

Giving on Valentine's Day: Trends and Preferences in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Preferences are not static, but constructed from traditional values and modern practices. The intellectual quest to understand individual preferences on Valentine's Day in Zimbabwe ignited this study focusing on how marital status, age and gender impact expectations for Valentine's Day. A descriptive survey was employed under a quantitative approach, with 230 participants recruited through volunteer sampling across Zimbabwe's major cities. To establish an in-depth understanding of the subject under study, the research data was collected through a structured web-based survey instrument supported by open and closed-ended questions. The results of the study were analysed using the 30th version of IBM SPSS. The findings suggest that Valentine's Day holiday is experienced differently across genders, age groups, marital status, and geographical locations. The study observed that, while many Zimbabwean participants did not celebrate the holiday, those who do so are primarily women, younger people and single and dating people. Most people above 40 seem to prefer non-material gifts such as 'a night out' whilst younger people prefer money and other tangible gifts. Women generally had higher expectations for receiving gifts, while men were more likely to indicate that they did not expect anything. The findings may assist researchers, marketers, relationship counsellors and social scientists in understanding changing social expectations and consumer preferences associated with Valentine's Day in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: preferences, culture, values, Valentine's Day.

Background

The 14th of February, has become a holiday marked in many countries worldwide as Valentine's Day. Although still strongly associated with romantic love, Valentine's Day has evolved into a broader social and cultural event that also recognises friendship, family relationships, and appreciation within communities. The cultural significance of the holiday goes beyond romantic love to acknowledging the importance of friendship, family and community. It has a cultural

significance that spans more than 1,500 years. At its heart is a celebration of love, romance, and affection. The holiday stems from ancient Christian and Roman traditions (Groom, 2018).

The focus of the holiday, which is on presents, candlelit dinners, and flowery words, also imposes a sense of obligation and pressure to conform (Kirwin, 2020). In addition, the commodification of Valentine's Day has led to the fostering of unrealistic fantasies and feelings of disappointment or inadequacy among those who feel unable to fulfil such fantasies (Ping, 2023). Additionally, the way social media often showcases ideal romantic relationships and the emphasis on material displays of affection on Valentine's Day can also lead to increased feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and stress (Galician, 2004).

There is a limited amount of research on the actual expectations of people regarding the holiday. This study sought to unravel the complex, multidimensional nature of Valentine's Day expectations and how people navigate and understand this culturally significant day.

Literature review

Studies have shown that in Africa, Valentine's Day is often associated with Western cultural values, such as romantic love and materialism (Pritchard, 2013). However, African cultures have also infused the holiday with their own unique traditions and values. For example, in Ghana, Valentine's Day is celebrated as a day of friendship and community, with people exchanging gifts and sharing meals together (Agyekum, 2015). Studies have also shown that Africans have diverse expectations surrounding Valentine's Day. In Nigeria, for example, Valentine's Day is a day of romantic love, with couples exchanging gifts and going on dates (Adeniyi, 2017).

From a Western perspective, Valentine's Day is largely understood as a celebration of romantic affection expressed through gift-giving, social outings, and symbolic acts of love (Groom, 2018). The globalisation of media and commerce has facilitated the spread of these practices into many non-Western societies, including African countries.

In southern Africa, Valentine's Day is celebrated with a mix of traditional and modern practices. In South Africa, for example, Valentine's Day is celebrated with romantic getaways, candlelit dinners, and gift-giving (Mkhize, 2017). However, some scholars argue that the commercialisation of Valentine's Day in South Africa has led to the corrosion of traditional values and practices (Ndlovu, 2015). In terms of expectations, it varies across countries. In South Africa, Valentine's

Day is expected to be a day of romantic love, with couples exchanging gifts and going on romantic getaways (Mkhize, 2017). In Botswana, Valentine's Day is expected to be a day of family and community, with people gathering to share meals and exchange gifts (Kebadiretse, 2019).

