just feel it so much more strongly I suppose. But even when you really, really like someone, you still kind of feel like you don't want to be without them, and you think that you're better off with them than without them and you just have a lot of fun with them. But, yeah, it's

hard to say what the actual differences between really, really, really liking someone and loving them other than just how strong those feelings are.

Connor then added that when he broke up with his first love, his love for her changed. He explained, "It went from being in love with the person to someone that you love. I don't know how to explain the difference. like you can love someone but not be in love with them I guess." He clarified that in his opinion there are different levels and intensities which he can feel love for someone and that is how he distinguishes between the words. Similarly, Mark said,

You can love somebody but not be in love with them. There's a huge difference. So, I think the difference with loving somebody and being in love with somebody is like you love your family, you can love your friends. Being in love with somebody is more of a romantic gesture, I guess. 'Cause I'm not in love with any of my friends but I do love them like family.

He insisted that the reason was not of a sexual nature and struggled to explain how the experiences were different. He added,

I guess it's a little bit confusing because loving somebody being in love with them is very similar but where to draw the line, I don't know, it's just a feeling you get. It's hard in the position that I am being in an open relationship and sleeping with people and loving friends but not being in love with them. It's difficult to explain. I'm trying to put it into words.

Moreover, Connor added that the feelings could even go beyond being in love with somebody. He said,

I mean emotionally I think it can, but verbally there isn't a word to distinguish that. I think emotionally you can, you can use the same word down the line and love someone

more and you can use the same word, but emotionally it means more but there isn't a word beyond that; it's not something that can be defined by a word. You still have like the same feelings and those feelings are gonna be stronger as things progress."

In addition, Kaveh said,

You start by saying "I love you" and that really doesn't mean that I'm in love with you, it just means that let's start this and see how deep it will go, but then at some point you do get that deep and then you kinda get used to people and you bond, and time creates that.

Kaveh, who spoke two languages, expressed that "I love you" in English and Farsi had a similar connotation. However, he said that "I love you" in the two languages had different meanings for him such that he would use them in different situations. He said,

It depends on who I'm telling it to and what the situation is. There are certainly different. Like you can say in a different tone, and it can mean just a playful thing, or like if I say, "I love you," to someone that could just mean sorry I messed up and it may not mean seriously. So, like if the question is do I have a direct translation of "I love you" in Farsi or the other way around or if the same phrase means the same thing, then the answer is definitely no. I'm very picky with these things. There are certain words in Farsi that I don't think it has a translation. So, I think it means a different thing and a lot of it is not culture, it is more like subcultural, like how people interact with each other and what it means in that group of people.

Kaveh added that saying "I love you" in Farsi hit closer to home for him because he used it less often. He clarified that,

For me when the conversation gets more serious, I switch to Farsi. Like let's say I'm dying and that's the last thing I want to say, I would probably say it in Farsi. It's more

serious maybe and it's not that every day I love you; it's more special. I don't wanna say more special as if it's meaningful or better. It's just used less so it carries more weight. Because I use I love you so often that it has probably lost its meaning. I think at that point I may even say, "I will remember you." That is probably my ultimate I love you to someone. You were part of my experience. . . . But for some reason I want to resist saying that the Farsi version is more meaningful or more personal to me. It can be any phrase like going back to my relationships, I would just call them a cute name or something and it would mean a lot more than I love you in English or Farsi or whatever. Similarly, Arman, who also spoke English and Farsi, believed that language played a major role in the perception and expression of love in a certain language. He clarified,

"I love you" in English has been a lot easier to say compared to Farsi. It's a different feeling. It feels more personal in the mother tongue. I feel like there's more expectation with it when you say it in mother tongue. The first Iranian that I dated in Calgary, I remember when we were making out in the beginning, I used to express my emotions and affections in English and we never spoke English just normally when we spent time together. Her insecurity was you're not over your ex and my response was no it's just a force of habit, but now that I think about it I don't think it was just a force of habit. It was the fact that it was easier to say it in English. It was more familiar in terms of using that sentence, because saying it in Farsi maybe made it more real.

Aayansh, the other participant whose first language was not English, said, "English is so dominant in India. I actually don't know how to say, 'I love you,' so in Hindi." So, he could not specifically comment about expression of love, but he added, "I feel like whenever you have a

kind of emotion and trying to express it, you focus on expressing them rather than like using the language. You automatically choose the one that is easiest for you.”

Actions Speak Louder Than Words. Nine out of the 12 participants expressed that verbal communication of love through “I love you” did not convey the depth or intensity of their feelings within a relationship. Many of the participants were aware of their love languages. For example, Chris said,

I don’t care about the word I love you. So my love language, like verbal stuff, means zero to me. Access of service is certainly my love language. I bend over backwards for people. That’s what I’ve always done even in my friendships. So, when someone does something like that for me, oh my goodness! My heart just collapses, and I don’t even know if they notice they’re doing it.

Similarly, Anthony expressed,

I actually don’t like saying “I love you” ’cause I feel like words only take you so far. So, to me, I actually see more value in actions and so the way that I portray my love is by doing dishes, so she doesn’t have to do extra work.

Alex also remembered,

So, acts of service is one of my biggest love languages. I mean to really put things into perspective as a 17-year-old kid just having known her for like two months, I was visiting her dad in the psych ward and walking her through the sexual abuse conversations and things like that. So for me it solidified that I was going to do whatever it took.

Likewise, Charlie said, “I’m less verbal. I prefer to show affection by acts of service,” and Connor said, “I think the actions behind the words speak louder than the word itself.” In addition, Mark explained,

I feel like saying “I love you” is something that’s a reassurance. I feel like you say you love somebody with more of your actions than your words. When you get to our age, you don’t tell people you love them with “I love you” but more of your actions that you.

Simon explained that his actions to demonstrate love had religious significance for him.

He said,

In Orthodox Christianity we have this concept of Christ being more important than our partner and we have this idea that there is something divine about each person and your quickest gateway to understanding God’s love for you, is to love somebody else. So, the phrase “Love your neighbour as if he were yourself” is the kind of belief that we carry our marriage and the way that we worship God is by worshipping each other in some sense. We act as in a way to make God happy and that is beneficial to our partner. The things we do to make it into heaven are beneficial for our neighbours and in this context our immediate neighbour is our wife they are the first to benefit from our good behaviour and our forgiveness.

