



Better Place Australia

**A snapshot: Victorians’
attitudes towards romance
in a time of “marrying at
first sight”**



The bachelor on date night at love island wants a wife (to marry at first sight)

If you were to turn on your telly to look for examples of how modern Australians spend their leisure time you could think that this was a country of people that were obsessed with either building the perfect home, making the perfect meal, or finding the perfect partner. The latter of which has seen an explosion in new programs, there are 24 different dating and relationship reality television series in Australia.¹

Since no fault divorce was introduced just under one third of marriages now end in divorce

The popularity of such programs about love and romance suggests that some traditional notions of romantic love have yet to call it a day within our cultural milieu.

Relationships in Australia

Australia, like other wealthy developed nations, has seen a shifting social landscape since the 1950s. The ways in which we couple up (and break up) have changed since then and these changes have been recorded in our marriage and divorce rates. Overall, we know that there has been a decline in the marriage rates (from 9.3 marriages per every 1,000 residents in 1970 to about 4.9 per every 1,000 Australian residents in 2016).

And while divorce was all the rage in the 1970s, in 2016 it was the lowest it has ever been since no fault divorce was introduced with just under one third of marriages now ending in divorce.²

We know that most divorces happen between the ages of 25 to 29 or in our late 40s. We also know that after 55 the partner you are with is the partner you will keep. Today, over **80%** of couples choose to live together before getting married compared to only **16%** in 1975. If you did get married in the last two decades it was most likely performed by a civil celebrant.

Attitudes to love and romance?

To gain a better understanding of certain romantic beliefs within the Australian population, we conducted a survey that asked people about their opinions and attitudes towards three common themes of romantic ideation:

¹ Refer to https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Australian_dating_and_relationship_reality_television_series

² Australian Institute of Family Studies, "Marriage and Divorce Rates," Government of Australia, <https://aifs.gov.au/facts-and-figures/marriage-and-divorce-rates>.

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Men are more inclined to consider that love is all you need.



1/ *there can only be one true love for me*

2/ *all you need is love*

3/ *love at first sight.*

In total, we had **845** respondents aged 18 and over from the State of Victoria. The age and gender distribution matched that of the general population of Victoria. Of the total respondents, **66%** were in a relationship at the time of the survey and the remaining **34%** were not. A further **155 (18%)** disclosed they had never been in a relationship.

One true love

For decades Hollywood has been telling us that for every person on earth there is only one true love, a soul mate with whom we'll experience undying love for the remainder of our lives.

To explore just how pervasive this belief is today respondents of our survey were asked to agree or disagree to the following statements:

1/ *There will be only "one true love" for me, and once I experience it I could never experience it again with another person.*

2/ *I believe that if I am truly in love, I will be in love forever, and my romance will never fade with time*

In total, over **35%** of people agreed to the notion that there can only ever be "one true love" and **43%** of people agreed that finding your "true love" means being in love forever. When comparing age groups, we found that men and women in their 30s, and those aged over 65 are more likely to agree with the statements as compared to those in other age brackets.

All you need is love

When we asked respondents to rate their agreement with the idea that *"if another person and I truly love*

each other, the relationship will work despite any differences, problems or obstacles" we found that respondents were much more traditionalist than they had been with the idea of "one true love". Overall **61%** of respondents agreed with this statement. For those who were aged 30–39 the agreement rate went up to **66%**.

When comparing results between men and women, we see that **65%** of men agree compared to **58%** of women. This rate increases to **70%** for men aged 30–39 years and **64%** for women in the same age group. Men are more inclined to consider that love is all you need.

Love at first sight

Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed to the statement *"I believe if I meet my "true love", I will know it is the right person almost immediately"*.

Results showed that overall **45%** agreed with the statement but **27%** were neutral and another **27%** disagreed. Once more, it was respondents aged



30–39 (55%) and those aged over 65 who were more likely to agree with the idea of love at first sight, and men generally scored higher than women.

What does it all mean?

