

Beyond Romance: Love Languages and Self-Disclosure in Generation Z Friendships

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ABSTRACT

Love languages have become an important way for Generation Z to express affection and maintain friendships. By fostering emotional comfort and trust, they may encourage greater self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships. This study aims to examine the role of love language use in promoting self-disclosure among Generation Z friends. Guided by Altman and Taylor's Social Penetration Theory, this study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore participants' lived experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six Generation Z participants who actively practiced love languages in their friendships. The findings reveal that participants perceived love language as facilitating self-disclosure by creating emotional comfort and encouraging them to share personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences with trusted friends. Words of affirmation and quality time were the most frequently experienced forms of love language, whereas receiving gifts was mentioned least often. Participants consistently described these two forms as facilitating a greater amount of disclosure. However, they perceived love language as having a more limited role in the honesty and accuracy dimension of self-disclosure, which they associated more closely with individual characteristics and perceived trustworthiness. Overall, participants experienced love language as fostering emotional closeness and facilitating more open interpersonal communication within Generation Z friendships.

Keywords: friendship; generation Z; interpersonal communication; love language; self-disclosure

INTRODUCTION

Love language, introduced by Chapman (2010), explains that individuals express and receive affection through five primary forms: words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, and physical touch. In recent years, the concept has gained significant popularity among Generation Z in Indonesia, particularly through digital communication. Love language has become embedded in reflective online content, social media discussions, and everyday conversations about relationships and emotions. Nasrin (2024) found that love language is among the most popular relationship-related topics on social media, contributing substantially to its widespread adoption. This trend highlights the growing role of digital

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communication in shaping how young people understand and perform interpersonal affection.

Despite its popularity, research on love language has primarily focused on romantic relationships. Consequently, its application in non-romantic contexts, particularly friendships, remains underexplored. Yet, previous studies suggest that love language preferences contribute to friendship quality by fostering emotional comfort, appreciation, and interpersonal closeness (Salsabila et al., 2023). Differences in how individuals express and interpret affection may also create communication misunderstandings and emotional distance among friends.

Within interpersonal communication, differences in love language preferences influence emotional interaction and relational development. Individuals whose primary love language is *quality time* tend to value shared experiences, whereas those who prefer *words of affirmation* rely more on verbal encouragement. When these emotional needs are not appropriately communicated or fulfilled, opportunities for meaningful self-disclosure may decrease (Yusuf et al., 2022). Understanding this relationship is important because self-disclosure represents a fundamental communication process through which individuals share personal information, emotions, and experiences, enabling the development of trust and relational intimacy (Gamayanti et al., 2018). Furthermore, expressions of love language have been shown to promote empathy, support, and trust, thereby strengthening interpersonal communication (Awing & Arsyad, 2023).

This phenomenon can be best understood through Social Penetration Theory proposed by Altman and Taylor (1973), as the theory explains how interpersonal relationships develop through gradual and reciprocal self-disclosure, progressing from superficial interaction to deeper intimacy. The theory is particularly relevant to this study because love language functions as a form of emotional communication that may create trust, emotional comfort, and relational security, all of which are essential conditions for individuals to disclose personal thoughts and feelings. By linking emotional expressions of affection with the process of self-disclosure, Social Penetration Theory provides an appropriate framework for understanding how love language is experienced within Generation Z friendships and how these experiences shape the development of interpersonal closeness.

Generation Z provides a relevant context for this study because they have grown up in a digitally connected environment characterized by frequent but rapidly changing communication patterns. Although they communicate intensively through digital platforms, they continue to face challenges in developing emotional intimacy and meaningful self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships (Febrina & Taryono, 2025). Therefore, this study aims to explore the role of love language in facilitating self-disclosure within Generation Z friendships. Rather than simply extending the concept of love language from romantic relationships to friendships, this study contributes to interpersonal communication scholarship by positioning love language as a communicative resource that facilitates self-disclosure and relationship development. Integrating love language with Social Penetration Theory demonstrates how emotional expressions of affection create trust and emotional comfort that support the gradual development of interpersonal closeness among Generation Z friends.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Friendship and Interpersonal Communication

