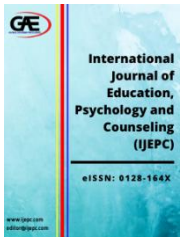
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THE FEELINGS OF LOVE AND EMOTIONAL DEPENDENCY AMONG PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES (PWD): A PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECT VIEW

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Abstract:

This concept paper examines the psychological dimensions of romantic love and emotional dependency among Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), or *Orang Kurang Upaya* (OKU) in Malaysia. It draws on the Triangular Theory of Love, which describes love as comprising intimacy, passion, and commitment (Sternberg, 1986). Romantic love is recognized as a significant component of socio-emotional development and quality of life. There is limited research on romantic love and emotional dependency on PWD compared to non-disabled persons. Many studies mainly focus on the socioeconomic issues among PWD, which has caused a significant gap in the field of romantic love and emotional dependency among PWD. The conceptual foundation of this concept paper is based on the three fundamental aspects of love: intimacy, passion, and commitment. These are derived from Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love (1986) and are augmented by four additional aspects: attraction, connection, trust, and respect. Therefore, seven aspects are used to form this study. Based on the thematic review from existing literature, this concept paper aims to (1) explore the feelings of love among PWD, (2) explore the emotional dependency among PWD, and (3) develop a conceptual framework to demonstrate the depth of romantic love and emotional dependency in PWD. PWDs are as capable of experiencing love as non-disabled people. However, they also face psychosocial challenges and are commonly misunderstood in the context of romantic love. This evidence supports the aims of this concept paper.

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Thus, by applying Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, a classical approach among PWD, who are excluded from traditional relationship research, highlights the novelty of this study. Overall, this study extends conceptual frameworks by applying Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love to examine how attachment influences relationship satisfaction. It also offers insights relevant to counseling, policy development, and further research on PWDs (Madey & Rodgers, 2009).

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Keywords:

Psychological Aspects, Emotional Dependency, Persons with Disabilities (PWD), Love, Romantic Relationship

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Introduction

Love constitutes a basic affective construct that is not subject to any categorical constraints or deficiencies. Research indicates that non-disabled young adults have not often been hindered in seeking meaningful romantic relationships or marriage with Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) due to the economic or socio-demographic status of PWDs (Zewude & Habtegiorgis, 2021). However, PWDs usually face obstacles to experiencing and expressing love due to societal prejudice, physical barriers, and emotional difficulties (Lesseliers & Van Hove, 2002). Hence, understanding the psychological side of love among PWDs is key to achieving inclusivity, providing emotional support, and fostering positive relationships (Arias et al., 2009).

This article focuses on the feelings of love alongside the dependency for PWDs in experiencing and maintaining love. Note that the subtle interplay of affection and dependency among disabled populations requires a strict focus on psychological aspects, such as intimacy, commitment, passion, attraction, connection, trust, and respect (Sternberg, 1986; Tobore, 2018). Accordingly, these categories and definitions reflect the author's perception of a comprehensive understanding of the psychological aspects of love among PWDs. Specifically, this paper aims to (1) explore the feelings of love among PWD, (2) explore the emotional dependency among PWD, and (3) develop a conceptual framework to demonstrate the depth of romantic love and emotional dependency in PWD.

Background of Research

Love and relationships between PWDs in Malaysia, known as *Orang Kurang Upaya* (OKU), remain a complex and under-investigated area of psychology. Although affection and intimacy are essential human needs, PWDs often face challenges that hinder the experiential and

affective unification of the latter. In addition, many PWDs struggle with attitudinal challenges, such as prejudice, stereotypes, and low expectations (Zewude & Habtegiorgis, 2021). Following this, the biases and misconceptions of society used towards PWDs create barriers, reducing the chance of affective bonding and, as a result, hindering their ability to establish and maintain romantic relationships. For this investigation, an operationally defined romantic relationship is a consensual, two-way exchange in which partners mutually recognize one another (Collins et al., 2009). As such, this definition combines both physical and emotional attraction, thereby constituting what can be regarded as the substrate of relationships that can last.

While several studies have focused on certain aspects of disability and relationships, including social discrimination, self-esteem issues, and barriers for users, there is a notable deficiency in research (Morales et al., 2015). This includes issues related to the psychology of love, dependency, and other concerns for PWDs. Correspondingly, this concept paper seeks to fill this gap by discussing how different types of disability impact the perception and expression of love. In particular, the study focuses on the seven psychological aspects of love: intimacy, commitment, passion, attraction, connection, trust, and respect. This explores the meaning of emotional attachment and establishes the specific psychological challenges PWDs face when seeking romantic relationships.

