

# Understanding the Concept of Love and How it Evolves Through Life: An Exploratory Study

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## Abstract

Each person is unique and interprets situations differently depending on their perspective, the definition of love can change as a person ages. The purpose of the present study is to explore the concept of love and how it changes with age and to study this objective data was collected using a subjective survey which consists of six open ended questions and thematic analysis was used to interpret the gathered information. Total sample size was, N=119 participants, among which 91 were females, 27 males and 1 other, age ranging from 17-60 years. Findings shows four major themes: expression, experience, connection, and exchange, all of which are considered to represent love when put together and it also reveal that participants at young age experienced love which is described as immature (35%), emotionally unstable (17%) as compared to love relationships after 30 years of age that were mature, long lasting and emotionally stable. It can be concluded that love is a multifaceted phenomenon including the expression of feelings and emotions, the formation of friendly connections, the exchange of pleasurable interactions, and the experience of a positive state. And the concept of love evolves as people gain new experiences with age.

Keywords: *Love, Experience, Expression, Connection*

## Introduction

Each of us is unique. We experience the world in our own way. Everyone has their own content, the result of our personal histories of sensations, people, events, behaviour and emotions. That's why there is no single lens under which the word love can be described, as the feeling and meaning of love is different for everyone based on their belief, associations and expectations. According to the biology view point, the feeling of falling in love has an influence on brain chemistry and neurotransmitters.

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In research conducted by Fisher (2005) findings revealed that when couples who love each other intensely were shown a photo of their beloved, three significant brain regions, the right ventral tegmental area (VTA), the medial caudate nucleus, and the nucleus accumbent were highlighted, according to fMRI brain reports.

In the context of psychology, Sigmund Freud believed that love and sexuality goes hand in hand and children from very young age experiences this feeling of love for their parents of opposite sex. To understand this concept terms like "Oedipus complex" and "Electra complex" were introduced. Young boys are sexually attracted to their moms and wish to kill their father in order to have their mothers exclusively. Similarly, young girls have a strong longing for their fathers and are willing to sacrifice their moms in order to be with them and when these feelings are rejected by their parents, they seek love and attention from others. Moreover, according to Humanistic theory, Maslow described love as a human need. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs people are constantly and actively striving to attain the highest goal of self-actualization

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by starting to fulfil basic psychological needs then safety needs next is need of love and belonging and self-esteem need. In relation to this concept, the famous love story of Romeo and Juliet by Shakespeare portrays the need for love among human beings. Although Romeo and Juliet had not been together for a long time, their love for each other was undeniable. Romeo arrives at Juliet's (supposedly) dying body and confesses that he will be unable to live without her. "For fear of that I still will stay with thee and never from this pallet of dim night depart again. Here, here I will remain with worms that are thy chambermaids, O, here will I set up my everlasting rest...O true apothecary! Thy drugs are quick. Thus, with a kiss I die." (152). Upon waking from her slumber, Juliet finds Romeo dead next to her. Unable to live without him, she grabs Romeo's dagger and declares "O happy dagger! This is thy sheath; there rust, and let me die." (154). While this is, of course, a dramatic portrayal of the inability to live without one's lover, it does demonstrate that the concept of belonging together has existed for ages. Another, significant aspect of love proposed by B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning in which voluntary behaviours are learned through consequences, and behavioural responses are elicited through reinforcement, which causes a behaviour to occur more frequently." (Varcarolis). He described love as the most effective positive reinforcement. For instance, when a man is head over heels in love with a lady, to gain her attention he frequently sends flowers, makes frequent phone calls, and takes her out on dates. In exchange, the woman sees him as a future benefactor, which makes her more fond of him. He sees this affection as a positive reward and as result of which he continues his behaviour. Thus, love is not an emotion as it is accompanied by physiological motivation which influences neurobiology and behaviour of a person feeling love. In a research study by Song (2015) compared the Regional Homogeneity (ReHo) and functional connectivity (FC) using Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) of people in love and those who ended their romantic relationship findings suggest that ReHo of the left dorsal anterior cingulate cortex and FC within the reward, motivation, and emotion regulation network, as well as the social cognition network increased. whereas ReHo of the bilateral caudate nucleus related to the ending of a romantic relationship found to be decreased. In addition, love is found to be addictive in nature, when the pleasure associated with love is terminated, it can induce a withdrawal syndrome, similar to addiction to opiates, cocaine, and other narcotics. Because of its similarity to opioid withdrawal syndrome, this has been termed "Love withdrawal syndrome" (LWS) Burunat, 2007. Therefore, love is a kind of drug and LWS can result in negative consequences