Friendship is a fundamental form of interpersonal relationship built upon trust, mutual support, and shared experiences, making it essential for individuals' social and emotional development (Vricillya, 2021). For Generation Z, friendships remain particularly significant despite the increasing reliance on digital communication, as they provide emotional security, social acceptance, and opportunities for identity formation (Santrock, 2003; Raprap et al., 2026). The quality of friendship is closely associated with interpersonal communication, which enables individuals to exchange messages, develop mutual understanding, and build meaningful relationships through openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality (DeVito, 2011).

Love Language as a Conceptual Framework

Love language, introduced by Chapman (2010), describes five preferred ways individuals express and receive affection: words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, and physical touch. Rather than representing an established communication theory, love language is used in this study as a conceptual framework for understanding how expressions of affection are communicated and interpreted within interpersonal relationships.

Previous studies have shown that love language supports relationship quality. Sari et al. (2023) found that couples used different love languages to maintain marital harmony through communication and mutual adjustment. Likewise, Azzahra et al. (2024) reported that words of affirmation and quality time were the dominant love languages among Generation Z, whereas Jelita et al. (2025) identified quality time as an important contributor to relationship harmony among adolescent couples.

Although love language has been widely examined in romantic and family relationships, research in friendship contexts remains limited. Salsabila et al. (2023) demonstrated that love language functions as an expression of care, emotional support, and appreciation in same-sex friendships. However, their study primarily focused on the social meaning of love language rather than its role in interpersonal communication. Consequently, how love language facilitates communication outcomes, particularly self-disclosure among friends, remains insufficiently understood.

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure is a central process in interpersonal communication through which individuals intentionally share personal information, thoughts, and emotions with others (DeVito, 2011). Wheelless and Grotz (1976) proposed five dimensions of self-disclosure: intent to disclose, amount of disclosure, positive–negative nature of disclosure, honesty–accuracy, and depth–control of disclosure. These dimensions describe not only the quantity of

information shared but also its honesty, emotional tone, and depth within interpersonal relationships.

Social Penetration Theory

Social Penetration Theory explains that interpersonal relationships develop through gradual and reciprocal self-disclosure (Altman & Taylor, 1973). As individuals become increasingly willing to disclose personal information, relationships progress from superficial interaction to deeper intimacy. The theory describes four stages of relational development: orientation, exploratory affective exchange, affective exchange, and stable exchange (West & Turner, 2012).

In the present study, Social Penetration Theory serves as the primary theoretical framework because it explains the communication process through which interpersonal closeness develops. Within this framework, love language is conceptualized as a form of emotional communication that may create emotional comfort, trust, and perceived responsiveness. These conditions facilitate participants' willingness to engage in deeper self-disclosure during friendship development.

Research Gap

Despite growing scholarly interest in love language, previous studies have mainly examined relationship harmony, marital communication, and romantic partnerships (Sari et al., 2023; Azzahra et al., 2024; Jelita et al., 2025). Research on friendships has largely explored the social meaning of love language without examining how it shapes interpersonal communication processes (Salsabila et al., 2023). Furthermore, limited attention has been given to explaining how emotional expressions of affection facilitate self-disclosure among Generation Z from the perspective of Social Penetration Theory.

Addressing these gaps, the present study investigates how love language facilitates self-disclosure within Generation Z friendships using a phenomenological approach. Rather than treating love language as a communication theory, the study applies it as a conceptual framework for understanding emotional communication and integrates it with Social Penetration Theory to explain how interpersonal intimacy develops in non-romantic friendships.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore how the use of love language facilitates self-disclosure in Generation Z friendships. A phenomenological approach was chosen because it seeks to understand the meanings individuals assign to their lived experiences and how these experiences shape interpersonal communication (Moleong, 2015).

