



What Twenty-Somethings Think About Marriage

Research Brief

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Background

Young adults today live in an American society where social norms include divorce, living together outside of marriage and having children out-of-wedlock. The U.S. divorce rate has decreased slightly and stabilized in recent years¹, yet divorce remains a significant social issue. Previous research has shown that the implications for children who experience the divorce of their parents include elevated risk for conduct disorders and psychological problems, low self-esteem, a greater likelihood of obtaining a lower level of education and lower status jobs, and greater potential to experience trouble in their own marriages. Further, marriage rates seem to be on the decline, from 8.2% in 2000 to 7.3% in 2007;² and those who do marry are doing so at an older age than in previous generations.³ Despite significant divorce rates and declining marriage trends, many surveys indicate that most young adults expect to marry, and marry for life. The percentage of young Americans who express that having a good marriage is extremely important to them has increased since the 1980's.⁴

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The idea of marriage continues to carry a powerful emotional charge for most young adults. The institution of marriage has lost much of its significance in terms of social norms and religious necessity and is seen as one option among many in couple relationships. More often marriage is a personal rather than a social standard to increase positive outcomes for children.

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, in collaboration with public leaders and key stakeholders, identified the need to conduct research within the broad 18-30 young-adult age group and subsequently identified the most effective and relevant messaging platforms to speak to these segments on the topic of marriage. This research, conducted by TRU, a research organization specializing in this "Millennial" (aka Twenty-somethings) population, provides further evidence that most young people aspire to marry, regardless of current relationship or level of commitment, and that expectations for marriage success are remarkably high.

This research provides critical new insight into the minds and hearts of young adults on the topic of marriage and defines segments of this population based on their attitudes toward marriage. The purpose of this Research Brief is to summarize the findings of this research. In particular, the segments classified by this population's attitudes offer a new way for marriage/relationship education (MRE) practitioners to think about applicable messages on the subject of healthy relationships and marriage.

Methodology

Three phases of research among young adults aged 18-30 were conducted, as summarized briefly below.

Phase One: Qualitative Target Exploratory Research

A series of 20 in-depth group discussions were conducted among young adults aged 18 to 30 in diverse markets across the U.S. including Los Angeles, CA; Knoxville, TN; Boston, MA; and Chicago, IL. This qualitative research phase was intended to provide rich insights into young-adult relationship experiences and expectations regarding current relationships as well as future, committed relationships like marriage. In order to gather a full range of insight from various perspectives within the young adult cohort, respondents recruited for this research were screened and segmented by gender,

relationship status, and aspiration for marriage. Separate discussions were held with the following segments:

- Dating, without any current thoughts about marriage (but ultimately interested in marrying sometime in the future)
- Actively seeking a soul mate and life partner
- Living with a significant other and not sure whether they will move towards marriage with this partner (some may already have children together)
- Engaged to be married within a prescribed time limit
- Married and aspiring to a long-lasting marriage

Insights from this research provided a set of discriminators among young-adults that became the basis for the quantitative attitudinal segmentation research conducted in Phase Two.

Phase Two: Quantitative Target Segmentation Research

Online interviews were conducted among a total of 3,672 women and men aged 18-30. These interviews were self-administered and lasted an estimated 20 minutes. This sample was weighted and balanced to ensure a representative mix of geographies, income levels, and ethnicities.

Respondents' age and gender for the surveyed sample are summarized below :

SAMPLE COMPOSITION			
3,672 Interviews / National Sample			
	Total	Women	Men
TOTAL INTERVIEWS	3,672	1,848	1,824
18- to 22-year-olds	1,227	620	607
23- to 26-year-olds	1,225	614	611
27- to 30-year-olds	1,220	614	606

The objectives of this quantitative phase were to 1) identify and profile diverse segments among the young-adult cohort on the topic of marriage, 2) determine which of the segments can benefit most from messages about healthy relationships and marriages, and 3) identify messages and media vehicles that allow a communications campaign to resonate in the most relevant ways with twenty-something segments.