such as depression, loneliness, sleep problems and other mental health issues.

Love is a complex phenomenon to understand poets, philosophers, and novelists have suggested different definitions of love over the ages, but there is still no consensus on a description of the love phenomenon capable of recognising its nature, given its diversity and subjectivity. The meaning of the word 'love' can have many different contexts and may have different meanings to different people. A person can have a different set of expectations in a romantic relationship and at the same time they can feel different kinds of love towards their parents, child or even objects. Hence, linguistics experts believe love to be polysemous. One word 'love' can be used to express different feelings, attitude or emotion which may vary in context from person to person. Fehr and Russell, 1991 invited college students to think of as many different sorts of love as they could. After condensing syntactic variations, 216 types of love were identified, with 93 were mentioned by more than one person. Furthermore, the dynamic of a love relationship changes with age as the concept of love evolves. Teenage love is a period in a child's development when he or she begins to understand the idea of love and explores many dimensions of it. And this discovery of love dynamics continues until young adulthood, when relationships are more casual since young couples do not want to settle.

According to Laursen and Jensen-(1999) Campbell's developmental application of social exchange theory, teenagers are primarily concerned with themselves and make relationship decisions based on personal benefit. Individuals are assumed to become less interested in maximising personal rewards as they get older and more focused on achieving joint advantages by benefiting both themselves and their love partner in encounters. So, love relationships in middle age are more mature and stable as compared to teenage love. Based on typology theory of love younger people may prefer the Eros style, they would later opt for the style of love which favours commitment (Storge) and attachment Shaver et al. (1988), and also the more rational styles (asPragma). Hendrick & Hendrick (1986). Therefore, the need for love remains constant while the meaning and dimensions of love shifts with age and context of relationships. Current study focuses on understanding the meaning of love for people and how the concept of love evolves with age.

### **Method Design**

In the present research exploratory research design was used to explore the concept of love and how it changes with age. Data was collected through

qualitative surveys from a wide range of age groups 17 to 60 years and thematic analysis was used for the interpretation of the information.

**Objectives**

- To study the concept of love.
- To study the concept of love for different age groups.

**Sample**

To understand the concept of love among different age groups data was collected through an online qualitative survey from participants of 17-60 years of age group and the average age is 30.3 years. Total sample size was N=119, among which 91 females, 27 males and 1 other. Inclusive criteria include participants from urban background and had some understanding and experience of love.

**Measures**

Information was collected through the qualitative survey which was designed for the present study.

**Survey**

1. What is love for you? Express in the top three words.
  2. To whom you love (relationship) ?
  3. How do you express your love?
  4. How do you know that you are loved?
- For above 35 years of age.

0. Describe your earliest love? Express in three words.
0. What's the difference between the meaning of love you're feeling right now and the love you previously experienced?

**Data Analysis**

Data was collected using qualitative survey which include six open ended questions and the information gathered was analysed using thematic analysis method. This entails identifying, describing, and analysing implicit and explicit concepts from data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2012). The breadth of scope is a crucial element of thematic analysis, which implies it is well suited to huge datasets.

