

Gender, age, and parental marital history as predictors of fidelity expectations and marriage intentions among young Xhosa adults in South Africa

John V. Rautenbach & Mary A. Faleke

Department of Social Work, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zululand

RautenbachJ@unizulu.ac.za & FalekeM@unizulu.ac.za

Abstract: Gender, age, and parental marital history influence fidelity expectations and marriage intentions among young Black South Africans. This mixed-methods study of 100 Xhosa adults used Chi-Square, correlations, and thematic analysis. Gender significantly shaped attitudes, with women holding higher fidelity standards and men showing more ambivalence. Age increased fidelity expectations but reduced desire to marry, revealing a paradox. Parental marital history was the strongest predictor, as those from married families were more likely to idealise and desire marriage. Qualitative findings highlighted gendered socialisation, intergenerational modelling, and accumulated relational experiences shaping these patterns.

Keywords: gender, age, parental history, fidelity expectations, marriage intentions

Résumé : Le genre, l'âge et les antécédents matrimoniaux des parents influencent les attentes en matière de fidélité et les intentions de mariage chez les jeunes Sud-Africains noirs. Cette étude, menée auprès de 100 adultes Xhosa, combine différentes méthodes d'analyse (test du χ^2 , corrélations et analyse thématique). Le genre influence significativement les attitudes : les femmes ont des exigences de fidélité plus élevées, tandis que les hommes se montrent plus ambivalents. L'âge accroît les attentes en matière de fidélité, mais diminue le désir de se marier, révélant un paradoxe. Les antécédents matrimoniaux des parents constituent le facteur prédictif le plus important : les personnes issues de familles mariées sont plus susceptibles d'idéaliser le mariage et de le désirer. Les résultats qualitatifs mettent en lumière la socialisation genrée, la modélisation intergénérationnelle et l'accumulation d'expériences relationnelles qui façonnent ces comportements.

Mots-clés : genre, âge, antécédents matrimoniaux, attentes en matière de fidélité, intentions de mariage

Introduction

How social-demographic characteristics determine intimate attitudes has long been debated in the social sciences. In sub-Saharan Africa, especially in post-apartheid South Africa, this question has not lost its topical theoretical and empirical significance. Studies of South African marriage and relationship norms have also increasingly reported that gender, age, and the relationship legacies that persons inherit in their family of origin mediate how these demographic characteristics are distributed into predictor channels of relationship attitudes, but can also be used to design culturally accountable family formation strategies (Neswiswa, Jacobs 2024). Understanding how these demographic variables operate as predictor pathways for relational attitudes is essential, as it is important not only to provide theoretical explanations to South African intimate culture but also to design socially responsive interventions related to the formation of family.

Gender is one of the most theorised demographic variables of difference in the sociology of intimacy. The work of Yavorsky, Kamp Dush, Schoppe-Sullivan (2015) reflects a broader scholarly consensus that traditional sociological theory has long imposed a binary framework on gender within the institution of marriage, constructing spousal roles as categorically distinct domains. In the framework, men were assigned to the productive, breadwinning sphere while

women were confined to the expressive, domestic world of emotional labour and household maintenance, a normative architecture that, despite sustained feminist critique, continues to structure spousal role expectations and domestic labour arrangements in demonstrably gendered ways. Feminist discussions of these explanations criticised the naturalisation of these arrangements, best expressed by Rozario Steinhagen (2025), who provided reasons for how gender roles were socially constructed and remained in culture, as well as where and how they were challenged. Scholars theorised the gendering of intimacy attitudes like Segato, Monque (2021), who observed that through hegemonic masculinity, which was developed based on indigenous patriarchal knowledge and coercive strategies undertaken by the colonial rulers to establish a patriarchal society, a relational space was created where men and women occupy structurally asymmetrical positions, wherein masculine identity is constituted through dominance and sexual autonomy while feminine identity is constructed through compliance, domesticity, and sexual fidelity.

The empirical studies about gender and marriage in South Africa have continued reporting that women tend to support the idea of marriage as a desirable institution more than men, who expect more fidelity in a marriage from a spouse (Sennott, Kane 2024). At the same time, they are more vulnerable to withstand the impact of infidelity in a marriage relationship; in contrast, research on South African masculinity has confirmed how hegemonic masculine norms have persisted where male sexual variety is perceived as an expression of virility, but not relational failure (Khumalo et al. 2020). Aloyce et al. (2023) established that men in support of gender-inequitable beliefs are significantly more likely to report multiple partners and less likely to expect marital fidelity, even while expecting it of their wives. This discrepancy between the expectations placed on women by men and vice versa is a gendered version of a double standard that has significant implications for how fidelity is defined across genders.

The role of age in shaping relational attitudes is theoretically connected to life-course sociology and developmental psychology. Guerrero-Puerta, Torres Sánchez (2023), the life-course perspective emphasises that individuals' attitudes and behaviours are shaped by the timing of life events, the historical context in which they are embedded, and the accumulated experiences that particular developmental phases make available. In the context of marriage attitudes, age may function as a proxy for at least three distinct processes: the accumulation of direct relational experience (including experiences of betrayal, disappointment, and successful partnership), the shifting cultural and social pressures that attend different life stages, and the developmental consolidation of identity that Reifman, Niehuis (2023) associated with the transition from emerging adulthood to established adulthood. Arocho (2021), drawing on longitudinal data from a North American sample, documented that marriage expectations shift systematically across the transition to adulthood, with younger emerging adults reflecting the culturally sanctioned deferral of marriage characteristic of the exploratory phase of emerging adulthood, while older adults who had completed their educational and occupational formation exhibited markedly stronger orientations toward marriage readiness.

In the South African setting, age-related differences in marriage attitudes are further shaped by generational shifts in cultural expectations. Older cohorts in the sample are more likely to have been socialised in environments where marriage was both culturally expected and institutionally supported. While younger cohorts have come of age in a post-apartheid era characterised by rising individualism and a significant retreat from formal marriage (Posel et al. 2011; Sennott, Kane 2024), alongside increased exposure to global intimate culture through social media. This has further shaped emerging adults' relational identities and orientation

forms, according to Naudé (2023), contributing to a diversification of relationship forms that includes widespread cohabitation and child-rearing outside marriage (Naudé 2023; Sennott, Kane 2024; Statistics South Africa 2024). Such differences between generations indicate that the age-related difference in attitudes to marriage might not only be the result of developmental maturation but also cohort-related socialisation into various normative frames of intimate life.

Parental marital history has become one of the strongest predictors of offspring's attitude toward marriage in both the Western and African scholarly world. The intergenerational continuity of marriage attitudes has been widely documented by Amato (2010). More recent studies continue to indicate that the children of divorced parents are more likely to experience union instability and reduced marital commitment (Bloome, Fomby, Zhang 2023). This intergenerational transmission is carried out in various ways, such as the direct modelling of relational behaviour, the transmission of patterns of communication and conflict resolution, and the internalisation of beliefs about the possibility of the existence of stable committed relationships. Rauscher et al. (2020) established that parental attitudes toward marriage, regardless of real marital stability, determine the offspring's attitudes, as a result of socialisation processes, which initiate during childhood and are sustained during adolescence.

