Changing Perceptions of Marriage and Family Life Among Millennials

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Article Info

Article type:
Original Research

How to cite this article:

ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this study is to explore the changing perceptions of marriage and family life among millennials. It aims to understand the factors influencing these shifts and to provide insights into the implications for future societal trends.

Methods: This qualitative study employs semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights from a diverse group of 23 millennials, aged 25 to 40 years. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure varied socioeconomic backgrounds, education levels, and relationship statuses. Data were analyzed using NVivo software through thematic analysis, with theoretical saturation guiding the data collection process. Ethical considerations included informed consent and anonymity of participants.

Results: The study reveals that millennials have a pragmatic approach to marriage, viewing it as optional and prioritizing personal growth and financial stability. They favor egalitarian partnerships and accept diverse family structures, including cohabitation and single parenting. Influences from family, media, and cultural norms shape their attitudes, while economic considerations and work-life balance are significant concerns. The findings highlight a blend of traditional values and modern attitudes, reflecting broader societal changes.

Conclusion: Millennials' perceptions of marriage and family life are shaped by a confluence of factors, including evolving societal norms, economic conditions, and cultural influences. These shifts suggest a move towards individualism, equality, and flexibility in relationships and family structures. Understanding these trends is crucial for policymakers, educators, and social scientists to support millennials in achieving their personal and familial aspirations.

Keywords: Millennials, marriage perceptions, family life, qualitative study, societal norms, economic influences, cultural influences, work-life balance, egalitarian relationships, diverse family structures.

1   Introduction

Millennials, those born between 1981 and 1996, have been described as a generation in transition, characterized by distinct lifestyle choices, economic behaviors, and social values compared to previous generations (Garikapati et al., 2016). They have grown up in a world marked by rapid technological advancements, globalization, and significant cultural shifts. These factors have influenced their perceptions of traditional institutions, including marriage and family.

One of the primary factors contributing to the changing perceptions of marriage among millennials is the evolving nature of societal norms and values. Traditional views of marriage, often characterized by rigid gender roles and lifelong commitment, are increasingly being questioned. Instead, millennials tend to prioritize individual fulfillment, equality, and partnership within relationships (Bejanyan et al., 2015). The shift from viewing marriage as a necessity to seeing it as one of many life choices reflects broader societal changes towards greater acceptance of diverse lifestyles and relationships (Radulović et al., 2023).

Economic factors also play a crucial role in shaping millennials' attitudes towards marriage and family life. The economic instability experienced by many millennials, including the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the rising costs of education and housing, has led to a delay in marriage and family formation (Xu et al., 2015). The emphasis on achieving financial stability before committing to marriage is a common theme, as highlighted by various studies (Budig & Lim, 2016; Teachman et al., 2000). This pragmatic approach contrasts with earlier generations, who often married at younger ages and prioritized family formation over economic security (Holland & Valk, 2013).

Cultural and religious influences continue to impact millennials' views on marriage and family, though these impacts are more nuanced than in previous generations. While some millennials adhere to traditional cultural and religious practices, there is a growing trend towards secularism and individualism (Lynxwiler & Smith, 2015). This trend is particularly evident in attitudes towards same-sex marriage and other non-traditional unions, where there is increasing acceptance and support (Negy et al., 2013). The influence of cultural background and religious teachings varies significantly, often intersecting with other factors such as education and socioeconomic status (Park, 2021).

The role of family dynamics and parental influence in shaping millennials' attitudes towards marriage cannot be overlooked. Studies have shown that the quality of parents' marital relationships and the experiences of growing up in different family structures can significantly influence millennials' views on marriage and its alternatives (Cunningham & Thornton, 2006). For instance, millennials from divorced families or those who witnessed marital discord may have different attitudes towards commitment and marital stability (Fam et al., 2017).

Moreover, the rise of digital technology and social media has introduced new dimensions to relationships and family life. The portrayal of romantic relationships and family dynamics on social media platforms often creates unrealistic expectations and pressures (Radulović et al., 2023). At the same time, technology facilitates new forms of communication and connection, allowing for more flexible and diverse family arrangements (Garikapati et al., 2016).

Understanding millennials' time allocation behavior provides additional insight into their evolving perceptions of marriage and family life. Enam and Konduri (2018) found that millennials allocate their time differently compared to previous generations, with a greater emphasis on personal development and social activities. This shift reflects broader changes in priorities and values, with millennials seeking a balance between work, leisure, and family responsibilities (Enam & Konduri, 2018).