On the other hand, Arman enjoyed giving gifts as the means to express his love. He explained,

I attach the level of being in love when it comes to gift giving the value of the gift, so meaning is deeply in love I spent a shit ton of money, and I can’t even feel at peace with myself to buy something that maybe the person has told me about that this is what they want but it only costs \$70 or \$50. I’m like I can’t get that for Valentine’s because it’s only \$50; that’s just too cheap. So, it’s funny and this is something in my mind always have associated then the value of the gift with the level of affection I’m showing. Do I also see that in the person that is giving me to give like in the receiving end? Not so

much. So, expressing myself, even to my friends, through the value of the gift is really important.

From another perspective, Aayansh explained that loving a partner through their meaning is an important aspect of demonstrating love. He clarified,

I am not saying my definition of love is more correct, but that is my definition. If you don't treat me like that then probably I might not perceive it as love. A different outlook towards this is love languages. Everyone has different love languages. If you're not really giving someone quality time and giving them gift and gift is not something they really like then it's a miscommunication. And I think it's very similar, the notion of love is also different for everyone. For some people it could just be being with them, or making sure they have those securities, that they feel understood or validated. For me I've come to believe it's more about accepting me for who I am. It's nothing wrong in like doing changes or making changes, but as long as you hold my hand or you are in my team, not in the other team.

Authenticity. Some of the participants explained that they had waited to say, "I love you," to their partners for the first time due to wanting to be confident about their feelings.

Arman explained,

You have to be true to yourself and your values and really acknowledge that I don't wanna say it just because you said it. I wanna say it because I really feel it and it's probably very hard and will bring anxiety to have that conversation because someone's feelings is gonna get hurt.

Similarly, Connor said,

I felt like I knew it for quite a while but didn't say it. It would have been the first time I've ever said it to anyone, and I just wanted to fully be sure, and I was pretty sure that she felt the same way.

Some of the participants hesitated to say, "I love you," to their partner for the first time due to concerns about the consequences. Aayansh described it as, "You have fear for your actions as well when things are going well. You don't want to jeopardize things by saying too much too soon."

Similarly, Chris said,

I still would have a hard time just frivolously saying it to her. For some reason I don't wanna say it to her for the fear that one, I scare her away. Two, she becomes more attached to me than I want. Both are negative things that I don't want to happen. I like where we're at right now so I don't want to screw it up, but if she says I love you I gotta say it back because and I gotta keep us at that level.

In addition, Simon explained,

I did say, "I love you," back to her, I just hesitated, like I stuttered because I had to think for a second whether this was the morally right thing to do, like when I say, "I love you," will she take it the way that I actually mean it or will it damage our relationship when she later finds out that I'm not religious, because I wasn't religious at that time yet.

Some participants reported withholding saying "I love you" to avoid vulnerability.

Arman explained,

It's vulnerable to put yourself out there and say, "I love you," then the person turns back and says, "Hey like by the way I'm not feeling that way but you're really great." Nobody

wants rejection. I definitely wouldn't say it in the beginning even if I feel it. I try to gauge what the other person feels before I say it.

Aayansh said,

I may have told her that "I like you very much." I don't think I used the word love, but it was love, to the best of my knowledge at that point. If she said the same thing as I like you too to me with the same intensity that I did, maybe in a little more time after that I would have told her that I loved her.

He added that in a different relationship,

There was a time when I was feeling like I loved her, but I didn't have the guts to tell her because well people don't take it very positively every single time. Like on the TV and everywhere I see people take a long time to say, "I love you," you know society's expectations. So, a lot of times when she's not looking or when like she's closing her eyes, I would mumble the word "I love you."

Participants also expressed that they have had said, "I love you," at some point in one of their past relationships while it was not true to their feelings. Arman explained his intentions as, I was the first person that said it in that relationship and definitely wasn't the right thing to say. It was more of an obligation to say it more than meaning it because we had been going out for a while and I needed to say this so that she feels good about herself and the relationship. I probably would have wanted to make the person feel good for being together. It felt like the right thing to say but I didn't necessarily feel it. It was more of an idea of filling that hole. I wasn't trying to be manipulated or anything.

Aayansh said,

She told me that she liked me, and I told her I liked her but actually I didn't, honestly speaking, I was just flirting. I was kind of bored and then I was chatting with her and then she started having feelings and I got kinda scared.

Andrew also said,

When I said, "I love you," to her it would have been 2.5–3 months in and I think it was part genuine, but I hate to say this but also part obligation. I wanted her to feel that I wasn't just using her for that physical purpose. She didn't say that to me, so I kinda felt stupid for saying it because I wasn't able to read the situation.

Participants also expressed that they have been in a situation where they doubted the genuineness of the other person saying "I love you" for various reasons. Aayansh said,

Then she actually said she loves me and I said something along the lines of you can't love me, like you haven't spent enough time with me. I would have said she's infatuated; she feels like she's in love but probably she's in love with the idea of being in love. I don't know if she actually loved me or not because I got to know a few things which made me feel that her motivations were corrupt and that's why I feel it wasn't love and she probably was trying to manipulate me to win me.

Arman explained,

She said "I'm falling in love" or something like that and I had to end that. It was like the third or fourth date that she said it and immediately I had a reaction that this person doesn't know me, this person has known me for like 3 weeks. I don't believe in love at first sight, and I don't think it is a thing I don't think you can fall in love with anybody by just seeing them two or three times or spending 3 hours with them. I think it is a process that develops over hours and hours of talking in having a face-to-face interaction.

Similarly, Kaveh said he did not believe love at first sight. He added, I believe in someone being extremely interesting to a point that you want to love them at the first sight, but I don't think you can love someone at that point. You see so many people and you get interested to see what comes out of it. A lot of information is missing at the beginning, and then I tend to fill those things with what I like so it's not really that person. It's my perception, but yeah absolutely you can absolutely fall in love with that character that you think they are at that point.

Theme 7: Societal Expectations and Culture. Participants explained how their gender identification, gender roles, and gender stereotypes played a role in the way they expressed and experienced love.