Phase Three: Qualitative Communications Development Research

For this final phase, a series of 14 in-depth group discussions were conducted among young adults aged 18 to 30 in diverse markets across the U.S. The sessions were grouped according to gender and marriage segment; three segments (“The I Don’ts,” “The Not-Yet Set,” and “The Romantics”), were interviewed.

The research found that eighty-two percent of young adults expect to be married for *life*. In-person discussions with young adults across the relationship spectrum reveal that many give marriage much thought, especially those who are unmarried. Further, these discussions suggest that marriage is a subject that may carry more *emotional weight* (and subsequent stress) for young adults today, especially now that marriage has become more of an individual choice than a social requirement.

Trends

The research found that eighty-two percent of young adults expect to be married for *life*. In-person discussions with young adults across the relationship spectrum reveal that many give marriage much thought, especially those who are unmarried. Further, these discussions suggest that marriage is a subject that may carry more *emotional weight* (and subsequent stress) for young adults today, especially now that marriage has become more of an individual choice than a social requirement. When considering the possibility of marriage, some unmarried young adults appear almost paralyzed by the need “to be sure,” coupled with the notion that they will be surrendering their hard earned sense of self to a relationship that must be “shared.”

The results show that many in this age group are holding on to a concept of freedom/self/independence based on the fears of losing oneself in the relationship, losing “leverage” or “power” in the relationship, and/or being taken for granted by their partners. Consistently, the major attitudinal difference uncovered between those young adults who are currently married and those who remain unmarried is that married young adults seem to find their *personal destiny/fulfillment in a relationship*, while unmarried young adults worry about losing their personal identity in marriage. Some young adults, especially men, view marriage simply as an “outdated concept,” associated with “pressure from society.” Also, many express a profound fear of personal failure and, ultimately, of divorce. In fact, despite the strong aspiration for marriage, three-fourths of young adults claim they would rather be alone than marry the wrong person.

Most young adults are comfortable, even comforted, associating work with marriage. Virtually all young adults surveyed seem to be wary of ideas that promise unrealistic, “rose-tinted” marriage benefits, without realistic trials; they expect reward and struggle to be represented in any credible portrayal of marriage.

Given this pronounced caution and deep-seated fear, it is somewhat surprising that most young adults believe they have what it takes to make a marriage work. Seventy percent of young adults surveyed in this research say they believe they have the personal relationship skills to make a married relationship last forever. While most believe that love is the foundation of lasting marriage, eighty-seven percent of young adults believe love is the reason to get married and sixty-one percent believe love is what holds marriages together. Twenty-eight percent of the young adults surveyed believe there is only one perfect marriage partner for themselves, and most young adults are comfortable, even comforted, associating work with marriage. Virtually all young adults surveyed seem to be wary of ideas that promise unrealistic, “rose-tinted” marriage benefits, without realistic trials; they expect reward and struggle to be represented in any credible portrayal of marriage. Notably, in reacting to specific messaging ideas presented in this research, most young adults indicated that they perceive marriage to be more of a *journey* (with highs and lows) than an *adventure* (always exciting and fun).