**Findings**

Thematic maps were constructed for each question which are as follows:

Figure 1

*Showing the thematic map for how individual describe love?*

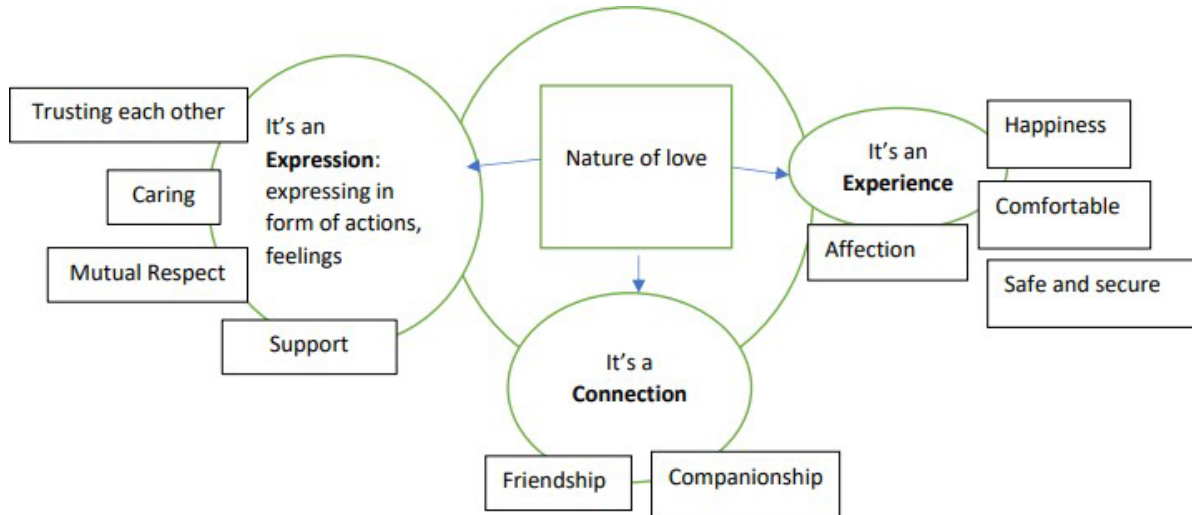


Figure 1. shows three major themes expression, experience and connection which describes love and each major theme have sub themes.

Figure 2  
*Showing thematic map for who do people love?*

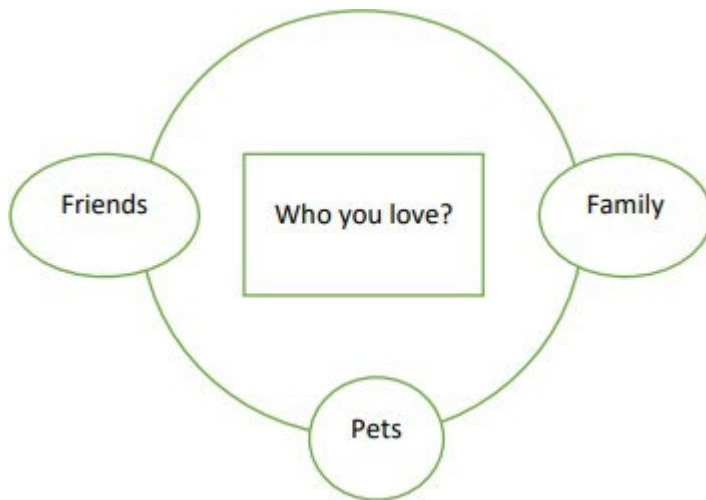


Figure 2, demonstrates the thematic map for who do people love and the major themes are friends, family and pet.