The structural disruptions of family formation that the apartheid system caused render the importance of parental marital history especially important in South Africa. The migrant labour system, in which many black men were forced to work in the mines and urban centres, while their families remained in rural areas, essentially derailed the process of marital formation and stability by generating generations of children of de facto single-parent families not by choice, but by structural force (Makusha 2024). Such enforced separations have left an imprint on family formation in post-apartheid South Africa, where non-marital childbearing, fatherless households and female-led families remain at very high levels in Black South African communities (Ramatsetse, Ross 2023). The marital history that many young Xhosa adults have inherited is thus one of disruption, absence or instability and may have a significant effect on their own marriage goals and expectations of fidelity.

Among the Xhosa-speaking people in particular, the marriage practices are so rooted in a culture that exalts marriage as the cornerstone of legal family formation, continuity of clans, and ancestral honour (Baloyi 2022). The lobola (bride wealth) institution serves as the material and ritualistic form of this cultural investment in marriage, which bonds the marital relationship between two people to the social and spiritual duties of their respective families. However, the financial constraints of modern life in South Africa have rendered the fulfilment of lobola requirements more challenging among young men, thereby introducing a structural blockage to marriage, which cultural norms still insist be overcome (Haskins et al. 2023; Posel, Rudwick 2014). The Intersection of cultural obligation and structural constraint implies that parental marital history, as a proxy for cultural capital, combined with the family of origin's economic conditions, might be one of the strongest predictors of offspring marriage attitudes.

Studies on gender, age, and parental background relating to marriage attitudes in South Africa are comparatively few and methodologically limited. The majority of the literature is centred on the Western Cape or KwaZulu-Natal, and so far the Eastern Cape Xhosa communities remain underrepresented in the literature (Statistics South Africa 2024). The present study addresses this gap by systematically examining the statistical and qualitative associations between three

key demographic variables and important attitudinal outcomes in a Xhosa sample, contributing to a more differentiated picture of how intimate attitudes are demographically organised within the community. Thus, the research addresses the demand of Neswiswa and Jacobs (2024) to research South African intimacy that is sensitive to the intersectionality of gender, generation, and family background as co-constitutive factors of relational attitudes.

1. Purpose of the study

The following specific objectives were addressed in this study:

- To assess the relationship between gender and fidelity expectations, willingness to marry without a fidelity guarantee, and desire to marry
- To determine the relationship between age, fidelity expectations and desire to marry
- To assess whether parental marital history predicts idealisation of marriage and desire to marry

1.1 Research Questions

- Is there a significant association between gender and fidelity expectations, willingness to marry without a fidelity guarantee, and desire to marry among young Xhosa adults?
- What is the relationship between age, fidelity expectations and desire to marry among young Xhosa adults
- Does parental marital history significantly predict idealisation of marriage and desire to marry among young Xhosa adults?

1.2 Hypotheses

- Female participants will report significantly higher fidelity expectations and significantly lower willingness to marry without a fidelity guarantee than men.
- Female participants will report a significantly stronger desire to marry than men.
- Age will correlate positively with fidelity expectations and negatively with desire to marry among young Xhosa adults.
- Participants from married parental backgrounds will report significantly stronger idealisation of marriage and stronger desire to marry than those from non-married parental backgrounds.

2. Methodology

The researchers adopted a cross-sectional mixed-method design that involved a quantitative survey with qualitative open-ended questions to investigate the relationships between demographic factors and the fidelity expectations and marital intentions among young Xhosa adults. The quantitative part consisted of a structured questionnaire measuring demographic variables such as gender, age, parental marital status at birth, marital status, and number of children. Attitudinal items were used to measure Q2 (belief that marriage is the ideal relationship state), Q3 (expectations of spousal fidelity), Q4 (intention to cheat on a spouse), Q5 (willingness to marry without fidelity guarantee), Q6 (perceive relevance of marriage), Q7 (desire to marry), Q8 (marriage as a success indicator), and Q9 (perceived social expectation

of fidelity). The qualitative section consisted of open-ended written explanations on the reasons participants got married (Q1), judgment on the relevance of marriage (Q6), and desire to marry or not to marry (Q7).

The target population comprised young Xhosa-speaking adults who were enrolled in a university in South Africa. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to select the participants. One hundred participants who identified themselves as Xhosa were recruited and included both male and female participants with a wide range of ages and single. Ethical protocols, including informed consent, were strictly adhered to before data collection.

2.1. Data Collection

Before data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. The purpose and procedures of the study were completely explained to all the participants, and each participant was informed about the study and gave informed consent to participate. The research process was conducted anonymously by using alphanumeric codes instead of identifying information.

2.2. Data Analysis

Frequency counts and percentages were used as descriptive statistics to analyse demographic characteristics. The Chi-Square tests of independence were used to test the relationships between categorical demographic variables, including gender and parental marital status, and attitudinal outcomes Q2, Q3, Q5 and Q7. Pearson product-moment correlations (PPMC) was used to examine the relationship between the continuous variable of age and attitudinal items Q3 and Q7. Linear-by-linear association statistics were used to measure effect sizes. Inferential tests were all carried out at 0.05 level of significance.

The qualitative element was made up of open-ended written explanations attached to the quantitative measure, on why participants get married (Q1), how they evaluate the relevance of marriage (Q6), and their desire to marry (Q7). These responses were analysed reflexively through thematic analysis using a six-phase framework by Braun and Clarke (2022). Much interest was given to how the reasoning of the participants regarding marriage and faithfulness was infused with gender-specific language, generational outlook, and references to the relationships with parents. Thematic analysis was conducted inductively and on a semantic level, with analytic interpretation relying on the theoretical frameworks that were identified in the background review. Reflexive memo-writing, analytical transparency in the development of themes, and cross-referencing of both qualitative and quantitative results during the interpretive process were used to improve trustworthiness (Nowell et al. 2017).

3. Results

3.1. Gender and Attitudinal Outcomes

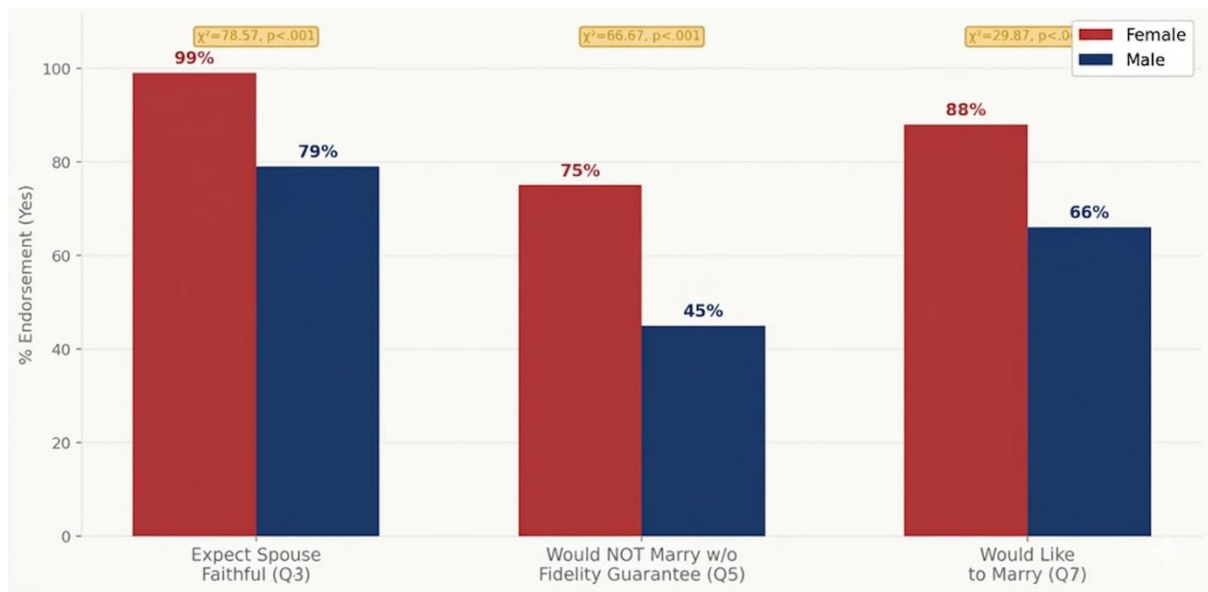


Figure 1: Gender Differences in Fidelity Expectations and Marriage Intentions (Grouped Bar)