The demographic diversity within the millennial generation also contributes to the complexity of their attitudes towards marriage and family. Factors such as ethnicity, education, and socioeconomic background create varied experiences and perspectives (Nwachukwu et al., 2022). For instance, immigrant millennials in Europe may have different ideal ages for family formation compared to their native counterparts, influenced by their cultural heritage and integration experiences (Holland & Valk, 2013).

This study employs a qualitative research design to delve deeply into these evolving perceptions. By conducting semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of millennials, the research aims to capture the nuanced and multifaceted nature of their attitudes towards marriage and family life. The use of theoretical saturation ensures that the data collected is comprehensive and reflective of the broader millennial population.

In summary, the changing perceptions of marriage and family life among millennials are shaped by a confluence of factors, including evolving societal norms, economic conditions, cultural and religious influences, family dynamics, technological advancements, and demographic

diversity. This study seeks to provide a detailed and nuanced understanding of these shifts, contributing to the broader discourse on the future of marriage and family in contemporary society. The findings will offer valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and social scientists interested in the implications of these changes for social stability and personal well-being.

2 Methods and Materials

2.1 Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study explores the changing perceptions of marriage and family life among millennials. The research design is centered around semi-structured interviews, aiming to capture in-depth insights into individual experiences and attitudes.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of millennials. Inclusion criteria required participants to be between the ages of 25 and 40, representing various socioeconomic backgrounds, education levels, and relationship statuses. The sample aimed to reflect a broad spectrum of experiences and viewpoints on marriage and family life.

Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Theoretical saturation refers to the point at which no new themes or insights are emerging from the interviews, indicating that the data collected is sufficient to understand the research phenomena. This was monitored through continuous analysis of interview transcripts.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Semi-Structured Interview

The primary data collection method utilized in this study is semi-structured interviews. This approach allows for flexibility in the conversation, enabling participants to express their views more freely while ensuring that key topics are covered. An interview guide with open-ended questions was developed to steer the discussion, covering themes such as the importance of marriage, expectations of family life, and societal influences on these perceptions.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted either in person or via video conferencing platforms, depending on participant preference and availability. Interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted using NVivo software, a qualitative data analysis tool. Thematic analysis was employed to identify and analyze patterns and themes within the interview transcripts. This process involved:

Familiarization: Reading and re-reading transcripts to become deeply familiar with the data.

Coding: Generating initial codes from the data, which involved highlighting significant phrases and sentences.

Theme Development: Collating codes into potential themes and reviewing these themes to ensure they accurately represent the data.

Refinement: Defining and naming themes, and refining them to ensure coherence and consistency across the dataset.

3 Findings and Results

The study included a diverse sample of 23 participants, ranging in age from 25 to 40 years. The gender distribution was balanced, with 12 female and 11 male participants. The educational background varied, with 10 participants holding a bachelor's degree, 8 having a master's degree, and 5 with a high school diploma or equivalent. Regarding relationship status, 9 participants were married, 7 were in long-term relationships, 5 were single, and 2 were divorced. The socioeconomic status of participants was diverse, with 8 identifying as upper-middle-class, 10 as middle-class, and 5 as working-class. Geographically, participants were from both urban (15 participants) and rural (8 participants) areas, providing a broad perspective on marriage and family life among millennials.

Table 1

The Results of Qualitative Studies

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Attitudes Towards Marriage	1.1 Importance of Marriage	Tradition, Stability, Legal benefits
	1.2 Views on Traditional vs. Modern Marriage	Equality, Individual freedom, Changing roles, Partnership
	1.3 Marital Expectations	Commitment, Shared goals, Emotional support
	1.4 Reasons for Delaying Marriage	Career focus, Financial stability, Personal growth, Societal pressure

	1.5 Marriage Alternatives	Cohabitation, Long-term relationships, Singlehood
	1.6 Influence of Family and Friends	Parental expectations, Peer influence, Cultural norms
	1.7 Impact of Media	Romantic ideals, Celebrity marriages, Social media portrayal
2. Perceptions of Family Life	2.1 Ideal Family Structure	Nuclear family, Extended family, Chosen family
	2.2 Parenting Roles and Responsibilities	Gender roles, Shared parenting, Single parenting
	2.3 Work-Life Balance	Flexibility, Career sacrifices, Support systems
	2.4 Economic Considerations	Cost of raising children, Dual-income households, Financial planning
	2.5 Influence of Technology	Digital parenting, Online education, Family communication
3. Societal Influences	3.1 Societal Norms and Expectations	Marriage age norms, Family size expectations, Gender expectations
	3.2 Cultural and Religious Influences	Religious teachings, Cultural traditions, Community pressure
	3.3 Policy and Legal Frameworks	Marriage laws, Parental leave policies, Tax benefits
	3.4 Education and Awareness	Sex education, Marriage counseling, Family planning
	3.5 Economic Factors	Employment opportunities, Housing market, Financial independence

3.1 Attitudes Towards Marriage

Importance of Marriage: Many participants highlighted the traditional and symbolic value of marriage. For example, one participant noted, "Marriage is more than just a legal contract; it's a commitment to build a life together." The perceived stability and legal benefits of marriage were frequently mentioned.