In Zimbabwe, Valentine's Day is celebrated with a strong emphasis on traditional values and practices. According to Chitando (2015), in some Zimbabwean cultures, Valentine's Day is celebrated as a day of respect and appreciation for elders and ancestors. However, Mugabe, (2017) states that the holiday is also celebrated with modern practices, such as gift-giving and romantic dinners. The expectations for the day in Zimbabwe are shaped by cultural and economic factors. Research has shown that Zimbabweans expect Valentine's Day to be a day of romantic love, with couples exchanging gifts and going on dates (Mugabe, 2017). However, economic constraints have led to a shift in expectations, with many Zimbabweans opting for low-cost or homemade gifts (Chitando, 2015).

Overall, the literature suggests that Valentine's Day in Africa, southern Africa, and Zimbabwe is celebrated with a complex mix of traditional and modern practices. While the holiday is often associated with Western cultural values, African cultures have also infused it with their own unique traditions and values. While there are common themes across the region, cultural, economic, and social factors shape the specific expectations surrounding the day. Understanding these expectations can provide insights into the ways in which Africans celebrate love, affection, and appreciation. Despite the diversity of expectations surrounding Valentine's Day across Africa, there are some common themes. Many Africans expect Valentine's Day to be a day of love, affection, and appreciation (Agyekum, 2015; Adeniyi, 2017; Mkhize, 2017). They also expect the day to be marked by gift-giving, sharing meals, and spending time with loved ones (Kebadiretse, 2019; Mugabe, 2017).

Objectives

1. Examine how marital status impact expectations for Valentine's Day.
2. Explore the role of age in Valentine's Day expectations.
3. Examine the impact of gender on shaping one's expectations of Valentine's Day.

Research questions

1. How does marital status influence Valentine's Day expectations among Zimbabweans?

2. What role does age play in shaping Valentine's Day expectations?
3. How does gender influence Valentine's Day expectations and gift preferences?

Methodology

Approach and design

The study adopted a quantitative approach and employed a descriptive survey design. The emphasis of this method is on describing the characteristics of a phenomenon rather than manipulating variables or testing hypotheses to answer why it occurs (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). This design allowed for the systematic collection of participants' understanding, opinions, expectations, previous experiences and preferences towards Valentine's Day from a large sample across the whole country in a relatively short period of time. Through this methodology, the researchers conveniently and easily gathered valuable in-depth information on Valentine's Day from a representative sample of the larger Zimbabwean population in a cost-effective and time-efficient manner.

Participants

A total of 230 participants were recruited through volunteer sampling, a non-probability sampling technique in which participants voluntarily chose to participate in the online survey. These came from the major cities of the country's ten provinces, notably Bulawayo, Gweru, Harare, Kadoma, and Masvingo. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution and cannot be generalised to the entire Zimbabwean population. Over 50% of them were 30 – 44-year-olds, while about a quarter (25%) of the participants were Generation-Z (18 – 29 years of age). The other quarter was comprised of 45 – 60 years and 60⁺ age groups. By gender, 70% were female and 30% identified as male. In terms of marital status, 59% were married, 17% were single but dating, and 14% were single, with the remainder being widowed, divorced or on separation. The study sought to describe trends and preferences rather than establish causal relationships between demographic variables and Valentine's Day expectations.

Data collection

Data were collected through a structured web-based survey instrument with seven closed-ended questions, and one open-ended question. The questionnaire sought demographic information about respondents such as their age, sex, marital status as well as their geographical location. Some of

the questions were: ‘Are you planning to celebrate Valentine’s Day?’; ‘What are your plans for the day?’; and ‘What would you like to receive as a Valentine’s gift?’

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was expressly sought from all participants who were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity of their responses to the survey instrument. The first part of the survey instrument informed participants of how the data would be utilised and that no identifying information would be collected.