Table 1 shows the Chi-Square tests on the associations between gender and three important attitudinal variables: fidelity expectation (Q3), willingness to marry without fidelity guarantee (Q5), and the desire to marry (Q7). The findings indicate extremely important and substantively big associations in all three outcomes.

Table 1: Chi-Square Analysis of Gender and Attitudinal Outcomes (N = 100)

Variable Pair	N	Chi-Square	Linear-by-Linear	df	p
Gender × Fidelity Expectation	100	78.57	77.79	1	< .001
Gender × Marry Without Fidelity Guarantee	100	66.67	66.00	1	< .001
Gender × Desire to Marry	100	29.87	29.57	1	< .001

Note. All tests: df = 1. Q3 = expect spouse to be faithful; Q5 = would still marry without a fidelity guarantee; Q7 = would like to get married. Source: Authors' own analysis.

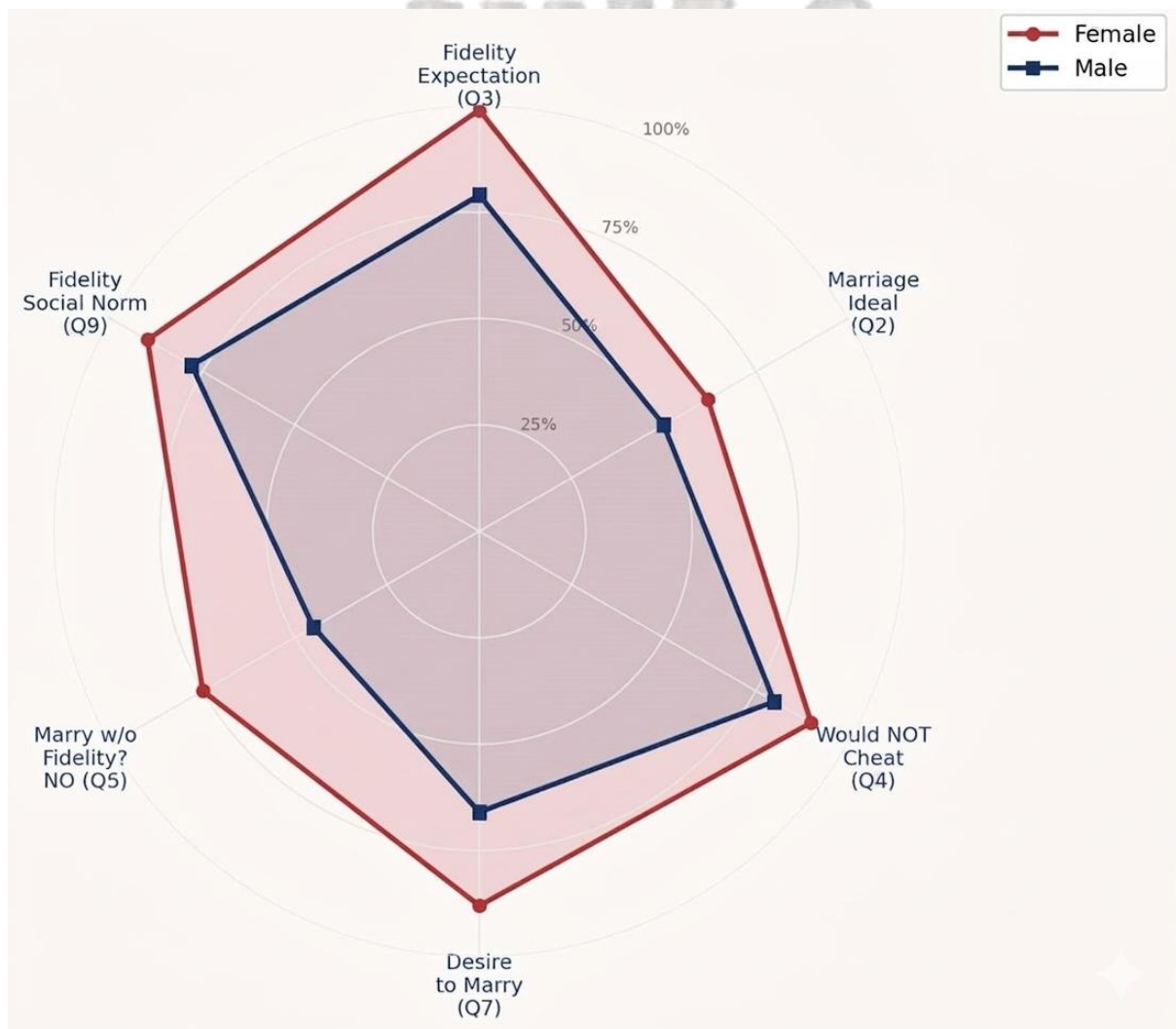


Figure 2: Gender Profile Across Six Attitudinal Items (Radar / Spider Chart)

The most significant relationship was found between gender and fidelity expectation, with a Pearson Chi-Square of 78.57 and a linear-by-linear association of 77.79 ($p < .001$). This extremely large effect suggests a very strong gender difference in fidelity expectations, with women participants strongly supporting the expectation that their partner be faithful, while male participants exhibited a much more distributed pattern, with a significant subgroup either having conditional fidelity expectations or no expectations. The correlation between gender and readiness to marry without a fidelity promise was also high ($\chi^2(1) = 66.67$, $p < .001$), with female participants showing a significantly lower readiness to consider getting married without a fidelity pledge. The association between gender and desire to marry was also significant ($\chi^2(1) = 29.87$, $p < .001$), but with a smaller effect size, indicating that, although both genders reported the majority of their desire to be married, the degree and contingency of the desire varied significantly between the two genders.

3.2 Age and Attitudinal Outcomes

Table 2 presents Pearson Product-Moment correlation analyses examining the relationships between participants' age and fidelity expectation (Q3) and desire to marry (Q7).