Figure 3  
*Showing thematic map for how do people express their love?*

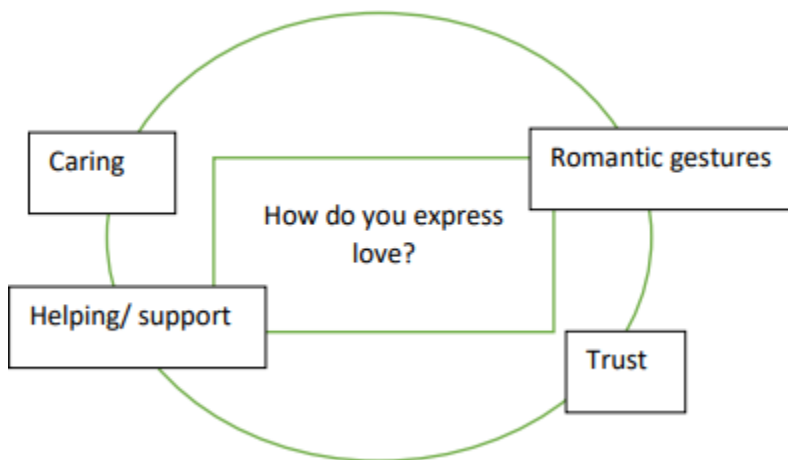


Figure 3 shows the major themes for how do people express their love and four major themes are caring, helping, trust and romantic gestures.

Figure 4  
Showing thematic map for how do people know they are loved?

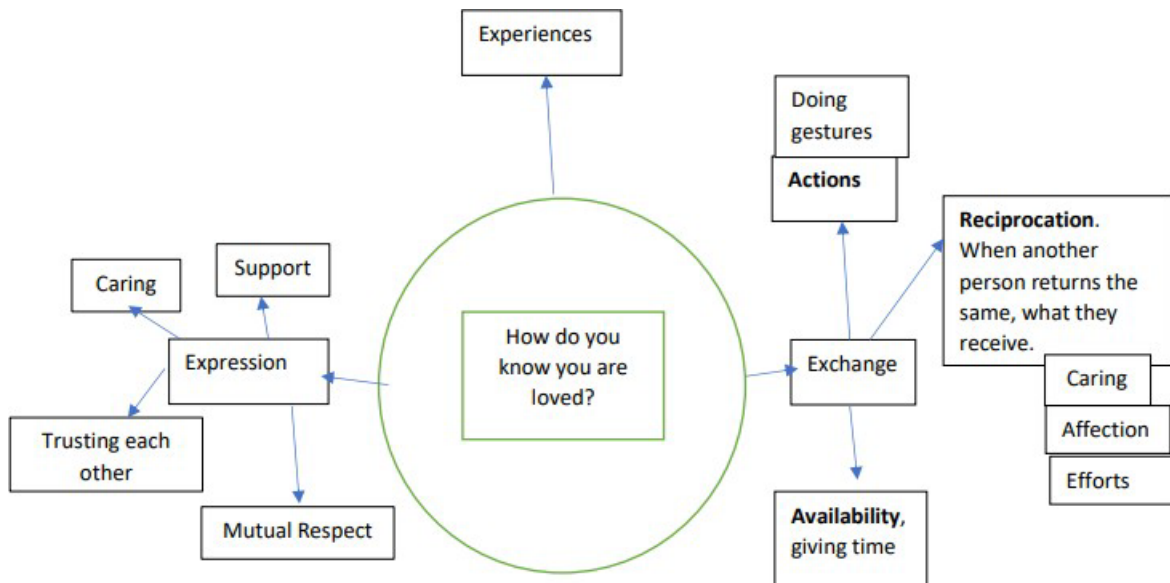


Figure 4, shows three major themes and subthemes for how do an individual know they are loved? Major themes are expression which includes caring, support, trusting, mutual respect as sub themes, next is experience as major theme which has subthemes as happiness, affection, comfortable and third major theme is exchange and sub themes are actions which means performing act of service, reciprocation of caring, affection, efforts and availability which means giving time to another person.

Figure 5,  
Shows the final thematic map which represents the concept of love.