Views on Traditional vs. Modern Marriage: Millennials expressed diverse views on marriage, balancing traditional expectations with modern ideals. Concepts such as equality and individual freedom were recurrent. One participant remarked, "We both work and share household duties equally, which is different from our parents' generation."

Marital Expectations: Expectations around marriage included commitment, shared goals, and emotional support. As one interviewee stated, "I expect my partner to be my best friend and someone who supports my dreams."

Reasons for Delaying Marriage: Career focus, financial stability, personal growth, and societal pressure were common reasons for delaying marriage. One interviewee shared, "I want to establish my career and be financially secure before thinking about marriage."

Marriage Alternatives: Alternatives to traditional marriage such as cohabitation, long-term relationships, and singlehood were discussed. "Living together without marriage gives us the freedom to understand each other better," said one participant.

Influence of Family and Friends: Family expectations, peer influence, and cultural norms played significant roles. A participant mentioned, "My parents constantly remind me of the importance of marriage, but my friends are more supportive of my choices."

Impact of Media: Media influences romantic ideals and expectations. "Social media portrays a very romanticized version of marriage that isn't always realistic," observed one participant.

3.2 Perceptions of Family Life

Ideal Family Structure: Participants discussed various family structures, including nuclear, extended, and chosen families. One participant shared, "My ideal family includes not just my spouse and kids, but also close friends who are like family."

Parenting Roles and Responsibilities: Shifting gender roles and shared parenting responsibilities were common themes. "We both take turns with childcare and household chores," said one interviewee, highlighting the move away from traditional gender roles.

Work-Life Balance: Balancing career and family life was a significant concern. Flexibility and support systems were key factors. "Having a supportive partner and a flexible job makes it easier to balance work and family," noted a participant.

Economic Considerations: Economic factors, including the cost of raising children and the necessity of dual-income households, were frequently mentioned. One participant stated, "Raising kids is expensive, and we both need to work to provide a good life for them."

Influence of Technology: Technology's role in family life, such as digital parenting and online education, was a recurring theme. "We use apps to keep track of our kids' schedules and educational progress," commented one participant.

3.3 Societal Influences

Societal Norms and Expectations: Participants discussed the societal norms and expectations around marriage and family, including marriage age and family size. "There is a lot of pressure to get married by a certain age," one participant noted.

Cultural and Religious Influences: Cultural traditions and religious teachings significantly impacted perceptions. A participant shared, "Our culture places a high value on marriage, and this influences my views."

Policy and Legal Frameworks: Policies and legal frameworks, such as marriage laws and parental leave policies, were discussed. "Government policies should support working parents better," suggested one interviewee.

Education and Awareness: The role of education and awareness in shaping perceptions of marriage and family life was highlighted. "Marriage counseling and family planning education are crucial," noted a participant.

Economic Factors: Economic factors, including employment opportunities and the housing market, influenced decisions around marriage and family. "It's hard to think about marriage when you're worried about job security and housing costs," one participant explained.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this study reveal a complex and evolving landscape of perceptions towards marriage and family life among millennials. This generation, characterized by their unique socio-economic and cultural experiences, displays attitudes that both align with and diverge from previous generations.

Attitudes Towards Marriage: The study found that millennials have a more pragmatic and flexible approach to marriage compared to previous generations. Many view marriage as an optional rather than a necessary life step, prioritizing personal growth, financial stability, and mutual compatibility over traditional timelines. This aligns with Garikapati et al. (2016), who noted that millennials are a generation in transition, reshaping societal norms around significant life events (Garikapati et al., 2016). The economic rationale behind delaying marriage is supported by Teachman, Tedrow, and Crowder (2000), who observed similar trends in the broader American demographic (Teachman et al., 2000).

Views on Traditional vs. Modern Marriage: Millennials favor partnerships based on equality and shared responsibilities, reflecting a shift from traditional gender roles. This finding is consistent with the work of Bejanyan, Marshall, and Ferenczi (2015), who highlighted the growing preference for egalitarian relationships among younger adults (Bejanyan et al., 2015). Additionally, Budig and Lim (2016) observed a gender-neutral approach to household

responsibilities, further supporting the trend towards modern marital arrangements (Budig & Lim, 2016).