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on predetermined criteria (Sugiyono, 2018). Six Generation Z university students (three males and three females), aged between 19 and 21 years, participated in this study. All participants were undergraduate students at Universitas Syiah Kuala, Banda Aceh, Indonesia, and shared a relatively similar cultural background as Acehnese young adults. The inclusion criteria were: (1) belonging to Generation Z, (2) maintaining intensive same-sex friendships, (3) being familiar with the concept of love language, and (4) having practiced love language in their friendships. These criteria ensured that all participants had direct and relevant experiences to reflect on the role of love language in facilitating self-disclosure within friendships. The relatively homogeneous demographic and cultural characteristics enabled the study to explore participants' lived experiences within a shared interpersonal and sociocultural context while minimizing variations associated with different cultural backgrounds. The participants' profile can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. The Participant's Profile

No	Initials	Gender	Age	Occupation	Ethnicity
1	AS	Male	21	University student	Acehnese
2	BQS	Male	20	University student	Acehnese
3	FA	Male	19	University student	Acehnese
4	NF	Female	19	University student	Acehnese
5	NR	Female	20	University student	Acehnese
6	SS	Female	20	University student	Acehnese

Source: Interview Data (2026)

The number of participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation. Although only six participants were included, data collection continued until successive interviews no longer generated new themes or meaningful variations in participants' experiences of using love languages and engaging in self-disclosure. The final interviews largely confirmed patterns that had already emerged in the earlier interviews, indicating that sufficient depth and consistency had been achieved to address the research objectives (Guest et al., 2020).

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing the researcher to explore participants' experiences while maintaining flexibility to probe emerging issues during the interviews (Sugiyono, 2020). Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the research at any time without consequences. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interviews were conducted. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, all interview excerpts are presented using anonymized initials, which do not represent the participants' real names (Sulianta, 2025).

Data were analysed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Asipi et al., 2022). During the data reduction stage, interview transcripts were read repeatedly, coded, and organized by identifying recurring statements related to participants' experiences of

expressing and receiving love languages as well as their self-disclosure practices. Similar codes were then grouped into broader themes corresponding to the five love languages and the dimensions of self-disclosure. In the data display stage, the coded data were organized into thematic matrices and narrative summaries to facilitate comparisons across participants, identify recurring patterns and explain how love language facilitates self-disclosure in Generation Z friendships. Conclusions were subsequently drawn through an iterative process of revisiting the transcripts and verifying emerging themes against the interview data. To enhance the credibility of the findings, source triangulation was employed by comparing information obtained from different participants and corroborating the interview findings with relevant literature (Malik et al., 2025). This process helped ensure the consistency and trustworthiness of the data interpretation

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Love Language Preferences in Generation Z Friendships

The interview findings indicate that all five love languages proposed by Chapman (2010)—*words of affirmation*, *quality time*, *acts of service*, *receiving gifts*, and *physical touch*—were practiced in Generation Z friendships. However, participants attached different meanings and levels of importance to each expression of affection. The findings reveal three major patterns: (1) all five love languages were present in friendships but were expressed differently, (2) *words of affirmation* and *quality time* emerged as the most dominant forms of affection, and (3) the love language participants most frequently expressed did not always correspond to the love language they most preferred to receive.

Participants perceived words of affirmation as an important source of emotional support, particularly during stressful academic or personal situations. Encouraging words made them feel appreciated, motivated, and emotionally cared for.

“I really like words of affirmation because positive words from other people truly resonate with me. For me, every positive thing that someone says becomes a prayer for my life.” (Interview with SS, October 28, 2025).

Similarly, quality time was regarded as an essential expression of affection because face-to-face interaction enabled participants to communicate more naturally through facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language. Spending meaningful time together also represented emotional availability, particularly when friends deliberately made time for one another despite their busy schedules.

“It feels much stronger and closer when we meet in person because face-to-face interactions are simply different—they are much more expressive. Communicating through other means just feels flat.” (Interview with AS, October 30, 2025).

Participants also described acts of service as meaningful when friends provided spontaneous help without being asked. Whether helping with academic responsibilities, visiting a sick friend, or offering assistance during difficult situations, such actions were interpreted as genuine expressions of care and emotional support.

