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Phenomenological investigation of negative attitudes towards marriage in female students

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Abstract

Marriage, as a social institution, has evolved over time and is now often associated with delays in marriage age and the development of negative attitudes. These negative attitudes, which encompass factors such as fear, anxiety, social pressure, and doubts about marriage, are particularly prevalent among female students. Investigating these negative attitudes, particularly among female students, through qualitative and phenomenological methods, offers valuable insights into the factors shaping these perspectives. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the phenomenology of negative attitudes towards marriage among female students at the Islamic Azad University, Yazd branch, in the context of Iranian cultural and social influences. This research employed a qualitative phenomenological approach. Among the unmarried female students of the Islamic Azad University, Yazd branch, in the academic years 2023–2024, those who scored low on the Attitude towards Marriage Scale (J Divorce Remarriage 29:83–91, 1998) were selected for semi-structured interviews. Data collection continued until saturation was reached. Ultimately, 12 students were purposefully selected and interviewed based on specific inclusion, and exclusion criteria. The data were analyzed using an interpretive analysis method. The analysis identified four main themes, ten sub-themes, and fifty-five semantic units. The main themes and their sub-themes were: (1) Interpersonal factors (negative emotions about the future, feelings of inadequacy for forming a marital life, lack of preparedness for marital challenges, idealism, and a sense of not needing marriage); (2) Family factors (family idealism and generational differences); (3) Social factors (imitating others' lives and mistrust in others' support); and (4) Economic factors (financial concerns). The results indicate that negative attitudes towards marriage among female students are influenced by interpersonal, family, social, and economic factors. These factors, whether directly or indirectly, contribute to doubts and delays in marriage decisions, significantly shaping negative views on the formation of marital life. Therefore, educational and counseling programs focused on enhancing life skills, adjusting attitudes, and reducing idealism among female students may facilitate the decision-making process regarding marriage.

Keywords Negative attitude towards marriage, Female students, Single, Phenomenology

Introduction

Marriage is a socially or ceremonially recognized bond between spouses that establishes rights and obligations between them. Attitudes and expectations surrounding marriage provide important insights into relationship perceptions and behaviors [1]. Over time, perceptions of marriage have evolved, particularly among younger generations, leading to delays in marriage and growing reluctance to marry [2]. Marriage during university years may have various effects, including providing emotional

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support and encouragement from a partner, which can be particularly beneficial during challenging periods such as final exams [3], as well as fostering skills like responsibility [2].

Marriage has long been a fundamental institution, but social norms and values have evolved, influencing perceptions of marriage [4]. This shift is evident in the increasing number of young people who either delay marriage or choose not to marry at all. Today's youth marry later than previous generations [5], with studies showing that only 17% of Americans believe marriage is necessary for a fulfilling life [6]. Similar trends are observed in Iran, where the average age of marriage in 2019 was 29.9 for men and 25 for women [7], with significant increases since 1986 [8]. Between 2013 and 2018, the average marriage age rose further [7]. These trends reflect a delay in marriage and a shift in priorities due to modernization and changing lifestyles [9].

A person's attitude towards marriage plays a critical role in their decision to enter into a committed relationship. As a cognitive phenomenon, attitudes towards marriage significantly influence an individual's willingness to marry and the stability of the marriage [10]. Attitudes towards marriage encompass a range of emotions, desires, biases, preconceived notions, fears, and strong opinions about marriage. In other words, a person's attitude towards marriage reflects their thoughts and feelings about the institution [10].

This attitude is shaped by a lifetime of knowledge and experiences, regardless of past events or traumas [11]. It includes the individual's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors towards marital relationships or the institution of marriage itself [12]. Given the changes in marital relationships in recent years, research on young people's attitudes towards marriage and their future marriage plans has become more prevalent. For instance, Yadav et al. [13] found that young people's attitudes towards marriage are evolving. Female participants, in particular, expressed a strong sense of responsibility in married life and viewed themselves as equals to men within the roles defined by society.

A negative attitude towards marriage can contribute to delayed marriage. This attitude reflects people's unfavorable beliefs and feelings toward marriage [14]. Today, many young people view marriage with skepticism, often considering it in a negative light. Such perceptions can lead to a conscious decision to postpone marriage until they feel more secure or satisfied in their personal and professional lives [15].

The interaction between negative attitudes and the timing of marriage is significant. A negative attitude towards marriage fosters a cautious approach to commitment, prompting many to wait until they feel fully prepared for the responsibilities of marriage [16]. Research shows that in 2018, students had a more positive view of divorce and a more negative view of marriage compared to previous years [17].

Social Exchange Theory (SET) is a prominent theory in the study of relationships. It defines human relationships as processes of exchange, where individuals continually assess the costs and rewards in their interactions and make decisions to either continue or terminate the relationship based on this evaluation [18]. In this framework, marriage is seen as an exchange system, where rewards and costs are considered. Furthermore, social exchange not only focuses on the objective aspects of a relationship but also includes factors such as trust, power inequality, and social expectations, which can have a significant impact on individuals' attitudes toward marriage [18]. Leybman and colleagues [19] showed in their study that social exchange consists of five components: monitoring, fairness, individualism, profit-seeking, and non-obligatory investment.