Marital Expectations: The emphasis on emotional support and shared goals underscores the changing expectations of marriage, where personal fulfillment and companionship are paramount. These insights resonate with the findings of Coninck, Doren, and Matthijs (2020), who noted an increasing preference for relationships that offer emotional and intellectual compatibility (Coninck et al., 2020).

Marriage Alternatives: The study highlighted the acceptance of cohabitation and long-term relationships without marriage, reflecting a broader social acceptance of diverse family structures. Radulović, Bundalevska, and Keskinova (2023) also found that young adults are more open to non-traditional unions, including extramarital and homosexual relationships (Radulović et al., 2023). This shift towards inclusive and flexible relationship models is a significant departure from earlier generations' norms.

Influence of Family and Friends: Parental expectations and peer influence continue to play significant roles in shaping millennials' views on marriage. Cunningham and Thornton (2006) found that the quality of parental relationships significantly impacts adult children's attitudes towards marriage, echoing our findings that familial experiences shape marital expectations (Cunningham & Thornton, 2006).

Impact of Media: The portrayal of romantic relationships in media and social platforms creates both inspiration and unrealistic expectations. This dual influence is consistent with the observations of Negy, Pearte, and Lacefield (2013), who noted the significant impact of media on young adults' perceptions of marriage and alternative relationships (Negy et al., 2013).

Perceptions of Family Life: The study found that millennials favor diverse family structures, including nuclear, extended, and chosen families. This flexibility in defining family aligns with Holland and Valk (2013), who noted variations in family formation ideals among different demographic groups (Holland & Valk, 2013). Additionally, the acceptance of single parenting and shared parental responsibilities reflects broader societal changes towards gender equality in parenting roles (Fam et al., 2017).

Work-Life Balance and Economic Considerations: Balancing career and family life remains a critical concern, with many millennials emphasizing the need for supportive work environments and flexible policies. Nwachukwu, Moses, and Vu (2022) highlighted the importance of managing work-to-family conflict to enhance family

satisfaction and engagement, a sentiment echoed in our findings (Nwachukwu et al., 2022). The economic challenges of raising children and maintaining dual-income households also align with Xu et al. (2015), who discussed the financial pressures influencing homeownership and family decisions among millennials (Xu et al., 2015).

Societal Influences: Cultural and religious influences continue to shape perceptions, though there is a trend towards secularism and individualism. Lynxwiler and Smith (2015) observed a similar trend, noting the impact of declining religiosity on attitudes towards same-sex marriage and other non-traditional unions (Lynxwiler & Smith, 2015). The role of policy and legal frameworks in supporting diverse family structures is crucial, as highlighted by Park (2021), who called for policies that accommodate changing family dynamics (Park, 2021).

While this study provides valuable insights into the changing perceptions of marriage and family life among millennials, it has several limitations. The sample size of 23 participants, though diverse, may not fully capture the breadth of experiences and views within the millennial generation. Additionally, the study relies on self-reported data, which can be subject to biases and inaccuracies. The use of semi-structured interviews, while providing depth, may also limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Finally, the study's qualitative nature means that it cannot establish causal relationships between observed trends and underlying factors.

Future research should aim to expand the sample size and diversity to include a broader representation of millennials from different geographic regions, cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic statuses. Longitudinal studies would be beneficial to track changes in perceptions over time and understand how life events, such as career advancements or parenthood, influence attitudes towards marriage and family life. Additionally, incorporating quantitative methods could complement qualitative insights, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the factors driving these changes. Further research should also explore the impact of specific influences, such as social media, on relationship dynamics and expectations.

For policymakers and practitioners, these findings highlight the need for supportive policies that address the evolving needs of millennials. This includes promoting work-life balance through flexible work arrangements and comprehensive parental leave policies. Educational programs that address financial planning, relationship skills, and family dynamics can equip millennials with the tools to navigate these complex decisions. Mental health support services should also be made accessible, considering the emotional and psychological challenges associated with balancing career aspirations and family responsibilities. For educators and counselors, incorporating discussions on diverse family structures and relationship models can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for young adults.

In conclusion, the shifting perceptions of marriage and family life among millennials reflect broader societal changes towards individualism, equality, and flexibility. These trends have significant implications for future social structures and policies. By understanding and addressing the unique needs and challenges of this generation, society can better support millennials in achieving their personal and familial aspirations.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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