“The moment that impressed me the most was when I had an accident. Even though I wasn't very open about it, my friends still came to visit me, helped report my condition, and informed my lecturers that I was ill. I never even asked them to do that.” (Interview with BQS, October 28, 2025).

Meanwhile, receiving gifts was generally viewed as a complementary rather than essential expression of affection. Participants appreciated receiving gifts because they symbolized appreciation and remembrance, yet they emphasized that emotional support, companionship, and attentive listening were more meaningful than material presents.

“Receiving even a small gift makes me happy because it shows that my friend remembers me. It makes me feel appreciated and brings warmth to our friendship.” (Interview with AS, October 30, 2025).

Participants expressed more diverse views regarding physical touch. Some regarded gestures such as patting a friend's shoulder as a reassuring form of nonverbal emotional support, while others considered physical touch uncomfortable or inappropriate within friendships because of personal preferences and sociocultural norms.

“When I'm feeling sad or stressed, something as simple as a friend patting me on the shoulder makes me feel that I'm not alone and that someone is there to support me whenever I'm facing problems.” (Interview with NR, October 27, 2025).

Although participants recognized all five love languages in their friendships, words of affirmation and quality time consistently emerged as the most dominant expressions of affection. Verbal encouragement was perceived as strengthening emotional confidence and reassurance, whereas spending meaningful time together fostered stronger interpersonal closeness than communication through digital media. In contrast, receiving gifts was identified as the least dominant love language because participants generally viewed gifts as symbolic additions rather than primary indicators of friendship quality.

Another important finding concerns the relationship between expressed and preferred love languages. Participants were generally able to distinguish between the love language they most frequently expressed and the one they most preferred to receive. However, these preferences did not always coincide. Several participants reported expressing affection through acts of service or receiving gifts, while expecting words of affirmation or physical touch from their friends. Participants explained that these preferences were shaped by previous interpersonal experiences, including communication patterns within their families and friendships, rather than representing fixed personal characteristics.

“I usually express my affection through acts of service and receiving gifts. However, what I really want to receive from others are words of affirmation and physical touch. Since acts of service already come naturally to me, I don't feel the need to receive the same from other people.” (Interview with NF, October 30, 2025).

Rather than representing stable personal traits, participants' love language preferences evolved through ongoing interpersonal interactions and previous relational experiences. The findings demonstrate that expressions of affection are dynamic communication practices shaped by relational contexts rather than fixed individual characteristics. This dynamic pattern provides an important foundation for understanding how love language facilitates interpersonal communication and, in turn, encourages greater self-disclosure among Generation Z friends.

The interview findings indicate that quality time and words of affirmation were the most dominant love languages experienced by the participants. These two forms of love language were perceived as the most meaningful because they made participants feel valued, listened to, and emotionally comfortable in developing closer friendships. However, the findings also revealed gender differences in love language preferences. Most male participants identified quality time as their dominant love language, whereas female participants predominantly preferred words of affirmation. In contrast, acts of service and physical touch were reported by only a small number of participants and were not considered primary expressions of affection. Meanwhile, receiving gifts emerged as the least dominant love language, as it was rarely identified by either male or female participants. These findings suggest that gift-giving and physical touch are not viewed as the primary ways of expressing care within Generation Z friendships. Instead, they function as complementary expressions of affection rather than essential emotional needs in maintaining interpersonal relationships.

Love Language and Self-Disclosure in Generation Z Friendships

Love language represents the ways individuals express and receive affection through different forms of emotional communication. Within friendships, these expressions shape how individuals perceive care, emotional support, and interpersonal closeness. The interview findings indicate that participants generally associated the fulfilment of their preferred love language with greater emotional comfort, appreciation, and trust. These positive feelings subsequently encouraged them to become more willing to disclose personal experiences, emotions, and private thoughts. Although all participants acknowledged that love language influenced interpersonal relationships, they differed in the extent to which compatible love language preferences affected their willingness to engage in self-disclosure.