Data analysis

IBM SPSS Version-30 was utilised in analysing the data. Descriptive statistics, such as percentages, frequency counts and other statistical indexes were computed and summarised.

Valentine’s Day statistics breakdown: Expectations and plans in 2025

Valentine’s Day is one of the biggest celebrations of love globally. While the day has so much global importance and undoubtedly business people have ridden on that hype to market jewellery, flowers and other products that can be bought as gifts. A survey was conducted in early February 2025 to find out the expectations and plans that people in Zimbabwe have about Valentine’s Day, specifically, the survey sought to find out people’s expectations about gifts that they can receive on the day and what they want to do on the day. The survey also sought to analyse expectations of people according to age, sex, marital status and geographical location.

As shown in Table 1, a total of 230 people participated in the survey through volunteer sampling. Of the 230 participants, 161 were female and 69 were male.

Table 1: Sex distribution of participants (N = 230)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Female	161	70.0	70.0	70.0
	Male	69	30.0	30.0	100.0
	Total	230	100.0	100.0	

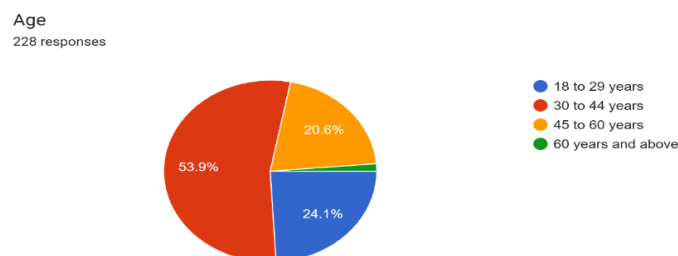


Figure 1: Distribution of respondent ages

The marital status of the participants is shown on Table 2.

Table 2: Marital status distribution

		Frequency	Percent	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid		1	.4	.4	.4
	Divorced	7	3.0	3.0	3.5
	In a relationship	1	.4	.4	3.9
	It's complicated	7	3.0	3.0	7.0
	Married	135	58.7	58.7	65.7
	Married pending divorce	1	.4	.4	66.1
	Single	33	14.3	14.3	80.4
	Single with significant other (dating)	39	17.0	17.0	97.4
	Widow	4	1.7	1.7	99.1
	Widowed	2	.9	.9	100.0
	Total	230	100.0	100.0	

Are you?

229 responses

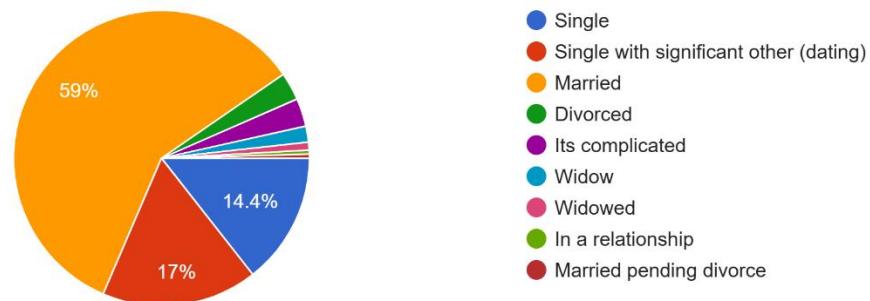


Figure 2: Marital status distribution

Instrument

Participants filled in a brief questionnaire with 7 closed-ended questions and one open-ended question. Most survey items were categorical multiple-choice questions designed to capture participants' plans, expectations, and preferences regarding Valentine's Day. No Likert-scale items were used in the study.

Findings

Plans to celebrate Valentine's Day

As shown in Table 3, the majority of respondents (63%) indicated that they had no plans for the day. However, 41% of females compared to only 27.5% of males, indicated that they have plans

to celebrate Valentine's Day. Therefore, women generally have plans for Valentine's Day compared to men.