Being a Man. Some of the participants expressed that gender stereotypes and gender roles for men have in some way influenced their experience with love and how they expressed it. For example, Chris said, "I don't know how feelings work 'cause I'm a male." Andrew also expressed that it was hard for him to talk about his previous relationships "because it exposes a form of vulnerability." He said,

I'm sure it's probably same for women but as a man I feel much more vulnerable talking about these things. It's something that I've never talked about before because I feel like you're not supposed to. You're not supposed to dwell on the past, you're not supposed to seem wanting for something in the past, you're not supposed to seem hurt by something in the past."

Andrew said that media has influenced how he views what an ideal man needs to look like. He explained,

The movie *The Wolf of Wall Street*, of course, the man in that, is a really extreme character but, maybe he in a way is seen almost as acceptable. Or like boys will be boys and how young men with buckets of money are going to act that way, and that it's something to celebrate. So, I guess it's that whole image of masculinity and how men are supposed to be. Part of me feels that I don't quite fit into that, but I don't really want to admit that I don't and again that goes back to talking about romantic love is something I've never done before.

He then said, "There's a professional wrestler who described himself as 'the woman's pet and a man's regret' like he beats the other guys, and all the women want to be with him" and added that men are judged by the society if they do not behave in a certain way and display such images. He explained,

I think it's actually almost universal across a lot of cultures that there's a lot of stereotypes. For instance, an issue I hear a lot about say Latin America is the issue of toxic masculinity. Now I would say it's probably prevalent in almost all cultures because there's always those expectations for men to behave a certain way and that you're seeming as sissy or whatever you want to call it if you show any emotion in this area.

There's a whole bunch of other ways that you can be blacklisted or seen as less of a man.

I'd say it's still prevalent North America as well.

Similarly, Chris mentioned, "a friend of mine who also says, "I love you, man," he always adds "man" at the end of it because to him I think that means it's not real and it's more bro like, less lovey-dovey you know.

On the other hand, Simon expressed that the gender roles have provided him with direction. He explained,

The way that my love deepened for her as I became more religious, is this concept of martyrdom in Orthodox Christianity. In the West we have gender stereotypes right, the man is supposed to be a provider and the woman is supposed to be the life giver and particularly in religion we boost or echo these stereotypes. Just like how men are enlisting to fight wars and women are nurses, as an example of men being providers and protectors and women being life givers, we have this in addition to the concept of martyrdom which is laying down your life for that person.

Diamonds and Roses. Some of the participants expressed that they felt a pressure at some point in their lives to provide materialistic items for a partner to prove or demonstrate their love. Simon expressed his experience as,

It was kind of hard at first because she had in my opinion unrealistic expectations of relationships. It was too much of what you see in the movies. Like this guy shows up with flowers every single time he sees you, and he does all these cute things and he's witty and charming; you run after him, and you spell your romantic words out before him and he rushes into your arms. I'm all for passionate romance, don't get me wrong, but when you see enough of a person you cannot be that passionate romantic 100% of the time and even if you were, it would just become normal. It would just be an expectation at that point. So, it's a fool's errand. Like even if I showed up with flowers every single time, it would only raise the bar next time if I want to stand out. Let's say I bring her flowers on every single date. I would call that romantic but on the 1-year anniversary, what do you do? You're already bringing her flowers, so you bring her chocolate too, but then what do you do when your 25-year anniversary comes up, like you buy her a car?

Alex criticized mainstream culture and explained,

A lot of what we perceive as love, is sold to us. Like this I Love You perfume from CK or this super emotional I Love You cards. The concept is almost predatory in a way where you're praying on a very confusing emotion that humans have, or at least like throwing a smokescreen up to make it confusing for people and then you offer them a really, really beautiful path that you could take and then there's all this really unknown, horrible pathways on the sides that are actually probably the more fun and profound ones, but like how do you market polyamory to someone? It doesn't quite work. So, it's all a part of the giant mechanism that just propels things forward. It's super sad because what ends up happening is we just pillaged the earth for more trees for cards that say I love you and really, we're not saying I love you to the earth by digging deeper.

Chris also disapproved of the materialistic side that society attaches to love. He said, When you start to break it down it seems almost fictional. Almost everything related to love is negative, is a lie, like why are we buying diamonds? We spend all this money on something that makes no sense. Diamonds are so unrare we can even make them. We spend all this money on Valentine's Day chocolates and all this garbage. It means nothing. The physical things that people equate to love, is either a lie or it's difficult. getting married, why are we getting married? Why do you need a certificate to tell the government you love someone? What is that about? It makes no sense! Unless you're super religious and then in the eyes of God you're married again, I don't know why you need government documents for that. To actually love someone should be the purest thing that we have and instead I find it's one of the most convoluted, one of the most unbelievably difficult things.

Alex added,

I really disagree with the philosophy or the fundamental idea of organized religion. I can see the control mechanism within it and to me that directly relates and intertwined with marriage. I mean I just prove that to myself by getting out of a marriage and how hard it is and how expensive and all these but even when we were planning a wedding, we were talking about renting a venue and it would be another couple thousand dollars and I'm not against spending this money, but what are we even spending it on.

James also said that he had been in a relationship where he was under pressure of expectations to spend money. He explained,

There was probably couple reasons why she didn't like me but I don't know if it was a cultural thing in her case or not, she kind of saw me not as upper or high class. Our personalities clash on occasions I remember she was very bigger on spending money and I very big on saving money.

Overall, participants expressed that various factors have influenced their meanings of love and have changed and evolved their definitions and how they expressed it over time. Participants also acknowledged that they had rarely talked about what love and expressing and hearing "I love you" meant to them. They said that other people, including their partners, might have had different definitions of love.

Analysis

Through the process of reviewing the transcripts and looking at textural and structural descriptions, elements of early experiences of dating, sexual intimacy, meaning of love, depth of love, experience of love, expression of love, and societal expectations and culture emerged as described in Step 6. In this section, I generate and expand on the essence of love based on the

presented themes, which guided me to understand the underlying meaning of the experience of love.