Four of the six participants explained that they felt significantly more comfortable sharing personal experiences when their friend's expressed affection through their preferred love language. They described this experience as creating a sense of emotional security that reduced hesitation when discussing personal matters. For these participants, being understood through meaningful expressions of affection strengthened interpersonal trust and facilitated more open communication.

One participant whose primary love language was quality time explained that spending meaningful time together created a stronger sense of comfort, making personal conversations feel more natural.

“When I receive the love language that I prefer—such as quality time—I feel much more comfortable sharing things and opening up to that person.” (Interview with AS, October 30, 2025).

Similarly, another participant emphasized that emotional comfort depended on whether the affection received corresponded to the love language that was personally meaningful. The participant explained that conversations became emotionally richer when expressions of affection accompanied interpersonal interaction, making it easier to disclose deeper feelings.

“Since physical touch is part of how I communicate, having that kind of touch while we are talking makes the conversation feel different. If someone expresses the love language I need, I automatically feel more comfortable opening up because there is no emotional distance between us.” (Interview with SS, October 30, 2025).

These findings indicate that participants did not simply perceive love language as a means of expressing affection. Rather, they viewed it as an important interpersonal condition that fostered emotional safety and encouraged greater openness within friendships.

Despite this general tendency, not all participants considered differences in love language to be barriers to self-disclosure. Two participants explained that incompatible love language preferences did not necessarily reduce relational closeness because every individual possesses unique ways of expressing care. Instead of expecting friends to demonstrate affection in a particular manner, these participants emphasized mutual respect and acceptance of individual differences.

One participant explained:

“Not really. I can still open up because everyone has their own way of showing they care. For me, it's more about respecting those differences.” (Interview with BQS, October 27, 2025).

Another participant expressed a similar perspective, stating that affection remained meaningful regardless of how it was expressed, as long as genuine concern was present.

“If someone shows affection in their own way, it already means they care about me. I don't really choose how they should express it.” (Interview with FA, October 27, 2025).

In contrast, other participants reported that incompatible love language preferences could create emotional distance. When the affection they expected was expressed in ways that did not match their emotional needs, they felt less understood and became more cautious about sharing personal experiences. Rather than immediately disclosing their feelings, they preferred to limit conversations until a greater sense of comfort had been established.

One participant described this experience by explaining that incompatible love language preferences often made interpersonal communication feel less natural.

“If our love languages are different, it feels like we're not on the same page. For example, I prefer talking face-to-face, but if my friend doesn't, it's much harder for me to start opening up.” (Interview with AS, October 30, 2025).

Likewise, another participant reported becoming more reserved whenever interpersonal interactions lacked the form of emotional expression that was personally meaningful.

“There is always a slight feeling that we are not emotionally connected. When that happens, I become less open and tend to hold back my thoughts rather than expressing them freely.” (Interview with SS, October 28, 2025).

These contrasting experiences suggest that participants responded differently to incompatible love language preferences. While some viewed such differences as a natural characteristic of interpersonal relationships, others perceived them as limiting emotional comfort and consequently reducing their willingness to engage in deeper self-disclosure.

Participants further explained that self-disclosure was influenced not only by the love language they received but also by the love language they expressed toward their friends. Several participants reported that when their expressions of care were recognized and positively reciprocated, they experienced stronger emotional reciprocity, which encouraged more frequent and meaningful interpersonal communication. This reciprocal interaction gradually strengthened interpersonal trust and made sharing personal experiences feel more natural.

One participant described how expressing affection toward friends also contributed to the development of mutual understanding and emotional closeness.

“The way I express my love language also matters. When my friends recognize that I care about them, we understand each other better, talk more often, and become closer. Once I feel comfortable like that, opening up becomes much easier.” (Interview with NR, October 27, 2025).

Beyond the expression of love language, participants consistently emphasized that understanding one another's emotional preferences played an important role in facilitating self-disclosure. Knowing how friends preferred to receive affection enabled participants to respond more appropriately to one another's emotional needs. This mutual understanding created a sense of comfort that encouraged more open conversations and deeper emotional exchange.