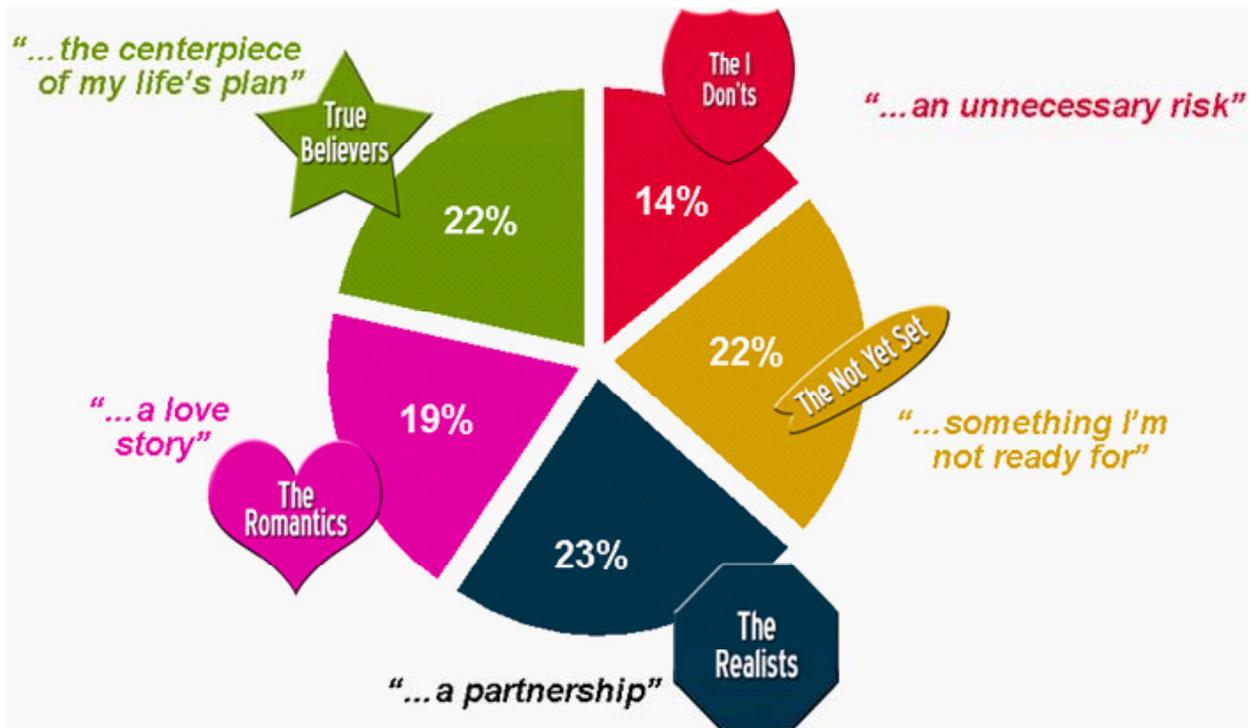
As one might expect, there are differences between how young men and young women think about marriage. Most young adults agree that women are more likely to want marriage for itself, and are consequently much more receptive to dialogue on the topic of marriage. Men, on the other hand, believe they are typically left out of the conversation about marriage, and most seem quite content with this. While almost all of the men aspire to be married some day, few express a desire to talk in-depth about the topic. Women accept this disconnect between men and marriage as well. They don't count on men to be to be “tuned in” to the marriage conversation in general.

This research provides evidence that establishing a relevant, engaging marriage dialogue with young adults – both men and women – requires a new young-adult perspective and a fresh marriage “vocabulary.” Discussions with both men and women in this age group indicate that relevant marriage dialogue is often obscured behind a camouflage of platitudes, clichés, and fairy tale mythology. That is, the dialogue that currently exists around marriage appears to have been produced by “someone else” – some other, older generation(s) – and doesn't always seem relevant to young adults. This is not to say that some of the *established ideas* around the value or benefits of marriage don't make good sense to young adults today (the fact that marriage takes work, for example); rather, it means that young adults do not currently have ownership in a fresh and relevant way to talk and think about marriage for their generation.

What the Research Says: Distinct Young Adult Segments

Five distinct young adult attitudinal segments, each with its own specific perspective on marriage, emerged from the quantitative research. The segments are summarized below:

MARRIAGE IS....



The Realists (23%) – Marriage is A Partnership

This very practical group exhibits a rational, balanced view of marriage. They approach this life-long commitment with caution and prefer to test the waters before diving in.

- Moderate marriage motivation
- Practical view of marriage benefits
- Personal destiny not linked to marriage
- High income and education

The Not Yet Set (22%) – Marriage is a Commitment for which I am not Ready

These young people (primarily men) are currently enjoying freedom from responsibility. Marriage is a distant goal, and they lack confidence in their ability to make marriage work.