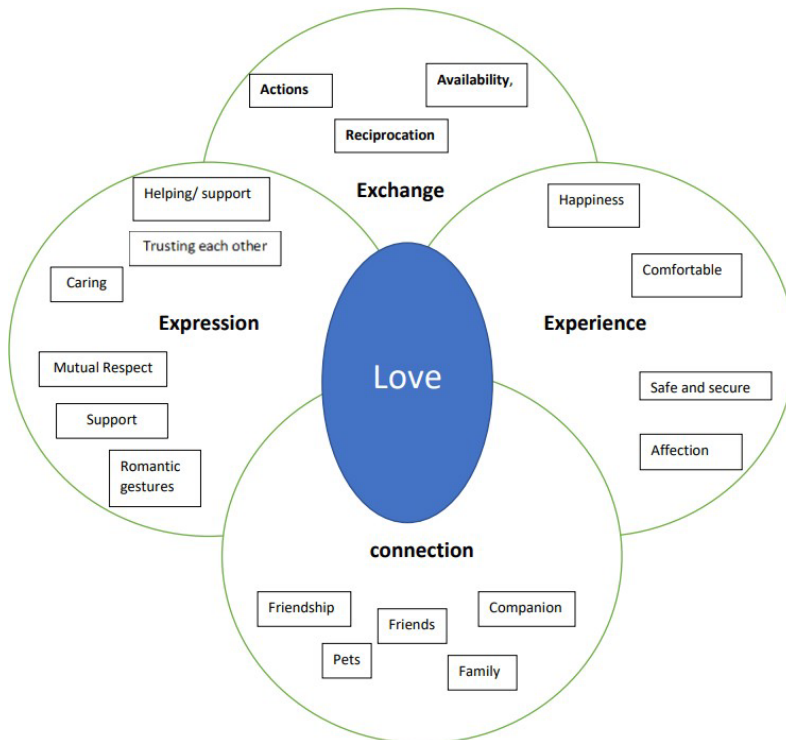
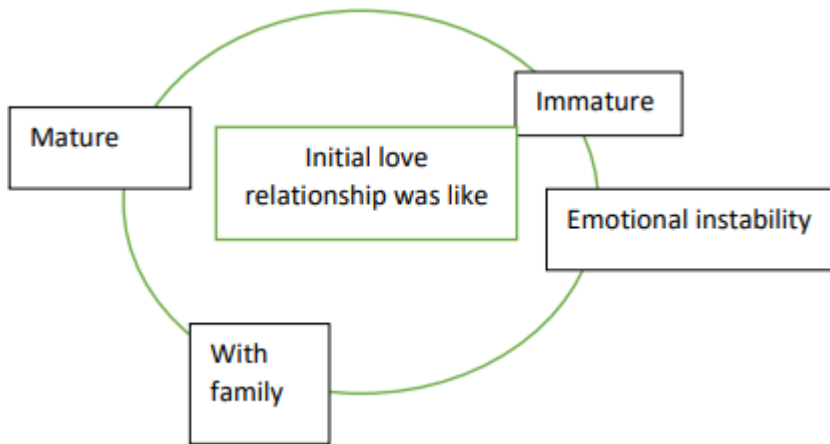


Figure 5 represents the concept of love which consist of four major themes as expression, experiences, connection and exchange.

Figure 6

Shows thematic map for how people describe love during their initial relationships.



Individual describe their initial love relationships.