One participant explained that understanding a friend's preferred love language increased emotional security because individuals felt that their emotional needs were acknowledged.

“Once we understand what makes our friends feel appreciated and actually do those things, they naturally feel more comfortable with us. Honestly, I think comfort is the key to self-disclosure.” (Interview with SS, October 28, 2025).

A similar perspective was expressed by another participant, who believed that mutual understanding of love language created a stronger sense of emotional fulfilment within the

friendship. As both individuals became aware of each other's emotional needs, conversations became more open and meaningful.

"When we both understand each other's love language, we also understand what each of us needs. That makes both of us feel more comfortable, especially when sharing personal stories." (Interview with NR, October 27, 2025).

Another participant emphasized that compatible love language preferences strengthened mutual support within friendships. Feeling emotionally supported encouraged individuals to discuss difficulties more openly and contributed to stronger interpersonal relationships.

"When we understand each other's love language, we feel like we're experiencing the same things. We support each other more, become more open, and our friendship grows stronger." (Interview with FA, October 27, 2025).

The interview findings also revealed that although all participants acknowledged the importance of love language in friendship, they differed in the extent to which it influenced their willingness to engage in self-disclosure. Four participants reported that receiving affection through their preferred love language substantially increased their emotional comfort and confidence to share personal experiences. In contrast, two participants argued that differences in love language preferences did not prevent them from communicating openly because they considered mutual acceptance and respect to be more important than receiving a particular form of affection.

The findings further indicate that love language contributes to self-disclosure through both receptive and expressive processes. Participants emphasized that receiving affection in meaningful ways enhanced feelings of trust and emotional security, whereas expressing love language toward friends encouraged reciprocal understanding and strengthened interpersonal communication. Consequently, self-disclosure developed not only because participants received emotional support but also because they actively created supportive communication within their friendships.

Gender differences were also evident in participants' perceptions of love language. Female participants generally expressed more positive attitudes toward all five love languages than their male counterparts. Among the five forms of affection, words of affirmation and quality time emerged as the love languages that most strongly encouraged self-disclosure. Participants consistently described these expressions as creating opportunities for meaningful conversations, shared experiences, emotional validation, and interpersonal closeness, all of which made it easier to discuss personal feelings and experiences.

By contrast, participants expressed more varied perceptions regarding physical touch, acts of service, and receiving gifts. Physical touch received mixed responses because some participants associated it with emotional reassurance, whereas others considered it uncomfortable when it exceeded personal or cultural boundaries. Meanwhile, acts of service and receiving gifts were generally regarded as situational expressions of affection. Although both forms conveyed care and appreciation, participants did not consistently perceive them as directly encouraging greater openness during interpersonal communication.

To provide a clearer overview of how each love language was perceived in relation to self-disclosure, participants' responses were coded and synthesized into three categories: positive, neutral, and negative. The classification was based on the dominant meaning expressed across each participant's interview rather than on the frequency of specific

statements. A perception was classified as positive when participants consistently described a love language as facilitating emotional comfort, trust, or greater willingness to disclose personal thoughts and feelings. A neutral classification was assigned when participants perceived the love language as having little or no noticeable effect on their self-disclosure, or when it was viewed as situational rather than influential. A negative classification was used when participants described the love language as creating discomfort, emotional distance, or reluctance to disclose personal information. The summary of these classifications is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of the Influence of Love Languages on Self-Disclosure among Participants

No	Initials	Gender	<i>Love language</i>				
			<i>Words of affirmation</i>	<i>Quality time</i>	<i>Act of service</i>	<i>Receiving gift</i>	<i>Physical touch</i>
1	AS	Male	Positive	Positive	Positive	Neutral	Neutral
2	BQS	Male	Neutral	Positive	Positive	Neutral	Negative
3	FA	Male	Positive	Positive	Neutral	Neutral	Negative
4	NF	Female	Positive	Positive	Neutral	Positive	Positive
5	NR	Female	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive
6	SS	Female	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive

Source: Data Analysis Results (2026)

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that love language plays an important role in shaping self-disclosure within Generation Z friendships. Participants who experienced affection through forms of communication that aligned with their emotional preferences generally reported greater comfort in sharing personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings. At the same time, the findings suggest that mutual understanding and acceptance of individual differences remain essential for maintaining interpersonal openness, even when friends possess different love language preferences. These patterns provide the empirical foundation for the subsequent discussion of how love language facilitates self-disclosure through interpersonal communication and the process of relational development.