With a view to enhancing how love and relationships are understood among PWDs, this study seeks to add value to the body of literature by exploring non-physical aspects. Consequently, research findings would be relevant for guiding policy strategies, supporting interventions, and campaigns aimed at increasing the inclusion and welfare of PWDs in love and relationships.

Research Gap

There is a significant gap in the current literature on love and dependence among PWDs. Disability is often studied in empirical research in a general way, without addressing the finer aspects of emotions and interpersonal relationships that people might face. This is one of the oversights that should be corrected to create a holistic framework that acknowledges that love is an important human phenomenon. A more comprehensive understanding of the psychological aspects that determine the nature of dependency in such relationships would be achieved through such a framework as well.

Research Objectives

This concept paper is guided by three specific objectives: (1) explore the feelings of love among PWD, (2) explore the emotional dependency among PWD, and (3) develop a conceptual framework to show the depth of romantic love and emotional dependency in PWD. These research objectives aim to contribute in-depth, disability-inclusive research on romantic love and emotional dependency to prior research.

Research Methodology

This study employs qualitative conceptual research following a systematic approach. A systematic thematic literature review serves as the main method, requiring no new data collection and enabling the analysis and synthesis of existing research. Relevant articles were searched in databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, ResearchGate, and Science Direct using

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keywords such as 'love,' 'persons with disabilities,' 'romantic relationship,' 'emotional dependency,' 'intimacy,' 'passion,' 'commitment,' 'attraction,' 'connection,' 'trust,' and 'respect.' This systematic approach aligns with the study's goal of exploring and extending theories about love and emotional dependency among PWDs. At the same time, the findings from the literature review were used to develop the proposed conceptual framework.

Finding and Analysis

Seven major psychological aspects that influence love and emotional dependency among PWDs were reviewed from existing literature: intimacy, passion, commitment, attraction, connection, trust, and respect. Accordingly, these findings suggest that PWDs can experience love similar to that of non-disabled people, while also facing psychosocial challenges and frequent misunderstandings in romantic relationships.

Love

Love plays a major role in a person's psychological health. It is a complex emotion that involves more than just physical ability or social expectations. For PWDs, love can be especially challenging, as they must manage both personal struggles and society's attitudes toward disability. Shifting from being alone to being in a relationship is often a significant moment for PWDs (Mattila et al., 2017). Research demonstrates that the socioeconomic status of PWDs does not always stop non-disabled adolescents from starting long-term romantic or marital relationships with them (Zewude & Habtegiorgis, 2021). Still, PWDs often face difficulties in experiencing and expressing love due to social norms, institutional barriers, and their own feelings (Ignagni et al., 2016). The type of disability may further affect how love is experienced and expressed, and the extent to which PWDs seek support and validation from their partners. In essence, understanding these psychological and social factors is important for encouraging social inclusion, offering emotional support, and helping people build strong, lasting relationships.

Intimacy

The literature defines intimacy as the foundation of a romantic relationship, enabling people to connect physically, emotionally, and intellectually. Although intimacy does not lessen by having disability, it may alter how intimacy is experienced by PWDs. On a similar note, body awareness and the experience of touch are likely to affect the perception of intimacy among PWDs (Cole, 2014). Moreover, PWDs often face challenges with intimacy arising from the factors of societal stigma, physical limitations, and non-understanding partners. Research also suggests that many people are not strongly attracted to those with physical disabilities. In the context of romantic relationships, PWDs are often excluded from studies (Man et al., 2006), resulting in a limited understanding of their experiences (Ruiz et al., 2023). Despite this, PWDs have important benefits from being in a romantic relationship. Being in a romantic relationship helps PWDs understand themselves by reducing active negative thoughts and self-judgment and by receiving more support from others (Friedman, 2019). Overall, the findings suggest that intimacy serves as an emotional connection between romantic partners and improves the psychological well-being of PWD.

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Passion

Passionate love is defined by intense feelings of physical attraction, sexual desire, and excitement in the presence of the beloved (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). In a romantic relationship, passion is defined as a powerful emotional and physical desire (Hatfield & Rapson, 2006). The manifestation and maintenance of passion often pose problems for PWDs due to physical limitations, social norms, and personal beliefs about their desires (Ellis, 2015). PWDs treasure romantic relationships, bonding, support, and physical expressions of love, including kissing and snuggling (Bates et al., 2016). Still, social barriers remain a major hindrance. Empirical evidence indicates that approximately 85.5% of non-disabled youth are unwilling to engage in marital or sexual relationships with their disabled counterparts, a sentiment. In most cases, it is driven by concerns of being perceived as having poor family values (Zewude & Habtegiorgis, 2021). In other words, recognizing that PWDs articulate and experience love differently can help society reflect on love in a less restrictive, more inclusive way.

