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An Analysis Of The Triangular Theory Of Love Among Wives With A Background Of Living Together

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Abstract	This qualitative single-case study explores the dynamics of intimacy, passion, and commitment in a 32-year-old wife (Subject Z) who lived with her partner for 13 years before their legal and religious marriage in 2024. Data were collected in Sonder District, Indonesia, through two semi-structured interviews with the subject, four observation sessions, and source triangulation involving three close informants. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate an uneven configuration of love. Intimacy was expressed through care, domestic support, empathy, and acceptance, but remained constrained by limited emotional disclosure and inconsistent support. Passion persisted through physical attraction, affection, and sexual intimacy; however, its fulfillment was affected by work schedules, geographic distance, and the husband's gaming habits, which the subject associated with feeling neglected. Commitment was the most prominent component, supported by the long shared history, formal marital status, trust, parental responsibilities, and the desire for family certainty. The study concludes that formal marriage strengthened commitment and the subject's sense of security but did not automatically resolve difficulties in intimacy and passion. A balanced marital relationship requires reciprocal communication, emotional availability, and shared responsibility.
Keywords	Commitment; Cohabitation; Intimacy; Passion; Triangular Theory Of Love

INTRODUCTION

Cohabitation, commonly described as living together in an intimate partnership without formal marriage, has become an important subject in the study of contemporary relationships. Couples may choose to share a home, finances, domestic responsibilities, and emotional or sexual intimacy before entering a legally and religiously recognized marriage. Such arrangements can be shaped by practical considerations, emotional needs, financial circumstances, and expectations about the future (Coast, 2009; Hunter, 2009). In Indonesia, cohabitation may also intersect with strong religious, legal, and cultural expectations regarding marriage, creating social pressure and uncertainty for couples who remain unmarried for extended periods.

Prior research suggests that cohabitation is not a uniform experience. Some couples regard living together as a way to develop intimacy or assess compatibility, while others remain in the arrangement because of financial, family, or situational constraints. Studies of

cohabiting couples have examined relationship attitudes, expectations, and outcomes, demonstrating the importance of considering the meaning that individuals attach to their living arrangements (Coast, 2009; Núñez Cohello, 2018). Research in the Indonesian context has also described cohabitation among students and young adults as a phenomenon shaped by varied social and personal considerations (Leko et al., 2024; Setiawan et al., 2026). These findings provide context, but they do not fully explain how a long cohabitation history is experienced after a couple transitions into formal marriage.

Marriage may provide formal recognition, clearer responsibilities, and a sense of security. Nevertheless, a change in legal or religious status does not necessarily transform established emotional patterns. Couples may carry forward communication habits, unresolved conflict, expectations, and vulnerabilities developed during cohabitation. For a woman who has spent many years in an uncertain relationship, formal marriage may address the need for status certainty while leaving other relational needs unresolved. Relationship commitment is therefore important, but commitment alone may not represent the overall quality or balance of love (Stanley & Markman, 1992).

Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love offers a useful framework for examining these dynamics. The theory conceptualizes love through three interacting components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Intimacy refers to emotional closeness, trust, care, and mutual understanding; passion involves motivational and physical attraction, including sexual desire; and commitment refers to the decision to love someone and the intention to maintain the relationship over time. The components may vary in strength, and their combination shapes the character of a romantic relationship. Sternberg and Grajek (1988) further discuss the nature of love as a configuration of these components rather than a single undifferentiated feeling.

Studies applying the triangular perspective have linked the components of love with marital harmony and satisfaction. Sanu and Taneo (2020) discuss the relevance of Sternberg's theory to household harmony, while Mahendry et al. (2023) examine the relationship between triangular love and marital satisfaction. Fitrizia (2019) also considers the relationship between attachment style, consummate love, and marital satisfaction. Research on relationship satisfaction further indicates that dyadic coping, love, sexual motivation, and having children may contribute to how partners evaluate their relationships (Meskó et al., 2022). Together, these studies support the importance of examining intimacy, passion, and commitment in relation to the wider context of family life.

The present study focuses on Subject Z, a 32-year-old wife living in Sonder District, who cohabited with her partner for 13 years before their formal marriage in 2024. The couple had a child during the first year of living together. The subject's account describes a prolonged period of uncertainty about relationship status, family responsibilities, and the future, followed by a formal marriage that provided greater certainty but did not remove all

relational difficulties. The study therefore aims to explore how intimacy, passion, and commitment are experienced and reorganized by a wife with a long cohabitation history after entering formal marriage. Its contribution is a contextually detailed single-case account rather than a claim that the experience represents all women or all couples with a cohabitation history.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a single-case study design. A qualitative design was selected because the research sought to understand the meaning and complexity of an individual's lived relationship experience in its natural context (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The case was selected purposively because Subject Z had lived with her partner for 13 years before entering a legally and religiously recognized marriage. She was 32 years old at the time of the study and resided in Sonder District, Indonesia. The couple's child was born during the first year of their cohabitation.