Discussion: The Role of Love Language in Facilitating Self-Disclosure among Generation Z Friendships

The findings demonstrate that love language functions as a form of affective interpersonal communication that facilitates self-disclosure among Generation Z friends. Participants reported that receiving affection through their preferred love language created emotional safety, trust, and a sense of being valued, encouraging them to share personal experiences and emotions more openly. This finding supports Maulidina et al. (2025), who emphasized the importance of love language in fostering emotional comfort within interpersonal relationships.

From the perspective of Social Penetration Theory, interpersonal relationships develop through gradual and reciprocal self-disclosure as trust increases (Altman & Taylor, 1973). The present findings suggest that love language does not directly produce self-disclosure; rather, it functions as an interpersonal communication mechanism through which emotional messages are interpreted and responded to. When participants perceived that their friends expressed

affection in ways that matched their emotional preferences, they interpreted these behaviours as signs of understanding, attentiveness, and relational commitment. Such interpretations created emotional comfort and psychological safety, reducing concerns about being misunderstood or negatively evaluated. As a result, participants felt more confident sharing personal experiences, emotions, and vulnerabilities. Conversely, when expressions of affection were perceived as inconsistent with their emotional expectations, participants often questioned whether their feelings were fully understood, leading them to communicate more cautiously and limit personal disclosure. This finding is consistent with Fadilla et al. (2023), who argued that interpersonal compatibility plays an important role in strengthening communication and relational closeness.

The findings further illustrate that love language facilitates relational development through the progressive communication process described in Social Penetration Theory. During the orientation stage, expressions of affection such as words of affirmation and simple acts of service primarily functioned to establish positive first impressions and signal interpersonal openness. As friendships progressed to the exploratory affective exchange stage, more frequent quality time, personalized verbal affirmation, and occasional gift giving enabled participants to exchange increasingly personal experiences and emotions. At the affective exchange and stable exchange stages, participants reported expressing all five love languages more naturally because repeated reciprocal interactions had strengthened relational trust and emotional security. Rather than merely accompanying relationship development, love language served as a communicative resource that reinforced reciprocity, validated emotional needs, and encouraged progressively deeper self-disclosure. Consistent with Chapman (1992), participants also emphasized that recognizing and responding to a friend's preferred love language reduced misunderstandings and strengthened interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, Wicaksono et al. (2024) suggested that love language preferences are shaped by relational experiences and social environments rather than being innate characteristics.

These findings extend Social Penetration Theory by identifying love language as an interpersonal communication mechanism that supports relational intimacy in Generation Z friendships. While Altman and Taylor (1973) explain that relationships develop through self-disclosure, the present findings suggest that emotionally congruent expressions of affection first create emotional comfort, perceived responsiveness, and trust. These conditions make participants feel safer to disclose personal thoughts and feelings. Rather than merely accompanying relationship development, love language facilitates the communication process that precedes deeper self-disclosure. In this way, the study enriches Social Penetration Theory by explaining how emotional communication supports the development of interpersonal intimacy in non-romantic friendships.

Unlike previous studies that primarily examined romantic relationships, this study found that words of affirmation and quality time were the dominant love languages within Generation Z friendships. This differs from Nuraini (2025), who identified physical touch and quality time as the dominant expressions of affection in romantic relationships. The findings suggest that friendships rely more heavily on verbal support, emotional validation, and shared experiences than on physical intimacy. Meanwhile, acts of service was generally perceived as

a normal social obligation among friends, reducing its emotional significance, while receiving gifts was rarely practiced because gift-giving was usually reserved for special occasions and constrained by financial considerations. This finding supports Prasetyo (2022), who argued that excessive gift-giving is often viewed by Generation Z as impractical and inconsistent with local cultural values. In contrast, physical touch was the least preferred expression of affection due to growing awareness of personal boundaries and privacy among Generation Z (Pamungkas, 2025). As digital natives, participants also relied extensively on digital communication to maintain friendships (Seno et al., 2025), making verbal interaction and emotional responsiveness more meaningful than physical expressions of affection.