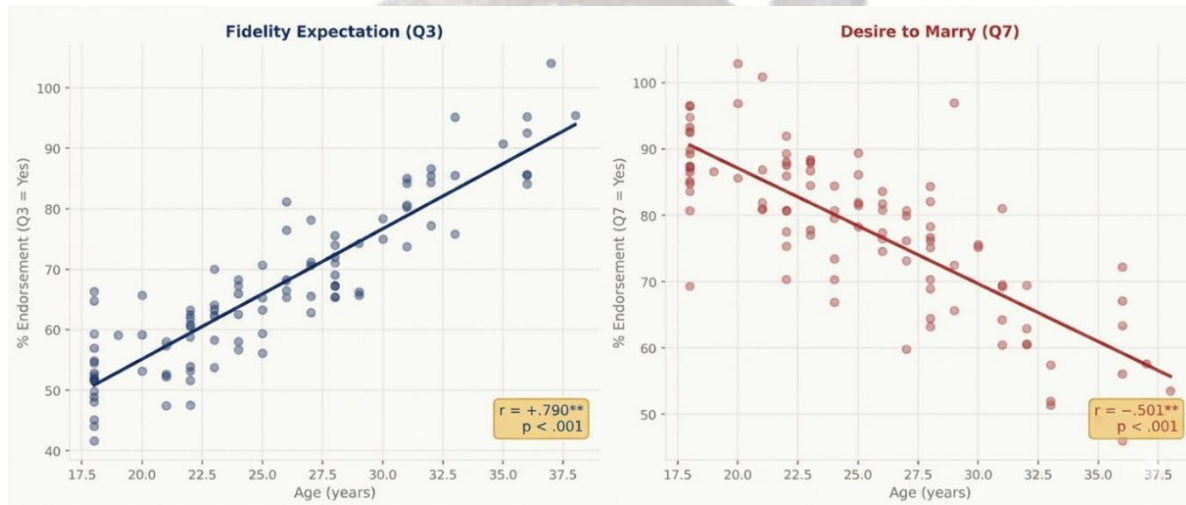


Figure 3: Age Correlations: Scatter Plots with Trend Lines (Q3 and Q7)

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Analysis of Age and Attitudinal Outcomes (N = 100)

Variable Pair	N	Mean	SD	r	p
Age × Fidelity Expectation	100	1.44	0.50	.790**	< .001
Age × Desire to Marry	100	1.23	0.42	-.501**	< .001

Note. ** Correlation significant at the .01 level (2-tailed). Items coded 1 = No, 2 = Yes. Q3 = expect spouse to be faithful; Q7 = would like to get married. Source: Authors' own analysis.

There was also a strong positive correlation between age and the fidelity expectation (Q3), $r = .790$, $p < .001$, indicating that older participants were significantly more likely to endorse the expectation of spousal fidelity, suggesting that relational experience consolidates rather than erodes normative fidelity standards over time. By contrast, the correlation between age and desire to marry (Q7) was moderately negative ($r = -.501$, $p < .001$), indicating that older participants in this sample were less likely to express a desire to marry. This counterintuitive finding, showing the positive relationship between fidelity norms and age and the negative relationship between fidelity norms and the intention to marry, is conceptually significant and is elaborated further in the discussion section. Combining these two correlations indicates the paradoxical status of older participants in the sample: their fidelity expectations are strengthened by experience, yet their readiness to commit to the institution of marriage, where their expectations are to be put to the test, has also declined accordingly.

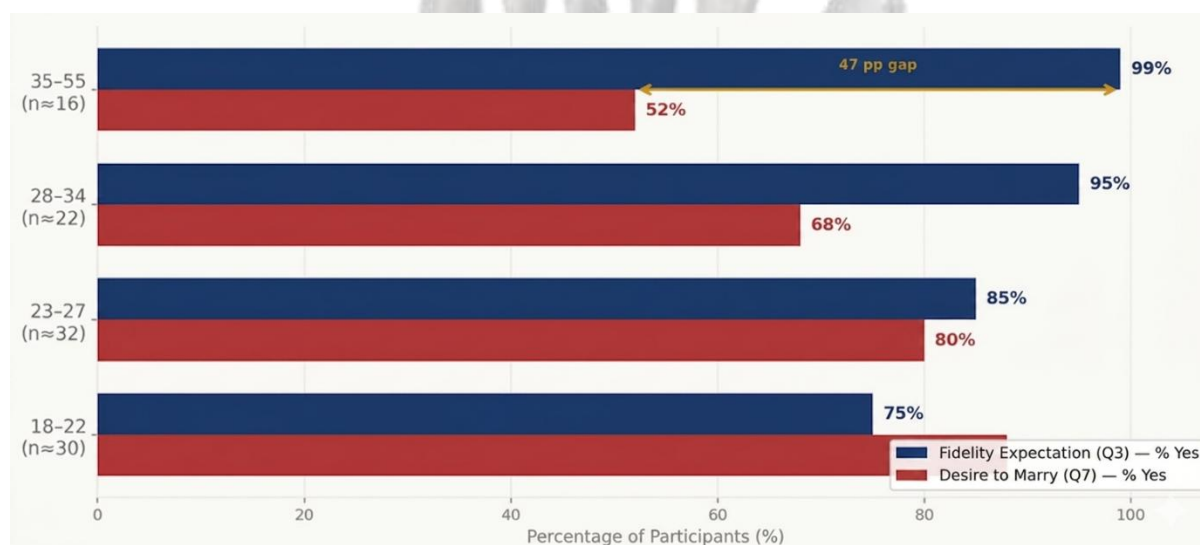


Figure 4: The Age Paradox: Diverging Horizontal Bar Chart by Age Group

3.3 Parental Marital History and Attitudinal Outcomes

Table 3 presents the Chi-Square analyses examining the relationship between parental marital status at the participant's birth and their attitudes toward marriage as an ideal (Q2) and their own desire to marry (Q7).

Table 3: Chi-Square Analysis of Parental Marital History and Attitudinal Outcomes (N = 100)

Variable Pair	N	Chi-Square	Linear-by-Linear	df	p
Parents Married × Marriage as Ideal	100	81.37	80.56	1	< .001
Parents Married × Desire to Marry	100	19.10	18.91	1	< .001

Note. All tests $df = 1$. Q2 = believe marriage is the ideal relationship state; Q7 = desire to marry.
Source: Authors' own analysis.

The Pearson Chi-Square (81.37) value was significant with a linear-by-linear correlation of 80.56 ($p < .001$) of parental marital history and the belief in marriage as an ideal state. This huge impact is so remarkable that those whose parents were married at the time they were born were much more inclined to think that marriage is good than those whose parents were not married. Parental Marital history also had a strong relationship with the aspiration to be married among the participants ($\chi^2(1) = 19.10$, $p = .001$), and this was a statistically significant intergenerational course of marriage aspiration within the specified sample. Both of these effects also support the conclusion that the marital history of the parents is the most significant demographic predictor of marriage attitudes in this study, and it is more important than gender as a demographic factor.