Data were collected in Sonder District between March and June 2026. The primary data consisted of two semi-structured interviews with Subject Z, conducted on 21 and 29 May 2026, and four observation sessions at the subject's residence during May 2026. The observations took place on 1 May (60 minutes), 8 May (75 minutes), 15 May (107 minutes), and 31 May (84 minutes). Semi-structured interviews allowed the subject to describe experiences and interpretations in her own words, while observation provided contextual information about communication and interaction. Three close informants contributed to source triangulation: a friend who had known the subject for eight years, the subject's grandmother, and another friend who had known her for seven years. Their accounts were used to compare and contextualize, not replace, the subject's own perspective.

Data credibility was strengthened through source triangulation and comparison of interview and observation records. The analysis followed the interactive model associated with Miles and Huberman and described by Sugiyono (2023): data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Relevant statements were selected and coded according to intimacy, passion, and commitment; the coded material was organized into narrative categories; and interpretations were checked against observations and informant accounts. Ethical reporting is supported by the use of the pseudonym "Subject Z" and by avoiding identifying details beyond those necessary to describe the case.

Figure 1. Analytical framework: a 13-year cohabitation history and transition to formal marriage provide the relational context; the experience is examined through intimacy, passion, and commitment; interview, observation, and informant data are integrated to interpret the post-marital relationship.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The case profile indicates that Subject Z had lived with her partner for 13 years before they married formally in 2024. The subject described the transition as important for obtaining certainty about the relationship and the family's future, particularly because their child was approaching the end of elementary school and required clearer parental status for administrative purposes. Informants generally observed that the formal marriage made the subject calmer and increased the couple's focus on family responsibilities. At the same time, informants noted that communication and conflict resolution remained challenging.

Table 1. Summary of the three components of love in the case

Love component	Main evidence in Subject Z's account	Overall pattern
Intimacy	Care and domestic support; acceptance and empathy; inconsistent emotional availability; limited disclosure and communication	Present but incomplete
Passion	Physical attraction, affection, hugging, and sexual intimacy; constraints from work schedules, distance, and gaming-related distraction	Present but unevenly fulfilled
Commitment	Long relationship history, formal marriage, trust, responsibility for the child, and intention to maintain the family	Most prominent component

Intimacy

Intimacy was visible in the subject's efforts to prioritize her husband's needs. She described managing household activities, preparing what he needed before work, welcoming him when he returned, and attempting to understand his feelings. She reported feeling happy when her husband was comfortable and when her efforts contributed to his well-being. These accounts indicate care, responsiveness, and a willingness to place the partner's welfare alongside her own. They correspond with Sternberg's (1986) description

of intimacy as emotional closeness, affection, and concern for the loved one.

The subject also attempted to accept her husband's shortcomings, recognizing that she had weaknesses of her own. However, acceptance was complicated by her frustration with his frequent gaming. Support and emotional availability were similarly inconsistent. She recalled occasions when her husband defended and protected her during pressure from her family, but she also stated that his presence during difficulties depended on the situation. At times, she concealed problems because she expected that disclosure might lead to an argument. The subject described wanting her husband to pause his own activities, listen without judgment, and offer reassurance or a hug. She did not consistently experience this form of emotional support.

Communication emerged as a central limitation. Although the couple sometimes discussed their expectations and encouraged one another, they also tended to remain silent or withhold feelings during conflict. During observation, the subject indicated that communication could feel futile when it did not lead to change. An informant similarly described a tendency for both partners to conceal matters from one another. Thus, intimacy was expressed through practical care and some empathy, but it was not fully supported by open, reciprocal emotional communication. This distinction is important: domestic care can coexist with unmet emotional needs, and the presence of one form of intimacy does not establish that all dimensions are functioning well.

Passion

Passion remained present through physical attraction and affectionate behavior. The subject described taking care of her appearance and acknowledged her husband's physical attractiveness. She identified small touches, hugs, shared time, and sexual relations as expressions of affection. She also viewed sexual intimacy as meaningful because physical closeness helped her feel emotionally connected to her husband. These experiences are consistent with Sternberg's (1986) account of passion as a motivational component that includes physical attraction and sexual desire.

Nevertheless, the subject reported that sexual fulfillment after marriage was less satisfying than she had expected. Work schedules and household responsibilities often made it difficult for the couple to find time together, while periods when her husband worked outside the area created physical distance. She particularly associated his extended gaming with feeling ignored, including at times when she wanted physical closeness. The subject described unmet needs for attention and appreciation that accumulated over time. She acknowledged seeking attention and understanding from another person during periods of dissatisfaction. The informant's account corroborated a history of relationship conflict and infidelity, while also emphasizing that this information concerned the relationship's history and should not automatically be treated as a description of its present condition.