Step 7: State the Essence of the Phenomenon

The goal of this step is to report the underlying essence of the phenomenon, also called *invariant structure*, which focuses on the commonalities in the experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants had various definitions of what the word “love” meant to them and what it meant for them to tell someone or hear someone say, “I love you.” The differences between the definitions were especially noticeable between monogamous and nonmonogamous individuals, with monogamous participants highlighting long-term commitment in their meanings of disclosing love and the nonmonogamous participants highlighted connection and connectedness in their meaning. Nevertheless, when looking to extract the essence of love, what appeared to be common across participants’ meanings and feelings of love was a sense of relatedness to the other person. Thus, in seeking to capture the essential elements of the lived experience, the essence of the experience of love is synthesized as “entering another person’s world and being able to relate to them,” which I expand on in the next step.

Step 8: Present the Understanding of the Essence of the Experience

Given that I found the essence of love to be “entering another person’s world and being able to relate to them,” I conceptualize this section into two parts to illuminate understanding in increased depth: a) relatability and b) entering someone’s world.

Relatability. The focus of this research was romantic love. It had been suggested in the literature that there are multiple distinguishable types of love, such as familial and romantic love. Nevertheless, many participants mentioned similarities in the experience of love for a partner,

friend, and a family member. As a result, they reported that the underlying essence of love reflected the experience regardless of the context. Relatability is what distinguishes between the experience of love for different people; it is what makes love personalized. Therefore, I have separated the ways the participants related to their partners and loved ones into three categories based on time: past, present, and future, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Categories of Relatability Based on Time and Example Themes Within Each Category

Relatability Based on	Themes
Past (Resonating)	Familiarity Understanding the journey Connection
Present (Experiencing)	Vulnerability and safety Appreciation/Admiration Commitment
Future (Deciding)	Intent Choice Learning/Finding purpose Desire/Hope for the best

The Past. Relatedness based on the past is the notion of finding resemblances and empathy in what the other person has gone through and understanding where they are coming from. It is when the two worlds' histories overlap with understanding. It is the type of love that Arman described as being based on "knowing the person, knowing the personality, respecting the personality, respecting where they're coming from, respecting what has made them who they are." It is the kind of relatedness that Mark experienced with his first closeted boyfriends while they were going through similar experiences.

Many of the participants who had been in a long-term relationship expressed that overcoming challenges together brought them and their partners closer to one another, strengthened their relationships, and gave their love more “significance.” Jayson described it as “The more and more experience we have together, the harder it becomes to ever even question or doubt.” Relatability based on the past makes the kind of love that people may feel when they look back at their relationships. Anthony described it as “We went through a lot of shit together,” and Mark said, “We’ve gone through basically everything that would break up a normal couple; anything that usually people break up over, we’ve gone through all of that together.” It is the type of love that made Alex say about his ex-wife, “We still love each other, and we still tell each other that,” and made him wonder,

People say love changes; I don’t know that it does. There are parameters around things that sort of shift, and then you feel a little maybe more awkward about expressing that love, but I don’t think that it necessary changes for someone.

Relatedness based on the past leads to a love that lasts which Alex described as “When I’ve shared that amount of energy with someone, I don’t believe in just walking away and completely forgetting about them.” Similarly, Chris said,

I hate the idea of losing someone completely out of my life. there’s a reason I had them in my life. I felt at one point that they were a good human being and I want to keep good human beings in my life.

Relatedness based on the past is the type of relatedness that can make the “firsts” special: the first love, first kiss, and first sex. Arman described the experience of it as,

These are the things that contributed to still having this in my mind as the first love because it was all very cute and like a fairy tale when it goes through my mind. I always cherish those memories and that's like a milestone in my life when I think about it.

Moreover, Kaveh described it:

No one can ever take that away from me. I lived that. That was mine; I had that experience, and even if she breaks up with me, even if the whole world says that it didn't happen, that happened, and no one ever can change that.

Relatedness based on the past leads to a type of love that made Connor feel "nervousness, excitement, sadness, anger. literally all the emotions" when he saw his ex-girlfriend a while after the breakup.

Relatedness based on the past is the type of attachment that Aayansh described having within his family:

I always compare any love to the love that our families have. If we were being a bad child, they didn't just abandon us. They held our hand, and we worked on it. Even if you make mistakes, they're not going to disown you.

The Present. Relatedness based on the present reflects the connectedness that people feel here and now. It is the type of love that Connor described feeling while "having a lot of fun with them" and Kaveh described feeling when "you have a crazy good sex, with all the right hormones jumping up at the right time." The romance that Simon had felt at a "nice sit-down restaurant where the person has put lots of effort into their appearance, they're putting effort into what they say, you're meshing with the person, you're attracted to that person physically and emotionally, and the mood is right." It is the type of love that makes people forget about all the past hurts. It is the feeling that makes people believe that it is all going to be okay, and Alex

described it as a “magic eraser as if you had a chance to redo all the things properly with all the knowledge that you have now.”

Relatedness based on the present is the type of oneness that Kaveh understood from his dad reading Persian poetry to him at a young age and the “organic” and comfortable feeling Charlie was connected to when he would “Go out to a hike, come back, go grab some greasy burgers, come back sit in the backyard, finishing shakes and be like I love you man, you’re amazing!” It is the kind of “natural” feeling that Jayson described: “We were having a sweet conversation where you can have that degree of closeness and bonding.” It is the connection that Aayansh described feeling when opening up to someone and having an intimate conversation. He called them “times when we shared our intimate stories and all our family stories.” He then explained, “When you become vulnerable with each other you kind of start to like the person more because you’ve been open with them.”

Relatedness based on the present is the type of connection that Anthony felt after pasta night when he realized how much he enjoyed his time with his partner despite her flaws. It is the feeling of getting “butterflies in your stomach,” as Connor described it, or sensing an intense energy when looking into the other person’s eyes, as Alex explained and Kaveh concluded, “That was a really huge moment for me to realize that the most important thing that can happen is what is actually happening now, and then once it’s done, you always have it for life.”

The Future. Relatedness based on the future is having the best intention for the other person at heart and the desire to have rapport with them in the future. Relatedness based on the future can look different for different people. Most monogamous participants emphasized long-term commitment and envisioning their lives with their partners. Anthony described it as “I see them as part of my life going forward, I see future plans, I see growth.” Expressing commitment

through saying “I love you” also looked different in terms of seriousness for different monogamous men. For example, the first time Jayson returned “I love you” to his partner, he meant that “I want to be with you, and I want to spend time with you,” and he clarified,

But certainly not saying I see you as the mother or father of my children, maybe someday but you’re certainly not meaning that first time saying it. Nevertheless, some people would have that hope so they probably would describe it as more significant.