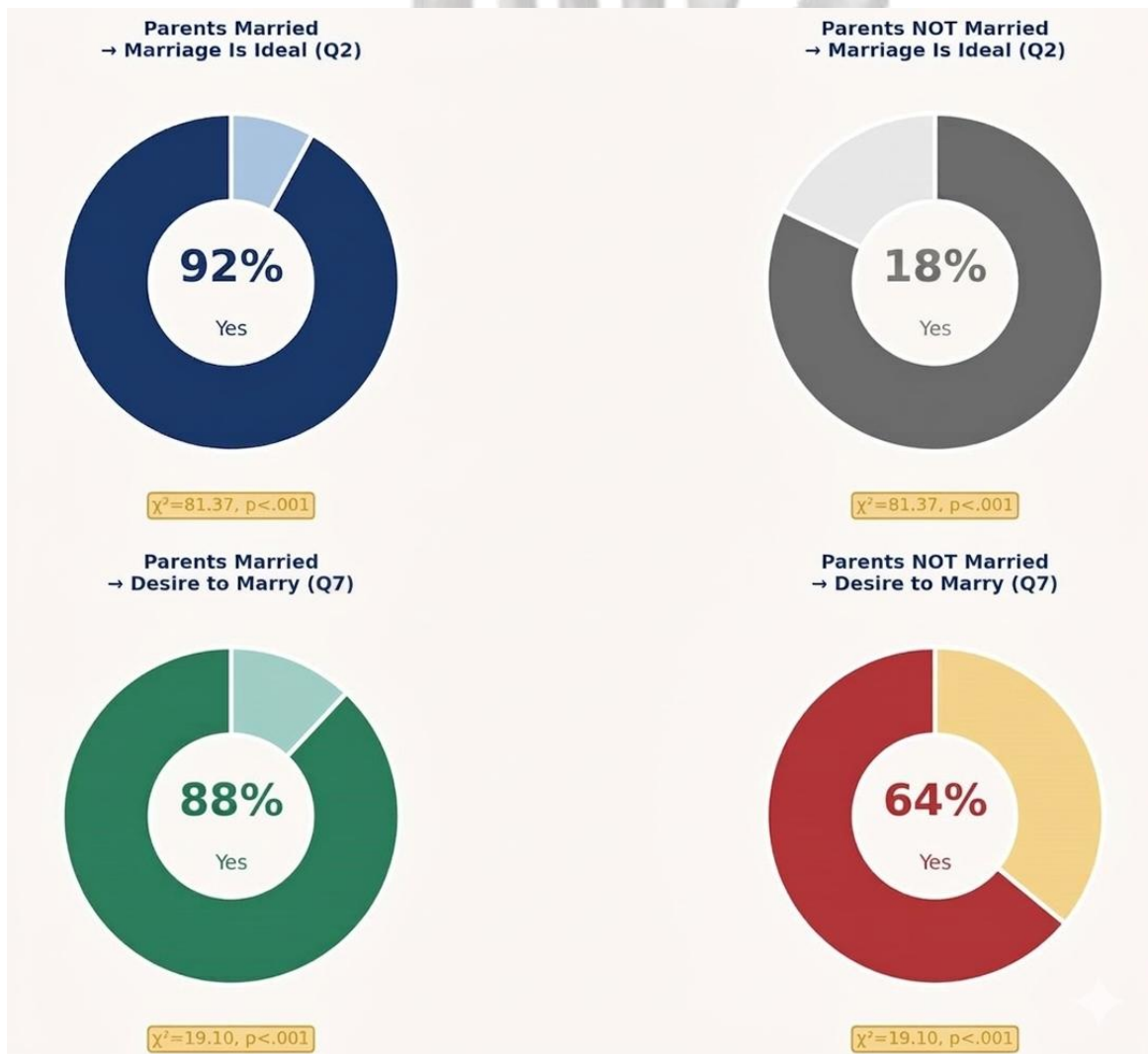


Figure 5: Effect of Parental Marital History: 2x2 Donut Grid

3.3.1 Qualitative Findings: Gendered and Generational Themes

Theme 1: The Gendered Architecture of Fidelity Expectations

The qualitative sheds light on the processes that underlie the quantitative gender differences, which is illuminating in its interpretive richness. Female participants always explained the rationale of relational reciprocity and self-respect as the foundation of fidelity. Participant 04SM10 was directly related to that: *"I cannot marry someone who will not be loyal to me as the relationship is not going to work"*. This was supported by participant 04SM12: *"A real marriage is based on trust and faithfulness, and if my spouse is not faithful, then there is no point in the marriage."* These reactions assert fidelity as an option and fidelity as a condition of being in a marriage, and exhibit a sober understanding of the mutual dependence of relational safety and the ongoing viability of intimate commitment.

The pattern of responses was much more diverse and internally differentiated in male participants. A significant percentage of them had such strong fidelity expectations as female participants had. Participant 04ZD09 stated that: *"Why would I marry someone who I expect*

will cheat on me? That just does not make sense.” However, a clear minority of male participants admitted either explicitly or implicitly the likelihood of infidelity by themselves, placing it in the context of cultural or biological undertones. Participant 05SM04 stated: *“As a man, it is understandable because it is in my nature not to focus only on my partner”*. Cheating for me means physical contact with another, so if I do not develop emotional feelings, then all is good.” Participant 05NH08 articulated a starkly gendered justification: *“No man can eat the same meal every day; there will be days when my wife and I will have our differences, and she might not want to have sexual relations with me.”* Based on cultural and pseudo-biological scripts of masculine sexuality, unstable by definition, these statements express the gendered double standard, according to which the statistical relationships above have been associated.

3.3.2. Theme 2: Age, Experience, and the Hardening of Relational Standards

The age-related patterns in the quantitative data are supported by qualitative explanations of older participants’ responses. Further analysis shows a significant difference in the epistemic register of the younger participants’ responses. Younger participants expressed more idealised expectations of marital fidelity, whereas the older participants often expressed their fidelity expectations in terms of the accumulation of experience. Participant 04ZD07, explicitly referencing personal history of betrayal, stated: *“Even though I have been cheated on, I still expect my husband to be faithful to me, almost like praying for the best, but I have experienced the worst, but I still have faith.”* This is the paradox in the quantitative age data: the experience of betrayal increases the expectation of fidelity, and has produced a corresponding reduction in willingness to marry, the willingness to entrust oneself again to an institution, which has already failed, with the arrangements it represents.

The discourse of readiness and timing that qualifies their desire to marry with their experience was also emphasised more often by the older respondents. Participant 08SM06 noted: *“Mostly amongst the older generation more than it is amongst the younger generation”*. The times I grew up in, and the morals and values we are taught about marriage make a huge difference here.” Participant 08SM04 reflected: *“It is still relevant because people still get married, but the reasons differ. People now are much more educated and independent than our forefathers, who married for financial dependency.”* These findings show that there is a different consciousness between generations regarding the meaning of marriage, whereby the older participants tend to place the institution under critical examination despite their being normatively committed to fidelity.

3.3.3 Theme 3: Parental Models and Intergenerational Relational Scripts

The qualitative information best elucidates the intergenerational transmission pathway by direct mention of participants having referenced parental relationships as examples of what they wanted to achieve in their own lives. Participant 09AM03 gave a particularly clear expression of this modelling process: *“I want to provide my children a stable home with love and support from both mom and dad, which is something my parents were not able to give me.”* This quote unveils the duality of parental marital history in terms of forming attitudes in offspring: where parental marriage has been present and stable, it provides a positive aspirational model; where it has been absent or unstable, it generates either a compensatory

aspiration (the desire to provide for one's own children what was absent in one's own childhood) or a sceptical caution against the viability of marriage.