In Bulawayo, 86% of people have plans for Valentine whilst only 32% of people in Harare have plans for Valentine. In Masvingo, it was established that 50% of people have plans for Valentine's Day.

Table 3: Are you planning to celebrate Valentine's Day?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	No	145	63.0	63.0	63.0
	Yes	85	37.0	37.0	100.0
	Total	230	100.0	100.0	

Other towns with a significant number of people who indicated plans for Valentine's Day were:

- 1) Gweru
- 2) Kadoma
- 3) Those outside Zimbabwe

Are you planning to celebrate Valentine's day
230 responses

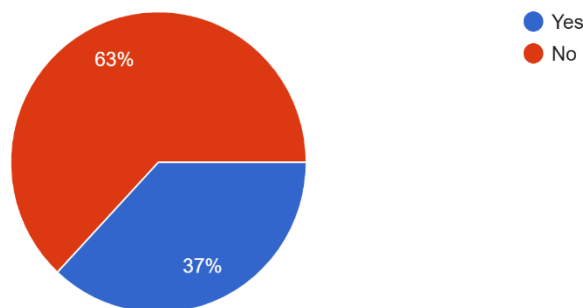


Figure 3: Yes/No response frequencies

Table 4: Sex of Participant: Are you planning to celebrate Valentine's Day Cross tabulation

		Are you planning to celebrate Valentine's Day		Total
		No	Yes	
Sex of Participant	Count	95	66	161
	Female % within sex of participant	59.0%	41.0%	100.0%
	Count	50	19	69
	Male % within sex of participant	72.5%	27.5%	100.0%
	Count	145	85	230
	Total % within sex of participant	63.0%	37.0%	100.0%

Table 5: Age of participants : Are you planning to celebrate Valentine's Day cross tabulation

		Are you planning to celebrate Valentine's Day		Total
		No	Yes	
Age of Participant	Count	2	0	2
	% within age of participant	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
	Count	29	26	55
	18 to 29 years % within age of participant	52.7%	47.3%	100.0%
	Count	76	47	123
	30 to 44 years % within age of participant	61.8%	38.2%	100.0%
	Count	36	11	47
	45 to 60 years % within age of participant	76.6%	23.4%	100.0%
	Count	2	1	3
	60 + years % within age of participant	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
	Count	145	85	230
	Total % within age of participant	63.0%	37.0%	100.0%

Solo Valentine Day

Of those who would be spending the day without a romantic partner, 47% expressed that they would not celebrate the day at all. Some (10.9%) expressed that they would dine at a favourite hotel, 9.6% expressed that they would travel somewhere special and another 9.6% said they would treat themselves with a gift.

If you are expecting to spending the Valentine day solo, what are your plans?

194 responses

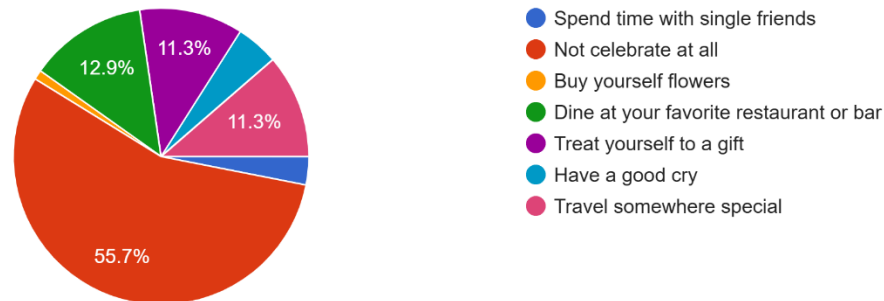


Figure 4: Solo Valentine's day plans

Expectations about gifts on Valentine's Day

Table 6 shows that the majority of participants (34.8%) indicated that they did not want/expect to receive anything on Valentine's Day. Some 15.7% would want to receive money, 10%, would want a romantic holiday, 8.7% would want a night out and 6.5% would want dinner as well as another 6.5% preferring perfume.