On the other hand, Connor asserted, “I wouldn’t ever say I love someone unless I thought that I could see myself marrying them.”

As for the nonmonogamous participants, depending on the type of nonmonogamy, the topic of commitment came up in different shapes and forms. Mark, whose nonmonogamy had a sexual nature rather than a romantic one (he had been dating his partner for 9 years and had had multiple sexual partners on the side), said, “If I’m in love with you, then my life is your life, and your life is my life,” and he emphasized that he was not interested in having that kind of connection with anyone other than his primary partner. On the other hand, Charlie expressed his opinion as,

Intent is important, not to say we’re going to get married and have kids and all that, but my intent is that I wanna be with you, and I want you in my life in some capacity, but I don’t know what that looks like.

On the other hand, Kaveh, whose relatability based on the future was not present in his definition of love, explained the following about his primary relationship of 6 years:

There’re so many things in the world that there is to explore and do. It’s a stupid thing to say, and I don’t really mean it but let’s just say I “hope” it doesn’t last, so that means I

get to explore more things, more pain, more break up pain. What I'm saying is that it's good right now, and I'm chasing the same person, but it may last or not. I'm not attached.

Alex described his experience before polyamory as follows:

So when we exchanged "I love you" back and forth, an interesting thing came up at this point that I felt the same feeling that I felt the first time with love, but within that, I was getting a panicky sort of trapped feeling that this would be the rest of my life. So, I started thinking that something was wrong with me to even have those feelings and concerns, and I thought maybe I'm incapable of love and maybe what I'm telling people is not the truth. So, I struggled pretty hard with that in that relationship, and now understanding what I know about myself, I know why that feeling was coming up and that it's tied to polyamory, but I had no idea at that point.

Another theme that came up within relatability based on the future was choice and choosing the person despite their flaws. Anthony said,

When you start dating, you don't necessarily know what someone's bringing to the table or what baggage they have or what they want out of a relationship whereas the longer you kind of progress in that relationship there's more and more that you see.

Mark expressed his opinion as, "I feel like you like people *because* of things and then you love people *despite* things. You love somebody despite their flaws." Aayansh explained love as the desire to be with a person even if they did not match his ideals. He stated,

We all have grown up having certain persona in our mind like how a partner would be, and then when you find somebody and you have a wonderful connection with, then you see that you make exception after exception and then suddenly the image that you have in your mind doesn't look the same as what you have always carried, but it matches the

person you are with and I feel like if you really love someone you do make exceptions. When the things that you grew up with or the notion of a perfect partner that you had when it starts falling apart, that's when it's love.

Jayson confirmed Aayansh's view. He explained,

When you envision your future with a person, you have this idea of what this person is gonna be like. And over time I started replacing that person with my wife. I don't know but I imagine after enough years of being married, you won't even be able to picture anything else; that person has become the archetype person. Contemplating anything else is impossible. And you hear many people describe it as "I can't imagine anything else."

Within the choice theme, an element of forgiveness showed up within past relationships of multiple participants. Alex described his experience as the following:

She had come back a few times to me and broke down crying, told me that she cheated on me and instead of getting mad or kicking her out, I would hold her hand and pet her hair. It was a really weird connection where I almost didn't care that she had done those things. I cared more that she was willing to come to me and be vulnerable with me.

Anthony who had been through a breakup with his current partner and had gone back to her said,

How do you forgive someone, I think that was a big part of things as well for us, like being able to trust again and being able to let your guard down for both of us because I think that is an important part of being in a relationship, is realizing that there are going to be times that your partner may let you down whether they mean to or not, but how do you move forward from it.

Simon quoted the serenity prayer, “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” He added that within the context of marriage, “The idea is that you need to stop caring about all of the stuff that you can’t change in that person, and you need to focus your efforts into places that you do want to see change.”

The next theme that came up within relatability based on the future was finding purpose. Alex expressed it as, “She really needed me and, in a way, I think that is synonymous with love,” and on another occasion, he described it as “caregiver oriented.” Simon explained his finding purpose as follows:

I love her and my love was deepened because I had a cause that I could submit to, like a divine ideal that was worth every fibre of my being. Like I skin in the game you know, within my bigger purpose there’s a smaller purpose which is serving my wife and, in many senses, I exist just to serve my wife. As my religion teaches, marriage is one of those things that brings you closer to God. In our marriage ceremony we don’t give vows but one of the scriptures that they read during orthodox marriage ceremony is that “wives submit yourselves to your husbands and husbands love your wives like Christ loved the church” and that should say it all.

Andrew pointed at fatherhood and said,

I know as an adult, I’m a bit more clear on my future and ambitions. I was about 20 or so that I thought to myself I really want to become a father. The whole idea of wanting to be a father, that is a factor and I feel that it is a big influence on my definition of love because it ties up to that stability and trust, long-lasting, stable relationship.

The last theme within relatability based on the future was “hope for the best,” whether for the other person or the relationship. Arman explained love as “I want to spend time with her, or I want the best for them. I don’t care if they’re with me or not, I want to see them happy, and I want to see them succeed in life.” This theme came up more often in long-distance relationships with the build-up of desire to see that person again. Simon explained his experience as follows:

All of those moments when you want to see that person but you can’t are moments that weigh on you. They don’t negatively affect the relationship, they don’t make you think less of your partner or anything like that, but they are spiritually challenging.

Entering Someone’s World. Entering another person’s world refers to the notion of getting to know a person in some capacity which can look different for different people. Entering someone’s world is what makes love in different relationships different. Kaveh explained it as, “There are as many ways to experience love as there are people on the planet. Every experience is unique, but they are all love.” Chris also described his experience of being in love in one relationship distinct from the other and he explained the reason as, “It was different because those girls were different.”

There are many ways to get to know someone’s world. One way is to learn about them and their lives. Some of the participants expressed that they were interested to gain knowledge about the other person’s interests. For example, Arman said,

It also depends on how people function and what kind of passions they have like I read a lot of Persian poems. I know poems, that’s how I define my emotions, that’s how I connect to people through emotions and songs and all that stuff, and it helps if the other person is the same.