Participant 02SN10 clearly identified parental modelling in relation to being socialised into the culture: *"My parents married to build a family and have children. I grew up in a culture where it is said that the home of a girl is in marriage"*. This response demonstrates how the marital status of parents could not only be seen as a role model but also a vehicle of cultural transmission wherein the meaning and expectations of the society and culture are passed to a new generation. Conversely, respondents whose parents had never married tended to be quite pragmatic and cynical about the worthiness of marriage, and this is also reminiscent of the quantitative outcome of very low marriage idealisation in this group. Participant 09KM06 observed: *"Most married couples do not last even two years after they are married, fight, cheat everywhere, and I would not want to occupy that space, but stay single."*

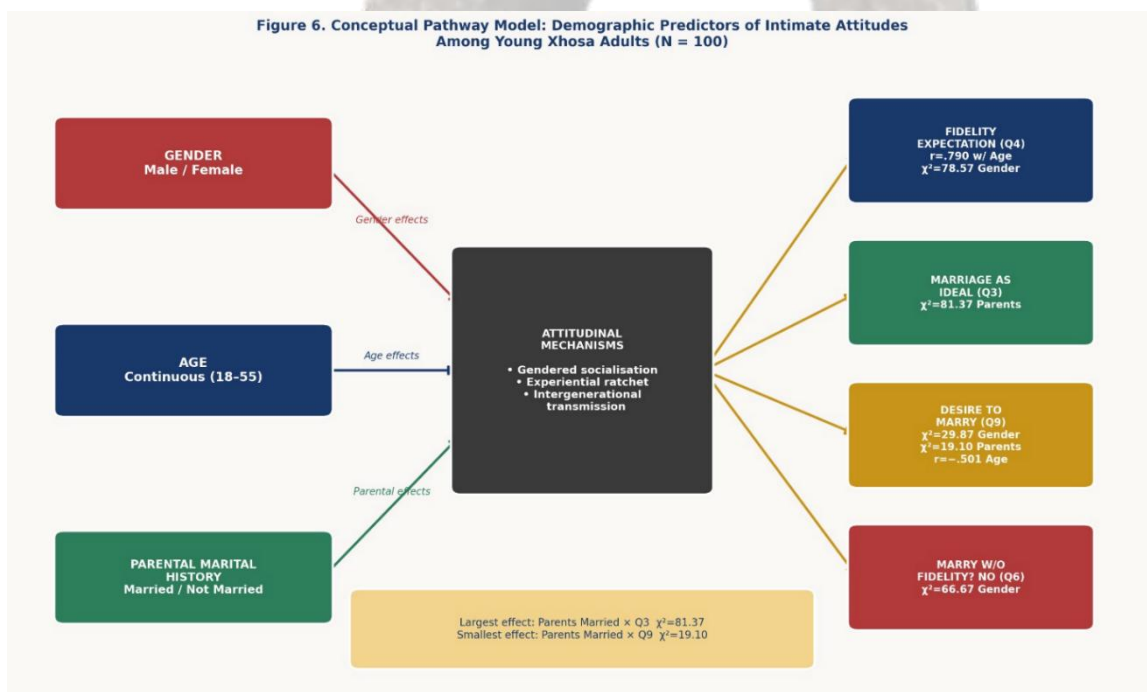


Figure 6: Conceptual Pathway Model: All Three Demographic Predictors

4. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm both statistically and qualitatively that demographic variables are strong structuring forces in the intimate orientations of young Xhosa adults. The statistically significant differences between gender, age and parental marital history are not merely significant but also show a substantively large effect indicating the relative terrain on which social location (as determined by the variables of gender, generation, family background) will play an important role in what one anticipates of the partner, what one demands of the self, and how one imagines the future of the marital life. This discussion interprets these results in accordance with the relevant theoretical frameworks and elaborates them within the framework of the overall literature on demographics and intimate attitudes in South Africa and beyond. The following discussion interprets these findings in relation to the relevant theoretical

frameworks within the framework of more general literature on demographics and intimate attitudes in South Africa and beyond.

The gender findings, specifically the exceptionally high Chi-Square of 78.57 of the Gender x Q3 correlation, require careful theoretical engagement. The magnitude of this effect is remarkable: it outweighs any other demographic correspondence in the data, and the extent of gender distinction in the expectations of wife fidelity is immeasurably beyond individual difference. The most appropriate theoretical framework to explain this finding is not individual psychology but structural gender analysis. A theory proposed by Young et al. (2025), based on hegemonic masculinity, offers a theoretical framework in this case, where the authors attribute the establishment of dominant forms of masculinity to the promotion of male sexual freedom and the policing of female sexual conduct in patriarchal social orders. Male participants in this framework are not simply inconsistent in distributing fidelity expectations but simply display a gendered ideology that tolerates masculine sexual promiscuity and one that also requires feminine fidelity.

The qualitative data is a strong confirmation of this analysis. The participant who made the metaphor about male infidelity being comparable to eating the same food on the same day every day is not enacting a personal peculiarity but a cultural script that has spread widely, and that Makusha (2024) classifies as central to hegemonic Xhosa masculine identity, wherein male sexual variety is framed as natural, unavoidable and thus justifiable. Bhana, Khumalo et al. (2021) discovered comparable constructions in South African male adolescents, who would claim that male sexual inconstancy is culturally established via peer socialisation mechanisms that start during early adolescence and are reinforced by adult male role models. That such an ideology continues to persist into adulthood as indicated by current data, suggests that the ideology is not simply a result of youthful experimenting but is a more permanent aspect of masculine self-concept in this cultural setting.

The gender disparity in Q6 (willingness to marry without a fidelity guarantee) is theoretically significant in a distinct way. The fact that women are less likely than men to think about marriage without a promise of fidelity affirms what Ugwu, Odimegwu (2024) have discovered to be the elevated risk of material and health consequences of marital infidelity. In a nation that still experiences HIV/AIDS as a crisis of national health, and in which the legal and financial rights of marriage are unequally distributed between genders (Klazinga, Artz, Müller 2020), the insistence of female participants on fidelity as a condition of marriage is not just a romantic choice but a protective agency, a reasonable claim of relational norms in a society where the lack of fidelity poses proportionately higher. This interpretation redefines what might be thought to be romantic idealism as a complicated risk management exercise.

Although the effect size of the gender difference in the desire to marry (Q7) is smaller than the fidelity-related relationships, it is significant and does not conflict with broader literature. Posel et al. (2011) reported higher rates of pro-marriage attitudes among South African women than among men, attributing this to the greater social and economic gains that married women receive than married men, such as access to male earnings, social respectability, and the avoidance of the stigma of unmarried motherhood. However, the current results make this economic-rationality account more complex: the women participants are now more interested in getting married and more intentional about it, demanding that fidelity be non-negotiable. This

implies that female marriage wants cannot be analysed into economic computation but entail real relational values, values that bring about a contradictory stance when women want most what they fear the most, they cannot attain.

The pattern of age correlation is theoretically rich, which needs multi-level interpretation. The strong positive correlation between age and fidelity expectation ($r = .790$) appears to be a paradox at first: older participants, having had more infidelity or relationship breakage, should decrease their expectations. The data, however, argue just the contrary: the experience of relationship betrayal, criticised, does not give rise to the rejection of fidelity ideals, but strengthens them. This pattern aligns with what King and Hicks (2021) called “value clarification through adversity”, where relational experience, such as negative experience, clarifies and sharpens core relational values instead of diminishing them. Alternatively, according to Elder Jr (1998); Fasang, Gruijters, and Van Winkle (2024), the life-course approach, older participants in this study can hold various structural statuses (with more settled economic endowment, adulthood, and familial obligation) that render fidelity more desirable and more practical.