Commitment

Notably, maintaining a romantic relationship requires commitment. PWDs perceive romantic love in the same way as people without disabilities, emphasizing commitment (Morales et al., 2015). Despite this, PWDs could experience more difficulties committing as they require care and assistance, and their disabilities may affect their day-to-day activities (Shakespeare et al., 2021). Correspondingly, commitment strengthens the relationship continuity and emotional security among PWD.

Attraction

Romantic attraction is defined as positive reactions to a potential romantic partner, which include cognitive, emotional, motivational, and behavioral components (Gerlach & Reinhard, 2018). PWDs may feel self-conscious or embarrassed about their bodies or abilities, making it challenging for them to feel comfortable with physical attraction (Glass & Soni, 1999). Likewise, Man et al. (2006) cited in their studies that college students had no significant romantic attraction to PWDs. However, PWDs reported being attracted to their partners just like people without disabilities. Moreover, empirical evidence suggests that PWDs demonstrate a statistically significant tendency, which is roughly two times higher than that of their non-disabled counterparts, to experience attraction to different gender categories (Bollier et al., 2019). Thus, the findings reveal that, although society may judge unfairly, the human ability to feel attraction remains real, powerful, and not limited by disability.

Connection

Based on the literature review, emotional connection constitutes an essential aspect in maintaining romantic relationships, though PWDs often face unique challenges in forming these bonds. For instance, when one partner develops a physical disability, both may need to adjust to new physical realities and identify new ways to improve their relationship (Schembri Lia & Abela, 2019). Additionally, PWDs can feel lonely due to exclusion, such as unfair social policies and structural barriers (Robinson & Idle, 2022), causing them to feel disconnected. They may also experience frustration or disappointment with their physical abilities, which can

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make it harder to build close, loving relationships. Hence, the findings highlight that fostering a supportive environment enables PWDs to build and maintain romantic connections.

Trust

Trust is essential for maintaining romantic relationships. PWDs frequently encounter distinct challenges that influence their capacity to trust others, potentially impeding the development of strong relationships (Perkins & Dilks, 1992). They also have higher caution on trusting others, as a result of mistreatment, including verbal and physical abuse, theft, and extortion by their primary caregivers (Oktay & Tompkins, 2004). This condition contributes to PWDs being reluctant to engage in romantic relationships due to concerns about vulnerability and betrayal. Consequently, establishing a supportive and inclusive environment (Whitehouse et al., 2001) can facilitate the development of meaningful, trust-based relationships for PWDs. Therefore, findings suggest that trust subsequently fosters emotional security, open communication, well-being, and relationship stability.

Respect

Valuing and respecting PWDs requires cultivating positive affirmations, destigmatizing culture, and adopting dignity and joy in romantic relationships (Hill, 2019). Findings of the study indicate that PWDs have sexual desires and feelings, similar to those of everyone else, and their relationships should be built on rights, dignity, and respect (Barber, 2011). Building on this, respecting the feelings of PWDs in romantic relationships is vital since their partners may react in a variety of ways, including fear, concern, and guilt (Hartman et al., 1983). Based on the findings, recognizing the emotional lives of PWDs improves their well-being and helps build a more inclusive and fair society.

Dependency of Love

Findings define dependency in love among PWDs as the reliance on others for emotional support, care, and assistance in romantic relationships. Attachment theory is a key point of reference for the study of dependency in interpersonal relationships. It assumes that childhood attachment experiences shape the development of intimacy and dependence in adulthood. In the case of PWDs, the unique life experiences may bring about their attachment styles and the perceptions created by society, causing them to be more dependent or avoid depending on others, as being vulnerable or further stigmatized. Conversely, comparative studies of dependency between normal functioning individuals and PWDs present different trends. Accordingly, fully functioning individuals might view dependence as a normal part of loving relationships that allow them to experience emotional intimacy and collaboration. In contrast, PWDs can face more issues, such as societal stigma and self-inadequacy (Damianidou, 2021), making their relations more complicated. The result of this divergence is a more subtle concept of dependency, and PWDs may perceive themselves as a burden or overly reliant on their partners. Some partners of PWDs suffer from a serious burden of support due to the disabled partner being dependent on them (Post et al., 2005). On the other hand, couples with an acquired disability manage by engaging in mutual, reciprocal circular patterns of interaction, with both partners motivated to assist each other in times of need (Schembri Lia & Abela, 2019). As a result, to experience and maintain romantic relationships among PWDs, dependency is an important aspect.

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Conceptual Framework

This paper draws on a conceptual framework from the existing literature and previous studies. The discussion is guided by Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love, which identifies three main components of love: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Nevertheless, these three elements may be insufficient to fully capture the romantic experiences of PWDs. Following this, the paper extends the framework to include four new constructs: attraction, connection, trust, and respect. These are perceived as being equally important in understanding how PWDs experience love and dependency in romantic relationships. To provide a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of love among PWDs, this paper discusses these seven constructs together. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed conceptual framework of this study.