Other participants got to learn the other person's values and aspiration; for example, Alex said the first night they exchanged "I love you" was the first time they met. He said,

Her presence and everything around her was so beautiful and she just swept me away. I was a putty in her hands, so we hung out the entire night, but like nothing sexual happened. We were basically just cuddling and talking about how to make the world better. We just talked all night.

Some learned about people's stories. Aayansh said the first time they said, "I love you" they were sharing intimate stories. He explained,

The time when she told me about the details of how the accident happened with her husband and I'm trying to be with her. She was crying and I was swiping her tears and then I said, "I've been trying to tell you, but I don't know how I'm going to say it, I love you" and she said, "I love you too."

Some participants were interested in the other person's attitude and personality. Chris explained his experience as,

I am more attracted to people that have a certain unexplainable quality that I just pick up on. It's maybe a demeanor thing like how they carry themselves which is a personality type that shows itself in a physical form; I don't know. There's just certain factors and I can't explain it.

Getting into someone else's world is not simply having a conversation with another person, but it is the type of communication that leaves people feeling heard and understood. Alex explained,

There is some kind of organic feeling to every aspect, like I'm just not going to connect with someone you get trapped in a dinner party or in a room where you don't even want

to be and someone just comes up and they want to talk about your job and you really don't want to – I no longer just sit there and talk to them about my job. If I can dig and find something really cool to talk to that person about, great; if I can't, I move on.

Arman explained it as, “Having enough things to talk about and not realizing how much time had passed. It was definitely a different kind of relationship from the emotional level and being able to express yourself, being able to talk.” He further explained that in his opinion sharing a language facilitates overlapping self-expression and understanding in the other person: “So sharing that mother tongue which is around expressing yourself and expressing your emotions would help quite a bit for the level of attachment.”

Entering another person's world may also include physical aspects such as sexual intimacy, being physically close to each other, spending quality time with one another doing activities. This aspect is what makes long-distance relationships hard to maintain. Simon explained,

When you're long distance, you're missing out on those life moments. There's just not enough time that you physically spent with each other to be able to meet the family and friends, to be physical, to go on dates and stuff like that; when you see each other, you have to really jam pack everything in a few days but even then, you would still only have a fraction of what being in person would do.

The sexual aspect of this knowledge does not narrow down to having sex or “bodies ramming up each other” as Mark described it, but it includes a deeper awareness. Alex described his experience as follows:

Through BDSM, not only are we taking our traumas collectively and sort of showcasing them to each other and absorbing them and recycling them in a really interesting kind of fun but empathetic way. So, it's a different kind of connection

Participants said that as they got older, they experienced deeper levels of love. This evolution was particularly evident across participants' stages of love (childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, and current stage). Simon described,

As a young adult/teenager I had more mastery of those emotions and to be able to express those emotions to the other person accurately meant something; it strengthened the bond and there's more depth that way. I wonder if I could sum this up in metaphor. Like you're a painter and you have one of those palettes with globs of paint on them; as a kid those globs of paint are individual experiences that you've gone through life, both good and bad. All of these are individual globs of paint and as a painter if you only have two globs, you can't make a lot of colours, but as you put more globs of colours on your palette, the more complex colours you can make and the more colours you can draw from in order to paint a complex picture, and that's what I'm trying to describe.

Participants also described that as they experienced more and understood what they wanted in life, and as they learned more about themselves and self-developed, the love they were capable of experiencing was deeper. For example, Alex explained about his current relationship:

So I think K knows more about herself than anybody that I've previously been with and at this point in my life I know more about myself than I ever have so we are able to approach it from this really sort of mature standpoint but at the same time also really playful juvenile kind of standpoint.

Figure 1 demonstrates a person's degree of self-awareness with an overlap with someone else's world leading to the experience of love. The overlap of two circles is not simply the similarities between the two worlds, but also depicts how one person relates to the other. The circle of self-awareness can constantly expand, reflecting self-growth and leading to a greater potential for experiencing a deeper level of love. Accordingly, Figure 2 showcases more overlap between the two circles of self-awareness and the other person, leading to a deeper love.

Figure 1

Experience of Love

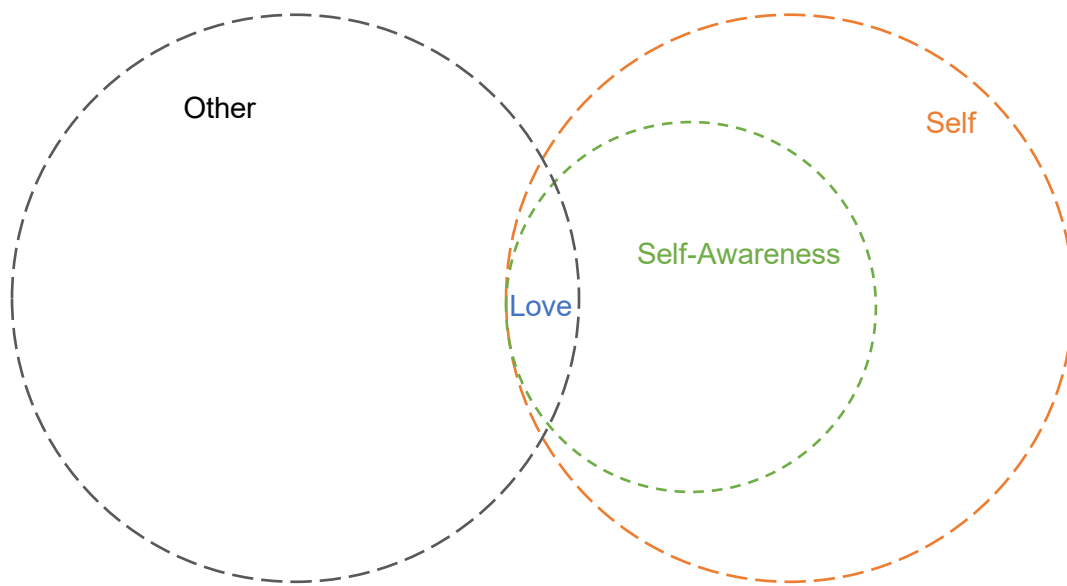
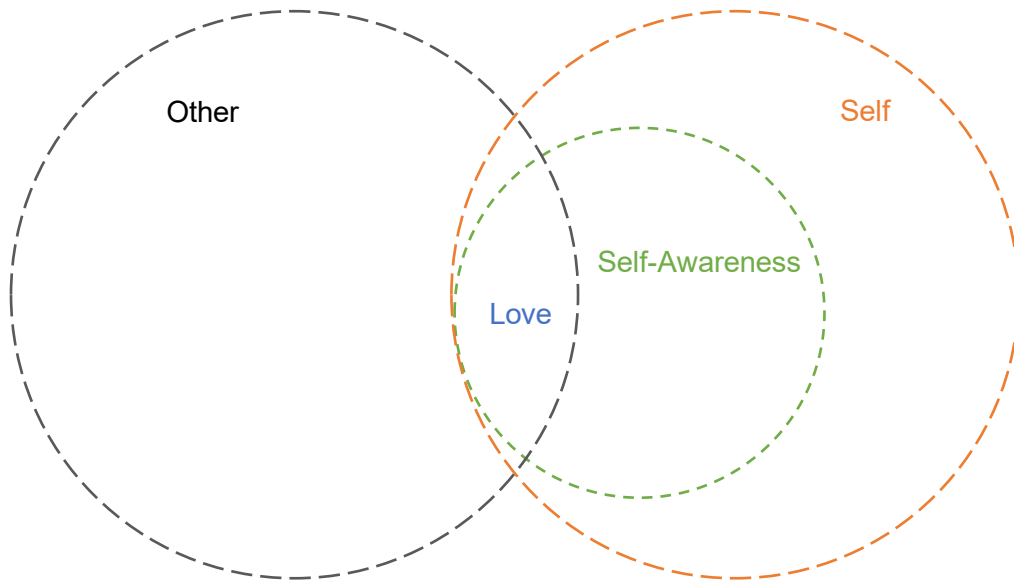