Table 6: Summary: If you are expecting to spend Valentine's Day solo, what are your plans?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid		36	15.7	15.7	15.7
	Buy yourself flowers	2	.9	.9	16.5
	Dine at your favourite restaurant or bar	25	10.9	10.9	27.4
	Have a good cry	9	3.9	3.9	31.3
	Not celebrate at all	108	47.0	47.0	78.3
	Spend time with single friends	6	2.6	2.6	80.9
	Travel somewhere special	22	9.6	9.6	90.4
	Treat yourself to a gift	22	9.6	9.6	100.0

With reference to Figure 5, the majority of participants did not want to receive anything on Valentine's Day, However, those that expected to receive something indicated their preferred gifts in order of popularity. From participants who expected a gift, the most preferred gifts were money (15.7%), a romantic holiday (10.0%), a night out (8.7%), dinner (6.5%), perfume (6.5%), flowers (6.1%), jewellery (5.7%), drinks and/or food (3.0%), and cards (0.4%).



Figure 5: Valentine's Day gift preferences

Table 7: What would you like to receive as a Valentine's Day gift?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid %	Cumulative %
	6	2.6	2.6	2.6
A night out	20	8.7	8.7	11.3
A romantic holiday	23	10.0	10.0	21.3
Cards	1	.4	.4	21.7
Dinner	15	6.5	6.5	28.3
Drinks and/or food	7	3.0	3.0	31.3
Flowers	14	6.1	6.1	37.4
Jewellery	13	5.7	5.7	43.0
Money	36	15.7	15.7	58.7
Nothing	80	34.8	34.8	93.5
Perfume	15	6.5	6.5	100.0
Total	230	100.0	100.0	

Expectations according to age

The 18 to 29 age group expressed that they wanted money as a gift on Valentine's Day (30.9%), whilst the few that expressed that they wanted something from the 30 to 44 years age group

(Millennials), and the 45 to 60 age group indicated that they wanted a night out and a romantic holiday. These findings should be interpreted cautiously because some marital-status categories had very small numbers of participants, which may affect the stability of percentage comparisons.

Expectations according to sex

On Valentine's Day, 57% of males indicated that they expected to receive nothing, whilst only 25% of females expected to receive nothing. This survey has shown that women expect to receive something on Valentine's Day. Of the few men who expressed the desire to receive something, their most preferred gifts were money followed by perfume and a romantic holiday. For women, the most preferred gift was money (17.4%), a night out (10.1%), a romantic holiday (9.9%), dinner (8.7%), flowers (8.7%), jewellery (6.8%) and perfume (6.2%).

Expectations according to marital status

On Valentine's Day, 39% of married people expected or preferred to receive nothing. Of those who expected to receive something, "a night out" was the most popular preference (12.6%), followed by a romantic holiday (11.9%), money (9.6%), dinner (6.7%) and perfume (5.2%).

All (100%) of the married pending divorce preferred a night out as a Valentine's gift. The single and dating category preferred money as a gift (33.3%), followed by flowers (12.8%). The divorced category preferred nothing (74%) and perfume (14%).

Among participants expecting to spend Valentine's Day alone, 47.0% reported that they would not celebrate at all, while 10.9% planned to dine at their favourite restaurant or bar, and 9.6% planned to travel somewhere special or buy themselves a gift.

Discussion

The findings of the 2025 Valentine's Day survey in Zimbabwe reveal notable trends and preferences regarding how people plan to celebrate the day and what they expect in terms of gifts. The data provides insight into the varying attitudes towards Valentine's Day celebrations based on sex, age, marital status, and geographical location, reflecting broader social patterns and cultural expectations.

Celebration plans (gender and age differences)

The data showing that 63% of respondents in Zimbabwe had no plans to celebrate Valentine's Day reflects a broader global disinterest in the holiday, driven by shifting social norms, economic pressures, and critiques of consumer-driven celebrations (DeVries et al., 2019). The

commercialisation of the holiday often fails to resonate with those questioning the commodification of love.