Figure 7

Shows the graph for how

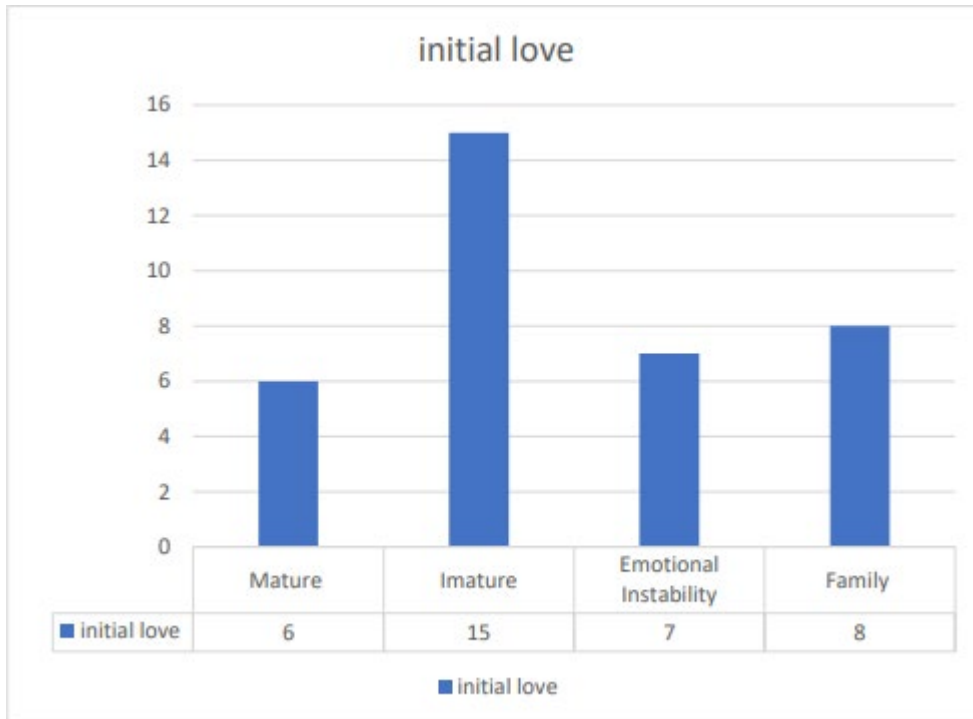


Figure 6 and 7 describes that 35% participants report initial love as immature relationship, 13% as mature relationship, 15% emotional instability and 17% feel love for family.

Figure 8

Shows thematic map for how people describe the difference between love during their initial relationships and present relationship.

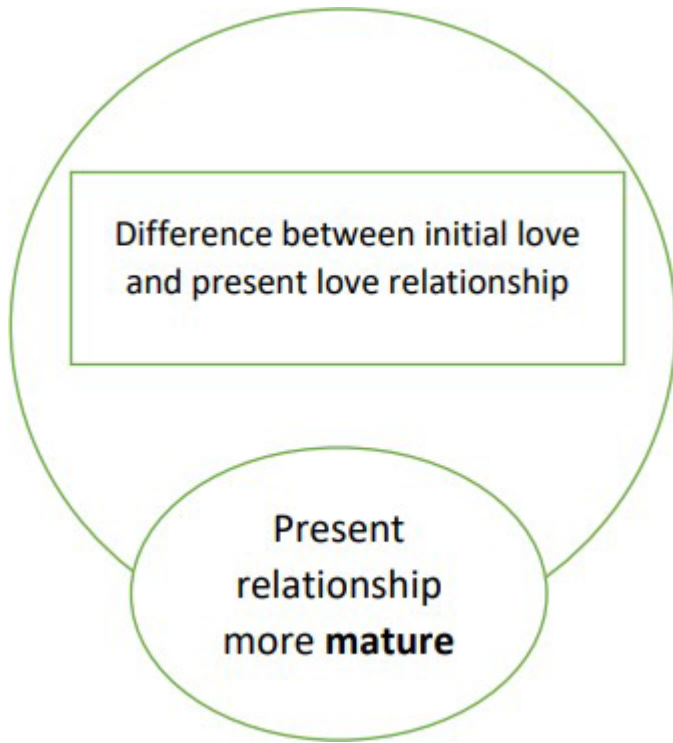


Figure 9

Shows graph how people describe the difference between love during their initial relationships and present relationship.