Figure 2

Experience of a Deeper Love



Discussion

Love is a universal phenomenon that has been cherished for many millennia across the globe. Love brings people together, motivates them, and causes satisfaction and sometimes pain (Bajoghli et al., 2017). Findings of this research indicated that the essence of love is the relatedness between people. Whether it is love for a friend, family, partner, neighbour, or people in general, the essence of love as a phenomenon comes down to relatability. The type of relatability, however, may differ for individuals based on the context of the relationship and nature of the connection.

Love can be as specific as having a romantic nature, which people usually seek in a relationship with a life partner, or as broad as the love for humanity and being one with the universe. As one of the participants, Chris, said, “It’s important for society, in general, to have more love in it.” Nevertheless, a deeper love in any context requires curiosity and the willingness to learn about the other side’s world rather than relying on the similarities on the surface.

Furman et al. (2009) revealed that the experience of romantic love is a critical element in psychological development during adolescence and is considered a valuable experience to prepare for future romantic relationships in adulthood. Similarly, this study suggested that a deeper awareness of self can lead to a more profound experience of love and connection with another person. Growth in the depth of love was observed in participants as they described development through different stages of life from childhood to adulthood. In addition, participants reported growth in their experience of love as their relationship progressed with their partners.

Participants distinguished between the experience of love and sexual desire, which is consistent with previous research (Langeslag & Sanchez, 2018; Langeslag & van Strien, 2016;

Surti & Langeslag, 2019). It appeared that sex/sexual attraction is only one possible way to bring people closer to each other and one of the means to relate. It is neither necessary nor sufficient to cause love. However, it seems to be one of the ways that people can enter each other's worlds, and in some instances, it is a way to relate to the other person based on the present, highlighting connectedness, or based on the future, wanting to have children with them.

Implications for Counselling

In clinical psychology and counselling, some professionals may be hesitant to talk about love and its essence due to a lack of understanding of the phenomenon (Levine, 2005; Moradi, 2019). Nevertheless, this research provided a phenomenological explanation about love as a human experience, contributing to the knowledge available for educating professionals on this ubiquitous matter. A professional's knowledge and expertise increase the comfort level within the therapeutic relationship to talk about the topic of love and facilitate the counsellor's ability to provide perspective and guidance.

Love as entering another person's world and relatability does show up in the therapy room and it is important for therapists to recognize the phenomenon's two separate but interrelated components. Gottman and Silver (2000) suggested that getting to know one another's worlds – including worries, hopes, goals, joys, values, interests, etc. – is a prerequisite to building a happy and healthy relationship. Therapists should welcome exploration of how partners attempt to enter aspects of each other's lives.

A therapist's understanding of love is critical in relationship therapy and conflict management. For example, Hui et al. (2011) suggested that for conflict management within a relationship, partners often recognize the necessity to alter how they perceive and relate to one another to improve their bond and promote a healthier relationship. Therefore, categorizing

relatability into the past, present, and future can help the counsellor compartmentalize problems within a relationship and offer exercises that address all aspects of relatability.

Last, given that this study revealed that each individual's experience of love is unique to the person, therapists must encourage partners and individuals to talk about what it means to them to love another person. It might be automatic for individuals to use the word "love" within a relationship without being present to the deeper meaning of the experience. People may also assume the same depth and meaning for their partners' love as what they themselves experience. As a result, promoting communication surrounding the meaning and role of love within a relationship is one of the practices to solidify the bonds between people and foster a healthy relationship.

Limitations and Future Directions

The initial purpose of this research was to obtain men's perspective on the meaning of love when it is disclosed through "I love you" for the first time. However, the study's results led to a broader finding of the essence of love as a human experience. The participants represented a group of diverse men, but a limitation of the study is that the participants were only men. Given that the study presents the phenomenology of love, it is crucial for future research to include a diverse population of women and nonbinary people to ensure inclusivity and consistency across all genders.

Conclusion

Love is a complex human experience with great significance in many cultures and provides meaningful ventures for personal and psychological growth and maturity. Literature suggests that men and women may view, and experience love differently due to biological and social construct differences. The presented phenomenological study was conducted to explore

the experience of men with romantic love. However, the findings provided a broader explanation about the essence of the phenomenon: the ability to relate to another person based on their past, present, or future.

Current literature lacks a comprehensive understanding of love's phenomenology. Therefore, this study provides a valuable contribution to the available knowledge about this important phenomenon. In addition, this study may be a basis for other researchers to continue the qualitative exploration of love in different populations. Finally, it is intended that professionals utilize this study's findings to better guide the clients in understanding matters pertaining to love.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Poster



WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LOVE SOMEONE?