Among the 37% who planned to celebrate, gender and age differences reveal how cultural factors shape participation. Women were more likely to celebrate (41%) compared to men (27.5%), thus aligning with Fischer and Arnold's (2020) argument that gender roles influence romantic rituals, with women expected to lead emotional gestures. Baker et al. (2017) also found that women tend to invest more emotionally in such holidays, while men often focus on material gestures. While women traditionally carry the emotional labour of holidays like Valentine's Day, Graham (2021) suggests changing attitudes toward masculinity are prompting more male participation.

Generational differences further influence participation. The 18 to 29-year-old age group (Gen Z) showed the highest interest (47.3%), which aligns with Smith and Thompson's (2019) research on how social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok amplify public romantic gestures, particularly during holidays. Conversely, only 23.4% of those in the 45 to 60 age group (Gen X) planned to celebrate. Schwartz and Hill (2020) found that older generations view Valentine's Day as overly commercialised, preferring more personal expressions of love. This generational divide reflects broader societal shifts, with millennials and Gen Z rejecting traditional consumer-driven holidays in favour of more individualised expressions of love (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Geographical variation in celebrations

Regional variation in Valentine's Day celebrations in Zimbabwe shows Bulawayo with the highest enthusiasm (86%), Harare at the lowest (32%), and Masvingo at 50%. This highlights the influence of geography, culture, and economic factors. Harten et al. (2018) argue that cultural differences between urban and rural areas shape holiday participation, which may explain Bulawayo's greater enthusiasm. Smaller towns, more connected to traditional values, often engage more in celebrations like Valentine's Day, while urban areas like Harare may experience a dilution of local customs due to globalisation, with residents focused on other concerns.

Economic conditions also impact participation. In Masvingo, financial constraints may limit involvement in commercialised holidays. Nguyen et al. (2021) suggest that economic insecurity, such as high unemployment or inflation, prompts people to prioritise necessities. In urban areas like Harare, the higher cost of living and competition further reduce the focus on Valentine's Day.

As DeVries et al. (2019) note, people in these environments often prioritise financial stability over consumer-driven celebrations.

Global trends also influence regional differences. Globalisation, especially through social media, promotes romantic celebrations, but its impact is stronger in larger urban centres like Harare. Schwartz and Hill (2020) suggest that people in cities with greater exposure to global trends are more likely to embrace holidays like Valentine's Day. However, some residents in Harare may view these celebrations with cynicism, while Bulawayo's more traditional approach integrates global trends more gradually and authentically.

Solo celebrations: A mixed response

The fact that 47% of respondents stated they would not celebrate Valentine's Day highlights its traditional association with romantic love, often excluding those without a partner. However, the 10.9% planning to dine out, 9.6% travelling, and another 9.6% treating themselves suggest a shift in how the holiday is perceived. These responses reflect a growing embrace of self-love and personal enjoyment as valid forms of celebration.

This trend is part of a broader cultural movement prioritising individual well-being and self-care, with activities like dining out or buying oneself a gift becoming more accepted. It also signals a shift toward more inclusive definitions of love, where people celebrate platonic relationships or self-affection. While Valentine's Day still maintains its romantic roots, there is increasing acceptance of alternative celebrations focused on personal happiness and fulfilment.

Expectations about gifts (money and experiences over material goods)

Valentine's Day gift expectations reveal a shift away from materialism, with 34.8% of participants indicating they did not expect gifts. This trend aligns with Schwartz and Hill's (2020) research suggesting a move from the commercialisation of holidays toward focusing on experiences and intangible affection.