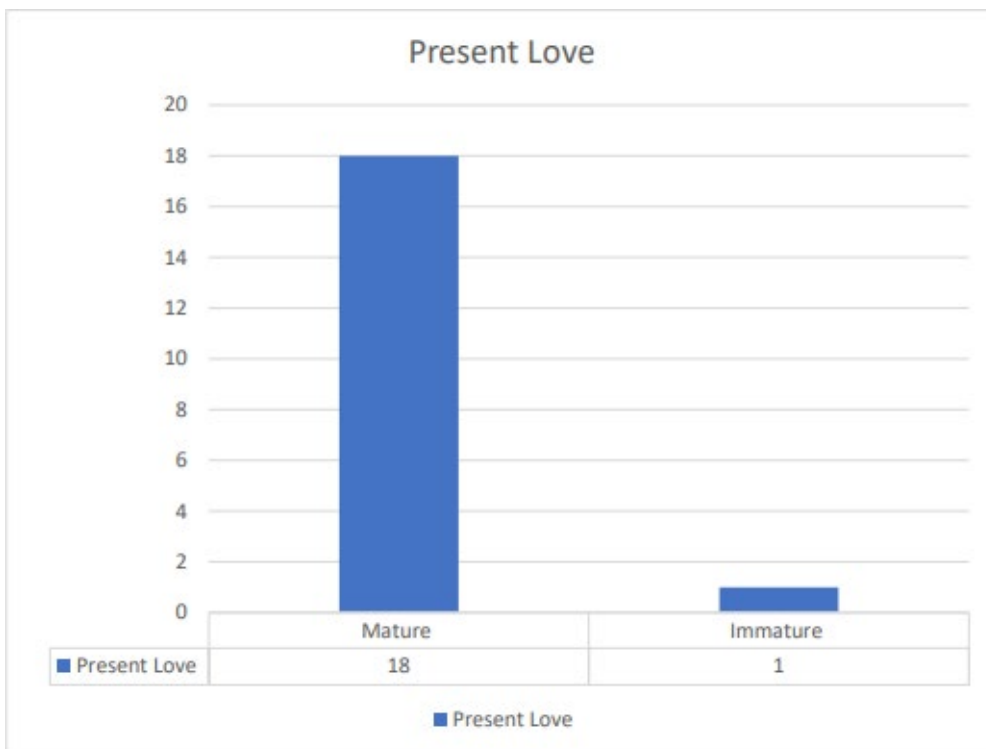


Figure 9 shows that 40% participants report their present relationship to be mature as compared to initial relationship.



## Discussion

Aim of the current study was to explore the concept of love and how the meaning of love changes with age, data collected through online qualitative survey was analysed using thematic analysis method. Four themes emerged from four thematic maps that describe the concept of love which are expression, experience, connection and exchange. Also, findings suggest that the context of love changes with age.

To understand the nature of love participants were asked to describe love in three words and the major themes observed by analysing the qualitative data through thematic analysis were experience, expression and connection. When a person receives these three elements in any situation or relationship, he or she refers to it as love. Sub themes for the major theme experience were happiness, affection, feeling comfortable, secure, and safe were constructed to better comprehend the nature of love. This implies that people must have basic emotions and feelings in order to be in love, and that their love can be determined by the degree and quality of the experiences they have. Therefore, it suggests that if a person feels happy, joyous, comfortable, and secure in a relationship, there is a higher chance of falling in love. Another prominent theme was expression, which included mutual trust, mutual respect, support, and understanding. This means that love is a secure and comfortable place where two people may show their support, caring, trust, and understanding for one another. Connection was the third main theme, with companionship and friendship serving as subthemes. This implies that individuals think of love as a relationship in which they can make a connection similar to that of friends and become each other's companions. Therefore, love is a connection where they can build a friendly bond and share positive experiences and feel happy, joyful and express their love in basic ways like caring, supporting each other. In line with the current findings, Rubin (1970) illustrates that "liking" and "loving" are distinct notions, differing in the essence and degree of attachment, and so should not be considered part of a continuous continuum. He described love as "an attitude directed by one person toward another in particular, involving predispositions to think, feel, and behave in specific ways toward this other person". In a nutshell, love refers to physical attraction, readiness to support, a desire to share feelings and experiences, as well as a sense of exclusivity and absorption.

The second question focuses on who individuals share love with, and the most common relationships with whom people share love are family, friends, boyfriends, girlfriends, and pets.

Humans are relational beings, which is one of the reasons why individuals express their affection for living beings. They have social requirements that must be met in order for them to have a feeling of belonging. In support of the result, Maslow (1954) believes in his Motivational Theory that the desire for love is essential for people to reach their maximum potential, and that if their needs for love and belonging are not addressed, they feel lonely or worthless. In the current findings friends and family are most loved, according to the social convoy theory (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980), people spend their lives surrounded by social convoys: social relationships in which they can count on close friends and family for help, protection, socialisation, emotional, instrumental, and social support, and who, in turn, offer assistance, interest, and help. These persons are crucial and important to people's psychological well-being.