A RESEARCH ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF MEN WITH ROMANTIC LOVE.

What do people mean by the term "love" when they first disclose it to a romantic partner by saying "I love you"?

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY, PLEASE CONTACT THE RESEARCHER AT SEYEDIKAKHKISARA@CITYUNIVERSITY.EDU

Participants must be individuals identifying as men, living in Calgary, and born between years 1981 and 1996.

Participation includes engaging in a one-on-one conversation with the researcher about your thoughts, beliefs, and experiences with romantic love. Participation and information shared by participants will remain confidential. You can withdraw at any time.

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form



CITYU RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

Title of Study: The Meaning of Love as Lived

Name and Title of Researcher(s): [redacted], Master of Counselling Psychology Student

Faculty Supervisor: [redacted]

Department: Arts and Sciences

Telephone: [redacted]

City U E-mail: [redacted]

Program Director: [redacted]

You are being invited to participate in a research study.

Key Information about this Research Study

The researcher will explain this research study to you before you will be asked to participate in the study and before you sign this consent form.

- You do not have to participate in this research.
- It is your choice whether or not you want to participate in this research.
- Your participation is voluntary, and you can decide not to participate or withdraw your participation at any time without penalty or negative consequences.
- You should talk to the researcher(s) about the study and ask them as many questions you need to help you make your decision.

What should I know about being a participant in this research study?

This form contains important information that will help you decide whether to join the study. Take the time to carefully review this information.

- You are eligible to participate in this study because you are a man living in Calgary, born between 1981 and 1996.
- You will be in this research study for approximately 1.5 hours
- About 10 to 15 individuals will participate in this study.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of men about romantic love and understand how they perceive the word “love” when it is first disclosed within a romantic relationship.

Research Participation

You will be asked to participate in the following procedures:

I understand I am being asked to participate in a virtual video interview using video program, Zoom; Approximate time: 1.5 h

You may refuse to answer any question or any item in verbal interviews, written questionnaires or surveys, and, you can stop or withdraw from any audio or visual recording at any time without any penalty or negative consequences.

Are there any risks, stress or discomforts that I will experience as a result of being a participant in this study?

COVID-19 refers to the Coronavirus that is being spread across people in our communities. We need to provide you with important information about COVID-19 (<https://www.alberta.ca/coronavirus-info-for-albertans.aspx>), and to review your study participation because of COVID-19 related risks. To minimize risk, contact with the researcher will only be conducted by telephone and/or video interviews. You will not be asked to meet with the researcher in person.

The researcher does not anticipate any definite risks from participating in this research. However, possible risks may involve experiencing negative emotions such as sadness, stress, anger, or embarrassment due to remembering past relationships. You may also experience problems in your current or future relationships due to exploring and gaining self-awareness on the topic of love. In the event that you need support, you will be provided with a list of distress and counselling services that you can access in your local area.

Given the current restrictions on face-to-face contact, correspondence between researcher and participants will be conducted via email and/or video interviews only, in order to eliminate risks of any physical contact. As a result, the following process will be in place to ensure participants' privacy and confidentiality:

- All correspondence with research participants and transmission of research documents between the researcher and the participant will be conducted via City U email and all documents (Informed Consent Forms, research data collection instruments) will be encrypted/password protected.
- Informed consent will be obtained verbally by recording at the onset of the video interview the researcher reviewing the informed consent form, having the participant acknowledge that they understand what has been read to them and that they verbally state their consent to participate.

Will being a participant in this study benefit me in any way?

I cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your participation in this research. However, possible benefits may include gaining self-awareness and becoming mindful about your beliefs on romantic love and relationships.

You will not receive any payment for participation in this study.

Confidentiality

I understand that participation is confidential to the limits of applicable privacy laws. No one except the student researcher, her supervisor, and Program Director will be allowed to view any information or data collected whether by questionnaire, interview and/or other means.

Steps will be taken to protect your identity, however, information collected about you can never be 100% secure. Your name and any other identifying information that can directly identify you will be stored separately from data collected as part of the research study. The results of this study will be published as a thesis and potentially published in an academic book or journal or presented at an academic conference. To protect your privacy no information that could directly identify you will be included.

All data (the questionnaires, audio tapes, typed records of the interview, interview notes, informed consent forms, computer discs, any backup of computer discs and any other storage devices such as USB drives) are kept locked and computer files will be encrypted and password protected by the researcher. The research data will be stored for 5 years. At the end of that time all data of whatever nature will be permanently destroyed. The published results of the study will contain data from which no individual participant can be identified.

Signatures

I have carefully reviewed and understand this consent form. I understand the description of the research protocol and consent process provided to me by the researcher. My signature on this form indicates that I understand to my satisfaction the information provided to me about my participation in this research project. My signature also indicates that I have been apprised of the potential risks involved in my participation. Lastly, my signature indicates that I agree to participate as a research subject.

My consent to participate does not waive my legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, and/or City University of Seattle from their legal and professional responsibilities with respect to this research. I understand I am free to withdraw from this research study at any time. I further understand that I may ask for clarification or new information throughout my participation at any time during this research.

I have been advised that I may request a copy of the final research study report.

Participant's Name (Please Print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Did the participant provide verbal consent? Yes/no

Researcher's Name: [redacted]

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

If I have any questions about this research, I have been advised to contact the researcher and/or his/her supervisor, as listed on page one of this consent form.

Should I have any concerns about the way I have been treated or think that I have been harmed as a research participant, I may contact the following individual:

[redacted], Program Director, City University of Seattle, at:

Address: [redacted]

Direct phone line: [redacted]

E-mail address: [redacted]

This study has been reviewed and has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of City University of Seattle. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact the IRB at IRB@Cityu.edu.

Appendix C

Sample Interview Questions

- Do you remember the first time someone said, “I love you,” in that relationship? What happened?
- What were you trying to communicate the first time you said I love you to them?
- What do you think they meant by saying I love you?
- Did you ever talk about the meaning of “I love you” in your relationship?
- How do you think the meaning of love changed for you within the relationship?
- How do you think your definition of love has changed over time?
- What influenced the meaning of love for you?