Experiential gifts, such as travel or romantic outings, were most desired, with 15.7% preferring money, 10% a romantic holiday, and 8.7% a night out. This preference for experiences over material gifts supports Smith and Thompson's (2019) findings that younger generations value shared experiences over physical objects. Gender differences also emerged, with women favouring

a variety of gifts, including experiences, while men preferred money and luxury items like perfume. Harten et al. (2018) suggest women's preference for romantic gestures aligns with traditional expectations of femininity. Men's focus on practical or luxury items ties to evolutionary psychology, linking gift preferences to status and mate attraction (Buss & Schmitt, 2021). These gendered patterns in gift-giving reflect global trends, with women valuing emotional gestures and men leaning toward material gifts.

Marital status and gift expectations

Marital status significantly influenced plans for Valentine's Day and gift expectations. Among married participants, 39% expressed no expectation for gifts, suggesting that long-term couples may prioritise experiences over material exchanges. The most popular choices for those expecting gifts were a night out or a romantic holiday, highlighting a preference for quality time.

Single and dating individuals (33.3%) favoured money, reflecting financial uncertainty and practical realities. Schwartz and Hill (2020) emphasise how economic conditions shape gift preferences, with money offering flexibility for younger individuals facing financial instability. In contrast, the divorced group showed a marked preference for no gifts, with 74% indicating no expectation. This may reflect disillusionment or a more pragmatic approach post-divorce, as Graham (2021) notes that significant life transitions, like divorce, often lead to a reassessment of the emotional and material aspects of holidays. Overall, these differences underscore how life stage, economic factors, and personal experiences shape Valentine's Day celebrations, with younger singles favouring practical gifts and those post-divorce distancing themselves from materialism.

In conclusion, findings from the 2025 Valentine's Day survey in Zimbabwe illustrate a complex landscape of celebrations and expectations. While many Zimbabweans do not celebrate the holiday, those who do are primarily women, younger people (especially in the 18-29 age group), and people in certain regions, like Bulawayo. Gift preferences reflect a shift toward experiential gifts, such as a romantic holiday or a night out, rather than traditional material gifts. Additionally, there is a noticeable divergence in expectations between genders, with women desiring more diverse experiences and men focusing on practical or luxury items. These insights provide valuable perspectives on the evolving nature of Valentine's Day in Zimbabwe, pointing to changing social norms and priorities, especially among younger people and those in urban areas.

Conclusion

The study highlights the complex and evolving nature of Valentine's Day celebrations and expectations in Zimbabwe. While traditionally associated with romantic love, the findings suggest that the holiday is experienced differently across gender, age groups, marital status, and geographical locations. A significant portion of the population does not actively participate in Valentine's Day celebrations, with some individuals opting for alternative ways of marking the day, such as solo celebrations or community engagements.

One of the key insights from this study is the shift in gift expectations. While material gifts such as flowers and jewellery are still considered valuable, there is an increasing preference for money, experiences, and quality time, reflecting broader socio-economic considerations. Women generally had higher expectations for receiving gifts, while men were more likely to indicate that they did not expect anything. Similarly, younger people, especially those in the 18-29 age group, were more enthusiastic about celebrating Valentine's Day compared to older generations. There is generally an increased preference for non-material gifts such as spending quality time and visiting places as people get older and generally among the married; whereas the single appear to value material gifts and money.

The commercialisation of Valentine's Day continues to shape people's expectations, but economic constraints play a role in how individuals choose to celebrate. Some people prefer low-cost or homemade gifts, while others forgo celebrations altogether. Regional differences also influence participation, with cities like Bulawayo showing more engagement in Valentine's Day festivities than the capital, Harare.

Overall, Valentine's Day in Zimbabwe, as in many parts of the world, is marked by a mix of traditional and modern influences. It is not just about romance, but also about cultural identity, economic realities, and personal preferences. Future research could explore the psychological and emotional effects of Valentine's Day expectations, particularly in the context of social media influence and changing cultural norms. Understanding these dynamics can provide deeper insights into how love, relationships, and social connections are perceived in contemporary society.

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