- Low marriage motivation
- Fear losing independence
- 70% male segment
- Most ethnically diverse

The True Believers (22%) – Marriage is the Centerpiece of Life

This segment instinctively embraces the positive role of marriage in their lives. They are aware of difficulties, but they are determined to turn marital stumbling blocks into stepping stones.

- Very high marriage motivation
- Divorce is not an option
- Highest education
- Mostly Caucasian

The Romantics (19%) – Marriage is a Love Story

This group believes in the existence of a soul mate. They are excited about the prospect of marriage and view it as the happy ending to a personal fairy tale.

- High marriage motivation
- Belief in soul mate
- 67% female segment
- Highest African American

The I Don'ts (14%) – Marriage is an Unnecessary Risk

This group expresses strong “anti-marriage” sentiments, largely due to a fear of commitment and a cynical view on their potential for marital success.

- Lowest marriage motivation
- Highest fear of commitment
- Divorce acceptable and common
- Urban, lower income

Implications

Tailor Messages to Each Segment

Although any comprehensive dialogue on marriage must include all segments of young-adults, this research suggests that diverse, tailored messages will be necessary to effectively deliver marriage/relationship messages to some segments of the twenty-something population.

Historically, marriage efforts have targeted highly marriage-motivated young adults. The groups identified in this study that fall into this category include the “True Believers” and “The Realists.” For the “True Believers,” providing traditional marriage messages reinforces this group’s already well-developed appreciation for the benefits of marriage. The other highly marriage-motivated segment identified in this research, “The Realists,” already have the attitude and information-gathering habits that would *equip* them for successful marriage. It is the remaining three segments – “The I Don'ts,” “The Not-Yet Set,” and “The Romantics” – that could benefit from information about healthy relationships.

Young-adults, however personally motivated toward healthy relationships, will not respond to a lecture on marriage. It is also clear that for many young adults, the experience of others their age as well as the wisdom of credible experts in the field are appreciated and sought – if they are offered in the spirit of true, two-way *dialogue*.

Offer a True *Dialogue*

The results show that young-adults, however personally motivated toward healthy relationships, will not respond to a lecture on marriage. It is also clear that for many young adults, the experience of others their age as well as the wisdom of credible experts in the field are appreciated and sought – if they are offered in the spirit of true, two-way *dialogue*.

Provide Fresh Perspective and Vocabulary

A fresh vocabulary and a relevant perspective are the goals of a marriage dialogue geared toward this population. The dialogue must eschew the clichés of the past while offering real-world, identifiable and engaging touch points for the lives of young adults today. Young adults *expect* marriage to be work.

Finding ways to talk about marriage in realistic terms is an imperative first step toward gaining credibility among young adults; it may also help to disarm the fairy tale clichés that obscure the real benefits of marriage.

This study shows that the age group of 18-30 year olds in the United States is in need of a marriage dialogue that is relevant to their attitudes, fears and beliefs. Program administrators and practitioners alike can use this information to tailor marketing messages, recruitment strategies and curricula. The results also suggest that, according to the ways in which this age group can be categorized, the men and women who show a fear of commitment, have unrealistic expectations of a marital relationship and/or lack confidence in their abilities to make marriage work, could benefit from an MRE program that addresses these areas.

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¹ National Marriage and Divorce Rate Trends. National Vital Statistics System. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved on November 17, 2009 from http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/mardiv_tables.htm.

² National Marriage and Divorce Rate Trends. National Vital Statistics System. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved on November 17 from http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/mardiv_tables.htm.

³ U.S. Census Bureau. Current Population Survey. Table MS-2: Estimated Median Age at First Marriage, by Sex: 1890 to the Present. Retrieved on November 17, 2009 from <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html>.

⁴ What's Happening to Marriage? Essay from State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America, 1999. National Marriage Project. Rutgers University. Retrieved on November 17, 2009 from <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/pubwhatshappening.htm>.