The findings suggest that passion in this case cannot be reduced to sexual frequency. The subject connected physical intimacy with emotional recognition, attention, and being treated with care. When these needs were not communicated or addressed, frustration accumulated. This interpretation is compatible with research that considers sexual motivation and love among the factors associated with relationship satisfaction (Meskó et al., 2022). It also highlights how practical constraints, distance, and everyday habits may shape the expression of passion within marriage.

Commitment

Commitment was the most prominent component in the subject's account. The couple's 13-year history, their continuing decision to remain together despite conflict, and the subject's love for her partner contributed to her willingness to maintain the relationship. She had previously asked for certainty about marriage, but her partner was not ready at that time. They nevertheless continued living together. The eventual decision to marry formally was associated with love, confidence in her husband's responsibility and ability to provide for the family, the child's administrative needs, social pressure, and concern about the uncertainty of the relationship while her husband worked away from home.

The subject described trust as a source of security, noting that her husband's trust in her encouraged reciprocal trust. Some concerns remained, particularly about the influence of her husband's family, but she expressed pride that he had continued to stand by her. Formal marriage provided clearer recognition of the relationship and a stronger sense of responsibility for the family's future. The grandmother's account supported the observation that the couple became more focused on their child's everyday needs, while another informant noted that the formal marital and religious bond reduced the subject's anxiety about relationship status.

Responsibility toward the child was a major expression of commitment. The subject valued her husband's continued financial support and attention to the child, even when she felt that his attention toward her was limited. An informant described the husband's involvement in preparing the child for school and meeting daily needs. These findings indicate that commitment was sustained not only by romantic attachment but also by shared history, parental responsibility, trust, and the desire for a recognized family status. This is consistent with Stanley and Markman's (1992) distinction between the decision to maintain a relationship and the long-term intention to persist in it.

Discussion

Viewed through the Triangular Theory of Love, the case demonstrates an uneven balance among intimacy, passion, and commitment. Commitment was strengthened by formal marriage and family responsibilities, whereas intimacy and passion remained vulnerable to communication barriers, inconsistent emotional support, and unmet physical

and emotional needs. The findings support Sternberg's (1986) proposition that love is composed of interacting components and that the strength of one component does not necessarily compensate for weaknesses in the others. Formal marriage provided legal, religious, and social certainty, but it did not automatically produce emotional openness or satisfying intimacy.

The case also illustrates the importance of distinguishing relationship status from relationship quality. The subject experienced greater security after marriage, yet unresolved interaction patterns continued. This is consistent with the view that commitment is an important relational dimension but should be examined alongside intimacy and passion (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Sanu & Taneo, 2020). Prior work on triangular love and marital satisfaction likewise suggests that the components should be considered together rather than treated as interchangeable indicators of marital well-being (Fitrizia, 2019; Mahendry et al., 2023).

The role of the child further shaped the meaning of commitment. The subject's decision to formalize the relationship was partly connected to the child's administrative needs and the parents' responsibilities. Family functioning may influence children's behavior and emotional development, making the management of parental conflict and shared responsibility important (Kasenda et al., 2023). In this case, informants observed greater coordination around the child after marriage, although communication difficulties between the spouses remained. The presence of a child therefore strengthened the practical and moral significance of commitment without resolving every source of marital dissatisfaction.

The findings should be interpreted cautiously. This is a single-case study based primarily on the wife's perspective, supported by observation and three informants. It cannot establish causal relationships between cohabitation and later marital dynamics, nor can it be generalized to all women or couples. The study's value lies in its detailed account of how one woman interpreted a long transition from cohabitation to formal marriage. Future studies could include both spouses, compare multiple couples, and examine how cultural expectations, family involvement, and economic circumstances shape the three components of love over time.

CONCLUSION

This study examined intimacy, passion, and commitment in a wife who had cohabited with her partner for 13 years before entering formal marriage. The findings show that intimacy was expressed through care, domestic support, acceptance, and empathy, but remained incomplete because emotional availability and open communication were inconsistent. Passion continued through attraction, affection, and sexual intimacy, yet its fulfillment was affected by work schedules, geographic distance, and the husband's gaming habits, which the subject associated with feeling neglected. Commitment was the strongest

component and was supported by the couple's long shared history, formal marriage, trust, responsibility toward their child, and the need for certainty about the family's future.

The central conclusion is that formal marriage strengthened commitment and the subject's sense of security but did not automatically resolve difficulties in intimacy and passion. A more balanced relationship requires reciprocal emotional communication, consistent attention, shared time, and collaborative conflict resolution. Because the study concerns one case, further research should include both partners and a broader range of couples with different cohabitation histories. Practically, couples in similar circumstances may benefit from supportive marital counseling that addresses communication, emotional needs, intimacy, and shared parenting.

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