Gender and sociocultural context also influenced participants' love language preferences. Among male participants, quality time emerged as the dominant love language, differing from Jessica (2023), who identified acts of service as the primary preference. This difference may reflect the Acehnese cultural practice of gathering in *warung kopi*, where spending time together represents an important form of social interaction and friendship maintenance (Mukhsinuddin et al., 2024). In contrast, female participants showed a stronger preference for words of affirmation, reflecting greater reliance on verbal encouragement and emotional validation, consistent with Yunalia and Etika (2020). Although physical touch remained relatively uncommon among male participants because of local norms regarding modesty and interpersonal boundaries, female participants were generally more accepting of appropriate physical touch within close friendships, supporting the findings of Salsabila et al. (2023). These results indicate that the expression of love language is shaped not only by individual preferences but also by broader cultural values and communication norms.

The findings further demonstrate that love language contributes differently across the five dimensions of self-disclosure proposed by Wheelless and Grotz (as cited in Jati & Rahayu, 2023). The strongest influence was observed in the amount of disclosure, as participants became more willing to communicate frequently and extensively about their personal experiences, emotions, and daily lives after receiving affection that aligned with their preferred love language. Love language also encouraged intent to disclosure, as emotional validation increased participants' willingness to initiate personal conversations (Putra et al., 2024). Regarding the positive–negative nature of disclosure, participants felt more comfortable discussing negative or emotionally sensitive experiences when they received verbal affirmation and emotional support from trusted friends. However, love language showed only limited influence on the honesty and accuracy dimension. Although supportive communication increased emotional comfort (Maulana & Gumelar, 2013), participants remained selective regarding the completeness and accuracy of the information they disclosed. Decisions concerning truthful disclosure were influenced more strongly by interpersonal trust, previous experiences, and individual characteristics than by expressions of affection alone. Similarly, participants consciously regulated the depth and control of their disclosures to avoid potential emotional consequences, regardless of whether they had received their preferred love language.

Overall, this study extends previous research by demonstrating that love language should not be understood solely as an expression of affection but also as an interpersonal communication mechanism that facilitates emotional engagement and self-disclosure in

friendships. While previous studies primarily focused on romantic or family relationships (Sari et al., 2023; Azzahra et al., 2024; Jelita et al., 2025), the present study highlights the communicative role of love language in non-romantic relationships among Generation Z. By applying Social Penetration Theory, this study contributes to communication science by explaining how affective communication strengthens trust, encourages interpersonal openness, and supports the gradual development of relational intimacy beyond romantic contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that love language facilitates self-disclosure in Generation Z friendships by creating emotional comfort and strengthening interpersonal communication. Participants perceived quality time and words of affirmation as the forms of affection that most supported openness, whereas receiving gifts was the least meaningful. Love language was most evident in the amount of disclosure, while honesty and accuracy remained dependent on trust, personal experiences, and individual characteristics.

The study offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it extends Social Penetration Theory by explaining that emotional communication through love language can facilitate self-disclosure before deeper relational intimacy develops. Love language is therefore positioned as an interpersonal communication mechanism rather than simply an expression of affection. Practically, the findings suggest that recognizing friends' preferred love languages may help create supportive communication, strengthen trust, and encourage more open interactions among Generation Z.

This study is limited to same-sex friendships among Generation Z and therefore does not capture the dynamics of cross-gender friendships. In addition, the potential transactional nature of love language exchanges was not examined from the perspective of Social Exchange Theory. Future research should include more diverse friendship contexts and integrate alternative communication theories to further explain the role of love language in interpersonal relationships.

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