One of the theoretically most provocative findings of this study is the negative relationship between age and the desire to marry ($r = -.501$). It directly questions the general belief in life-course sociology that the desire to get married increases with age, as individuals approach the culturally normative stage of life at which one is expected to marry. In the study, the opposite is observed: the older the participants, the less desirable they are to get married, although their fidelity standards are higher. This paradox can be theoretically accounted for by what can be called the ratchet effect of accrued relational experience: every year of adult life in which marriage has been contemplated but not taken may present new information, either in personal experience or through relationships observed, and the conditions of fidelity and trust that the participants believe to be required of marriage have been hard to reliably acquire. The consequence is a gradual narrowing of the terms of marriage that would be acceptable, with a gradual decrease in the anticipation that those terms will be fulfilled. Aspiration to marriage does not die, but it is being conditionalised and increasingly deferred.

These findings have policy and programmatic implications to the solution to the declining rates of marriage among black South Africans. Sennott, Madhavan, Nam (2021), documentation of falling marriage rates reflects not a declining desire for marriage but a progressively rising fidelity threshold beyond which marriage is deemed safe to enter; then interventions designed to promote marriage by simplifying its material preconditions (reducing lobola costs, providing economic incentives for formal marriage) may be systematically missing the point. The barrier to marriage among the older participants in this study was not largely economic but relational: it is the doubt, based on experience, that a partner of adequate trustworthiness and faithfulness can be sought and held. It indicates that relationship skills training, trust-building interventions, and direct programmes that relate to the culturalisation of infidelity might be more effective in facilitating the formation of stable families than economic or legal incentives alone.

The significance of the parental marital history, as observed, is the strongest statistical finding in the dataset, and its theoretical importance should be well expounded. The Chi-Square of 81.37 for the association between parental marital history and belief in marriage as an ideal is not only large but also quite diagnostic, implying that being born to married parents is virtually a sufficient condition for predicting whether one believes in marriage as an ideal relationship state. The result also generalises the intergenerational transmission study of Arocho (2021) to

the Xhosa South African context and affirms that the same mechanisms of direct behavioural modelling, socialisation into relationship beliefs, and internalisation of cultural scripts, which he found in North American samples, are equally or more powerfully applied in the Xhosa community.

The South African setting provides significant insights into the hypothesis of intergenerational transmission. The systematic destabilisation of the formation of Black families by the apartheid system, as discussed in the background review, implies that the marital histories of many young South Africans were not a result of choice or preference based on that individual or family culture, but rather imposed by structural factors. The current finding that non-marriage by parents is highly correlated with the scepticism of their offspring towards marriage as an ideal must be interpreted in this structural context. It is not simply that unmarried parents transmit anti-marriage attitudes to their children; it is that the structural circumstances, which made marriage impossible, offered the material and relational misfortunes, poverty, absent fathers, single-parent stress, that give children direct experiential evidence for doubting whether marriage is achievable or beneficial. The attitude is not just a parental-child transmission as a cultural belief; it is independently generated by the child's own experience of growing up in a household structured by the absence of the institution that their culture celebrates.

Conversely, participants whose parents were married during their birth not only have a positive attitudinal heritage but also a constellation of experiences that validate the possibility of marriage. The qualitative data from participant 09AM03, whose explicit comparison of their own aspiration and the failure of their parents would evoke the dual valence of parental modelling, suggests that parental marital history is not a straightforward interaction of positive and negative templates but rather a complicated relational inheritance that individuals have to make sense of and negotiate. Those whose parents had been successful in their marriages have a real model of success; individuals whose parents had not been successful have to build the vision of marriage out of cultural and symbolic materials, with no personal experience, or give up the idea in the presence of the opposite evidence.

The intersection of gender and parental marital history as predictors merits particular attention. While the present study's sample size does not permit a fully powered three-way interaction analysis, the qualitative data suggest that the intergenerational transmission of marriage attitudes may be differently gendered. Female participants who grew up in households with married parents appear to internalise not merely the aspiration for marriage but specifically the expectation of fidelity within marriage, combining the parental model with the broader feminine relational value system described above. Male participants from similar backgrounds may internalise the aspiration for marriage while retaining the culturally transmitted masculine script that permits fidelity exceptions. This gendered differential in what is transmitted through parental modelling would help explain why parental marital history has such a powerful effect on belief in marriage as an ideal (Q2), while its effect on desire to marry (Q7), though still highly significant, is considerably smaller: the ideological investment in marriage as an institution may be more uniformly transmitted across gender, while its translation into personal marriage aspiration is more significantly moderated by gender-specific cultural scripts.

The qualitative data also present significant information about the reasons participants provide regarding marriage that can be applied to the demographic patterning of marriage desire. The answers to Q1 (reasons why people still get married) clearly show a gradation based on age: the younger participants more often refer to romantic ones (love, spending life with a partner), older ones refer to pragmatic and structural ones (stability, financial security, family obligation, cultural expectation). Participant 02ZD08 provided an acute but cynical commentary: *“Money, money and more money, marriage in our times is about what kind of financial support one receives on the part of his or her spouse, as though it were a business deal”*. This comment, from an older participant, shows the disillusionment with the ideals of romantic marriage that builds up with age and experience in relationships, and is in accord with the negative age-desire-to-marry relationship quantitatively measured.

The finding that participant 08KM01 invoked a Xhosa-specific cultural proverb (*“our culture says the grave of a woman is at her husband’s home”*) to justify the relevance of marriage speaks to the cultural dimension of demographic patterning that cannot be captured by quantitative data alone. This statement reveals how cultural gender ideology is not merely transmitted through abstract socialisation but is encoded in specific linguistic and proverbial forms that circulate within communities and shape individual attitude formation. That this statement was made by a female participant in defence of the relevance of marriage, at the same time as other female participants were also voicing pragmatic scepticism, indicates the inner multiplicity of gendered marriage orientations and the numerous and sometimes conflicting cultural resources that people mobilise around to form their relational orientations.

One of the limitations of the present study that must be acknowledged is that the design is cross-sectional and, therefore, causal inferences cannot be made as to the directionality of the associations reported. While the theoretical frameworks employed suggest clear causal hypotheses (parental marital history shapes offspring attitudes through intergenerational transmission; age effects reflect the accumulation of relational experience), the data can only verify that the relationships are present, but not how they are achieved. Longitudinal research tracking the evolution of these associations over the life course would significantly strengthen these claims that the present analysis suggests.