To understand love from different dimensions, participants were asked how they express love? Participants referred to love as an expression which is one of the major themes that describe the nature of love. And interestingly, findings are reliable as the same sub themes emerged which were observed earlier for expressions which are supporting each other in their difficult times, or helping in household chores, caring for each other, expressing love through romantic gestures like hugging, kisses, surprises and showing their trust. Another question was how do a person know they are being loved? Participants shared that they feel that they are loved when the same amount of energy, efforts are received back and when affection is expressed through actions like doing something that makes the other person happy, feel comfortable. Three major themes constructed were expressing, experience and exchange. Which suggests that people feel loved when their partner expresses their feelings by taking care of them, building an understanding and mutual trust among each other. Moreover, experiencing the feeling of safety and security and comfortable sharing their view also make them feel loved. And lastly, exchange is another major theme which includes reciprocating the same kind of gestures, efforts that they receive from their loved ones. Therefore, different thematic maps converge in four different main themes that people describe as love which are experiences, expression, connection and exchange. This suggests that love is more of a decision that people make consciously or subconsciously than just calling it an emotion as people perform actions, reciprocate or exchange their values, efforts in relationship and experience happiness, affection, and other emotions as well as express their feeling through romantic gestures, taking care of others person. In support of the current findings, Aristotle describes *Philia* (love that resembles friendship) as



the finest kind of love. This type of friendship occurs among people who have similar interests and are not motivated by personal gain. It is driven by the reciprocating support, encouragement, and sympathy of qualities, emotions, ambitions of the mind, and spirit.

Next, objective of the study was to explore the meaning of love at different age and to understand that participants above the age of 30 years were asked to share the experience about their initial love relationships and the finding reveal that early love relationships were immature and emotionally unstable relationships and only few shared their relationship to be mature and long lasting. It was also observed in the results that people had more mature long lasting and emotionally stable love relationships as they experienced more security, their partners are trustworthy and most importantly they share companionship at the older stage of life as compared to relationships during teenage and in young adulthood. So, it can be inferred that the meaning of love changes with age as people get new experiences and learnings. Similar patterns of results were obtained in study by Charles & Carstensen, 2002 reveal that when older people disagree with their spouses or conduct cooperative duties, they generally perceive them as loving. Although older married couples say that romantic relationships are less important in their life, they may have less marital disputes than their younger counterparts. The cardinal element of their relationships appears to be companionate love, which is founded on friendship. Intimate relationships are reasonably peaceful and rewarding in old age. Furthermore, results of the present study support the theory by Almeida & Mayor (2006) which states that love is a complex and dynamic system that involves cognitions, emotions and behaviours that are often related to human happiness. Therefore, to love someone and have a healthy relationship it is important to understand the concept of love because without love life can be miserable as Braz (2006) states that “without love, human beings would not form bonds. Without bonds, social systems would not form, without these there would be no genuine socialisation of human beings and, finally, evolution would be compromised”.

### **Future Suggestions**

Future research might concentrate on enlarging and diversifying the sample in order to understand the nature of love and its evolution with age for various groups and cultures. Future research can also explore the relationship between the concept of love and other variables, such as gender.

### **Limitations**

The sample size for the current study was only 119, and the majority of the participants were female, which restricted the opportunity to observe gender as a variable. Thus, the results are less generalizable. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the current study may have been improved by using standardised quantitative measurements to explore the idea of love.

### **Conclusion**

Results obtained from thematic analysis suggest that love is not just an emotion as it is a bond of companionship and friendship, it's an expression of thoughts, feelings. It's also an exchange of actions, and experience which promotes well-being in life. Meaning of love is different for different people and it also changes with age. Findings reveal that people in their thirties experience mature and emotionally stable love relationships as compared to teenage love or love during young adulthood. Thus, it can be inferred because humans are relational beings. The need for love remains constant however the concept of love can evolve with age.

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