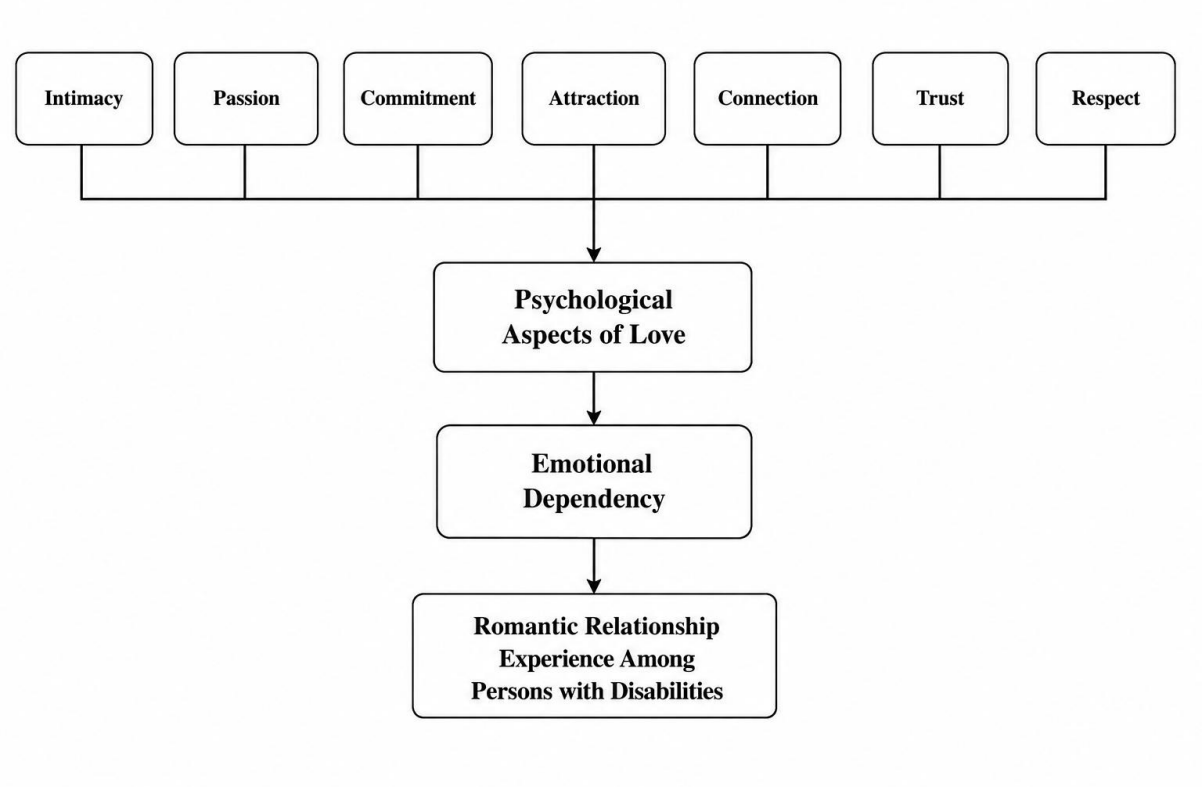


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework of Love and Emotional Dependency among Persons with Disabilities

Source: Developed by The Authors Based on Sternberg's Triangular Theory (1986) and The Reviewed Literature.

Conclusion

This concept paper studied the psychological components of love among PWDs, concentrating on feelings of love and dependency that develop in romantic relationships. The notions of intimacy, commitment, passion, attraction, connection, trust, and respect were all studied in the context of PWDs. The researcher hypothesizes that a subtle understanding of the psychological aspects of love and dependency among PWDs is essential to the creation of supportive and inclusive relational models. Thus, by considering the significance of intimacy, commitment, passion, attraction, connection, trust, and respect, the researcher aims to establish a society that honors and promotes PWDs' emotional well-being and love experiences. Correspondingly,

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questioning current cultural presuppositions is critical, as is promoting inclusivity and allowing PWDs to experience love and to rely on their own way.

Research Novelty

Earlier research examined either romantic relationships or disability in isolation. On the other hand, this concept paper contributes to the field by introducing a framework that explains love and emotional dependency among PWDs from a psychological perspective. At the same time, by bringing together key psychological factors, the paper aims to offer a fuller picture of how PWDs experience romantic relationships. The framework can also guide future research in this area.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research can assess the proposed framework using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods approaches with PWDs. Researchers might also examine how different types of disabilities, cultural backgrounds, and relationship experiences affect love and emotional dependency. These studies could help confirm and refine the framework and support the development of valid, inclusive practices that encourage healthy romantic relationships among PWDs.

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