Conclusion

This study has established that demographic factors: gender, age and parental marital status are effective and statistically significant predictors of intimate attitudes amongst the young Xhosa adults in South Africa. Gender structures fidelity expectations through the differential socialisation of masculine and feminine relational norms, creating a gendered double standard where women require fidelity more absolutely and condition marriage more stringently, whilst men show greater distributional heterogeneity, which is in part due to cultural scripts that naturalise male sexual inconstancy. Age works in its paradoxical fashion of accumulation of experience: the harder the fidelity expectations become as a result of the relational experience, the less one wants to pass through the institution of marriage, which implies that the relational standards become more tightened as the amount of experience increases, and the confidence in the possibility of meeting the relational standards decreases. Parental marital history proves to be the most significant predictor of marriage attitudes, with children of married parents being far more likely to idealise marriage and to aspire to have one themselves, a result that affirms the intergenerational transmission of marriage attitudes through direct behavioural modelling

and cultural socialisation, but also indicates the circumstances in which the transmission is interrupted.

These findings have important implications for the way family scholars, policymakers, and social workers interpret the decrease in marriage rates and the changing intimate norms that are evident in the post-apartheid South African communities. The authors suggest that the barriers to marriage are both structural and attitudinal and that interventions should be directed to both material conditions that make marriage difficult to achieve and the relational conditions that inhibit the formation of interpersonal trust. Future studies are needed to investigate these demographic correlations over time, to be more systematic in considering the overlaps among demographic predictors, and to extend the investigation into communities beyond higher education settings to fully represent the diversity of the Xhosa intimate communities.

References

- Aloyce, D., H. Stöckl, D. Malibwa, E. Peter, Z. Mchome, A. Dwarumpudi, A. M. Buller, S. Kapiga, G. Mshana. 2023. Men's Reflections on Romantic Jealousy and Intimate Partner Violence in Mwanza, Tanzania. *Violence Against Women* 29 (6–7): 1299–1318.
- Amato, P. R. 2010. Research on Divorce: Continuing Trends and New Developments. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72 (3): 650–666.
- Arocho, R. 2021. Changes in Expectations to Marry and to Divorce Across the Transition to Adulthood. *Emerging Adulthood* 9 (3): 217–228.
- Baloyi, G. T. 2022. Marriage and Culture within the Context of African Indigenous Societies: A Need for African Cultural Hermeneutics. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 48 (1): 1–12.
- Bloome, D., P. Fomby, Y. Zhang. 2023. Childhood Family Instability and Young-Adult Union Experiences: Black–White Differences in Outcomes and Effects. *Demography* 60 (2): 379–410.
- Braun, V., V. Clarke. 2022. *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. London: SAGE.
- Elder Jr, G. H. 1998. The Life Course as Developmental Theory. *Child Development* 69 (1): 1–12.
- Fasang, A. E., R. J. Gruijters, Z. Van Winkle. 2024. The Life Course Boat: A Theoretical Framework for Analyzing Variation in Family Lives Across Time, Place, and Social Location. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 86 (5): 1586–1606.
- Guerrero-Puerta, L., M. Torres Sánchez. 2023. Early Leaving from Education and Training and Related Matters through the Lens of the Life Course Paradigm: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *Social Sciences* 12 (9): 521.
- Haskins, L., S. Luthuli, S. Mapumulo, T. Kathree, C. Horwood. 2023. Exploring the Roles of Fathers from the Perspective of Informal Women Workers: A Longitudinal Mixed Methods Study from Durban, South Africa. *Journal of Family Studies* 29 (5): 1987–2007.

- Khumalo, S., M. Mabaso, T. Makusha, M. Taylor. 2021. Intersections between Masculinities and Sexual Behaviors among Young Men at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *SAGE Open* 11 (3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211040114>.
- Khumalo, S., M. Taylor, T. Makusha, M. Mabaso. 2020. Intersectionality of Cultural Norms and Sexual Behaviours: A Qualitative Study of Young Black Male Students at a University in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *Reproductive Health* 17 (1): 188.
- King, L. A., J. A. Hicks. 2021. The Science of Meaning in Life. *Annual Review of Psychology* 72 (1): 561–584.
- Klazinga, L., L. Artz, A. Müller. 2020. Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and HIV in South Africa: An HIV Facility-Based Study. *South African Medical Journal* 110 (5): 377–381.
- Makusha, T. 2024. Young Fatherhood, Masculinities, and Structural Factors in South Africa. *Frontiers in Sociology* 9: 1410801.
- Naudé, L. 2023. ‘Connecting the I to the We to the World’: Social Media as Dialogue between Self and Society. *Social Identities* 29 (6): 608–625.
- Neswiswa, K. G., S. Jacobs. 2024. Hearing the Voices of Black Africans: Essential Components for Culturally Relevant Marriage Enrichment Programs in South Africa. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 50 (2): 407–433.
- Nowell, L. S., J. M. Norris, D. E. White, N. J. Moules. 2017. Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16 (1): 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>.
- Posel, D., S. Rudwick. 2014. Ukukupita (Cohabiting): Socio-Cultural Constraints in Urban Zulu Society. *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 49 (3): 282–297.
- Posel, D., S. Rudwick, D. Casale. 2011. Is Marriage a Dying Institution in South Africa? Exploring Changes in Marriage in the Context of Ilobolo Payments. *Agenda* 25 (1): 102–111.
- Ramatsetse, T. P., E. Ross. 2023. Understanding the Perceived Psychosocial Impact of Father Absence on Adult Women. *South African Journal of Psychology* 53 (2): 199–210.
- Rauscher, E. A., P. Schrodtt, G. Campbell-Salome, J. Freytag. 2020. The Intergenerational Transmission of Family Communication Patterns: (In)consistencies in Conversation and Conformity Orientations Across Two Generations of Family. *Journal of Family Communication* 20 (2): 97–113.
- Reifman, A., S. Niehuis. 2023. Extending the Five Psychological Features of Emerging Adulthood into Established Adulthood. *Journal of Adult Development* 30 (1): 6–20.
- Rozario Steinhagen, B. 2025. A Reconstruction of Gender: Implications of Social Construct and Gender Structure Theories. *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence* 10 (1): 5.
- Segato, R. L., P. Monque. 2021. Gender and Coloniality: From Low-Intensity Communal Patriarchy to High-Intensity Colonial-Modern Patriarchy. *Hypatia* 36 (4): 781–799.
- Sennott, C., D. Kane. 2024. Rights vs. Lived Realities: Women’s Views of Gender Equality in Relationships in Rural South Africa. *Social Problems* 71 (3): 309–318.

- Sennott, C., S. Madhavan, Y. Nam. 2021. Modernizing Marriage: Balancing the Benefits and Liabilities of Bridewealth in Rural South Africa. *Qualitative Sociology* 44 (1): 55–75.
- Statistics South Africa. 2024. *Statistical Release P0301.4: Census 2022*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.
- Ugwu, N. H., C. O. Odimegwu. 2024. Contextual Determinants of Multiple Sexual Partnerships amongst Young People in South Africa: A Multilevel Analysis. *BMC Public Health* 24 (1): 1533.
- Yavorsky, J. E., C. M. Kamp Dush, S. J. Schoppe-Sullivan. 2015. The Production of Inequality: The Gender Division of Labor Across the Transition to Parenthood. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77 (3): 662–679.
- Young, A. M., M. Moji, Z. Duby, S. Tenza, M. Atujuna, T. Palanee-Phillips, A. M. Minnis, E. T. Montgomery. 2025. The “Ideal Man”: How Gender Norms and Expectations Shape South African Men’s Masculinity, Sexual Identities, and Well-Being. *The Journal of Men’s Studies* 33 (2): 417–440.