The results did surprise us. Overall, romantic ideation was higher than we expected across all age groups. Furthermore, men held more traditional views on romance. Women in this sample were less likely to agree with all three notions of romantic ideation. This supports previous findings that show men are generally more romantic than women.⁴

Theorists often refer to evolutionary psychology for the reasoning behind this. Females across all animal species have generally had to be more selective, even methodical when choosing a mate.

While males, as the selectee, have needed to evolve highly sophisticated and ingenious methods of impressing females (just watch a Bower bird prancing around). Whatever the reasons, it's hard to ignore that popular culture would have us believe that women are the hopeless romantics. Perhaps men are cloaking their romanticism within a tough, machismo exterior, ie Mills and Boon novel hidden within the sports section.

Our results also show that life stages seem to influence our romantic beliefs. Not surprisingly romantic ideation is highest at a time when most people are thinking of getting married (late 20s and 30s), and lowest during our 40s where divorce rates are highest. Romantic ideation is also high for people aged 65 plus and likely to


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have only ever been married once which would support the notion of only “one true love”.

There could be advantages in believing that there can only be one true love or that love can conquer all. One obvious advantage is that these beliefs may influence a person to stick it out in the relationship, have high levels of commitment, and believe that a relationship is worth fighting for. Such beliefs though could result in unrealistic expectations. It places much reliance on love alone which, as we know, can mean different things for different people. Such beliefs suggest that once in love, job done, tick. It may also keep people in problematic or unhappy relationships longer than necessary, or delay seeking help until in crisis if they truly believe that love is all you need (sorry John Lennon).

⁴ Sprecher, S., & Metts, S. (1989). Development of the “Romantic Beliefs Scale” and examination of the effects of gender and gender-role orientation. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 6(4), 387–411





The understanding and distinction between an immediate erotic desire and a deep caring love is important.

The belief in love at first sight is one that is perhaps most exploited by reality TV, and potentially the most damaging romantic belief.

The potential consequences of marrying too quickly are obvious and may partially explain the high divorce rate in our early 20s. There is ample evidence to show that the longer you wait to get married the less likely you are to get divorced and the higher levels of satisfaction you'll experience. That's not to suggest that strong initial attractions don't exist; it's the interpretation of that attraction, and what we do with it, that could be problematic - calling it love may be a stretch.

The ancient Greeks and Romans were totally convinced of this strong immediate attraction between people. In fact, they named gods after them, Eros and Cupid, gods of erotic, sensual love and desire. The closest English translation would be lust although this interpretation has slightly less romantic connotations. But they did distinguish this kind of desire from the higher form of love essential for long-term relationships, which generally takes time to cultivate.

The understanding and distinction between an immediate erotic desire and a deep caring love is important. Making a life-long commitment while in a state of lust may not be very prudent, and yet, this is exactly what popular culture is telling us to do.

So did the farmer find a wife?

The higher than expected levels of romantic ideation in our survey does partly explain the popularity of dating and relationship reality television shows. And there is the perennial question as to whether media programming reflects attitudes or serves to influence them, both of which are likely to be true. There have been several studies attempting to find a causal link between romantic ideation and reality TV consumption, but the results are tenuous at best. This is probably because our motivation to watch certain shows may just be to have a good laugh at someone else's expense. And the farmer didn't get his wife. In fact out of five seasons of 'Married at First Sight' only one couple is still standing.

The truth is, love and romance have had scholars and philosophers stumped for centuries. It's agreed that love and romance underpin the social human fabric critical to our success as a species. But we don't have a formula or a recipe that works for us all - it's far too complex for that. We also know that attitudes towards love, romance and marriage can have a detrimental impact on the quality of relationships and families. Relationships can be the source of our greatest happiness but also our greatest pain.

So, if you're in lust, well enjoy it for what it is and hold off on the wedding plans. Perhaps wait till you transition through the smelly socks, interfering parents, irritating habits and the extending waistlines before you say - **"I do"**.

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