SET theory suggests that human relationships are formed and maintained based on a cost–benefit analysis. Based on this theory, it is assumed in the present study that when an individual perceives the costs of a relationship to outweigh the rewards, they are likely to develop negative attitudes toward the relationship (such as marriage) and decide to avoid it. In this study, negative attitudes toward marriage may be influenced by the individual's evaluation of the costs and rewards of marriage, as well as their expectations and previous experiences with relationships.

In Iranian society, marriage is not only a personal decision but also a deeply cultural and social one. Cultural norms surrounding marriage, including expectations about roles within the family, social pressures, and the influence of traditional values, shape the perspectives of young women significantly [20]. For many young women, marriage is seen as a transition from family dependence to the establishment of a new family unit, often accompanied by societal expectations around gender roles [21]. These norms may impact women's perceptions of the responsibilities they will assume in marriage, which can contribute to either positive or negative attitudes toward the marriage. In this regard, young women in Iran may perceive marriage as a way to fulfill cultural expectations, yet at the same time, they may question or reject it due to changing societal values, increasing educational and career aspirations, and evolving gender roles.

The evolving views on marriage among Iranian youth, particularly young women, have been influenced by these shifts in social values, as well as by exposure to global perspectives on gender equality and individual autonomy [22]. As these societal and cultural norms intersect with

personal experiences, they significantly affect attitudes toward marriage and the decisions young women make about whether or not to marry.

A person's negative attitude towards marriage is shaped by various factors, ranging from societal norms and common attitudes towards marriage to personal family experiences [23]. Family history, personality, premarital communication, and the stressful experiences couples face [24], as well as age [25], gender [26], religious beliefs [27], economic status [28], parental relationships [29], romantic relationships [30], social networks, and role models such as relatives and married friends [12], all influence people's attitudes toward marriage. Moreover, studies have shown that individuals raised in conflicted family environments tend to have more negative attitudes toward marriage [31]. Similarly, those whose parents are divorced are more likely to hold negative attitudes toward marriage than those whose parents are not divorced [29].

The impact of gender on attitudes towards marriage remains a subject of conflicting research. Some studies suggest that women have more positive attitudes towards marriage than men [32, 33], while others indicate the opposite [26]. However, given that women are often seen as the foundation of the family and bear the primary responsibility for raising children in Iranian culture, it is particularly important to investigate negative attitudes towards marriage in this group.

Considering the cultural influence on attitudes towards marriage, it is crucial to explore the experiences of individuals who hold negative attitudes towards marriage. Employing a phenomenological approach allows for an in-depth investigation of these experiences, helping to uncover the underlying factors and processes shaping negative attitudes [34]. This method was chosen to understand the participants' perspectives within the socio-cultural context, providing valuable insights into the factors influencing their attitudes and decision-making.

Comprehensively identifying the factors that contribute to negative attitudes towards marriage requires creating an environment for in-depth conversations with the participants. The researcher initiated this process by using a screening tool to identify individuals potentially holding negative attitudes towards marriage, followed by qualitative interviews to deeply explore their lived experiences. Establishing trust during these discussions was crucial for analyzing the perspectives of single female students and uncovering the influencing factors.

The Islamic Azad University, Yazd branch, was specifically selected as the study location because it provides access to a diverse group of students who represent a critical demographic in the context of marriage. Yazd is a city deeply rooted in traditional cultural norms, and its university students, particularly women, are navigating the intersection of these traditions and modern educational experiences. Female students in this setting are uniquely positioned to offer insights into how cultural expectations, academic influences, and personal aspirations shape their attitudes toward marriage. While quantitative methods are useful for initial participant selection, achieving a deep understanding of the complex and nuanced nature of these attitudes necessitates qualitative approaches. Such discussions enable the identification of the key factors shaping their negative attitudes towards marriage within the specific cultural and academic context of Yazd.

This study builds upon previous research by addressing gaps in the understanding of negative attitudes toward marriage among young women in Iranian society. While earlier studies have primarily focused on general trends in attitudes toward marriage or examined demographic factors such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status [25, 26, 28], few have delved into the lived experiences of individuals who hold negative attitudes toward marriage. Moreover, much of the existing research relies on quantitative methodologies, which, while valuable for identifying patterns, often fail to capture the depth and complexity of the factors influencing attitudes [35].

Unlike these studies, the present research adopts a phenomenological approach, enabling an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences and perceptions of single female students with negative attitudes toward marriage. This focus on the intersection of cultural, familial, and individual factors within the unique sociocultural context of Iran adds a novel dimension to the literature. By identifying the underlying factors contributing to these attitudes, this study provides an original contribution to the field and addresses a critical gap in previous research. Therefore, the current study seeks to answer the question: What is the phenomenology of negative attitudes towards marriage among female students?

Methods

Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically an interpretive phenomenological approach, aimed at exploring the subject of interest. The research population consisted of all female students at Azad University, Yazd branch, during the academic years 1402–1403. Participants who met the inclusion and exclusion criteria were purposefully selected. To investigate the experiences of these individuals, the phenomenological method was utilized. Phenomenology, both a philosophical approach and a research method, was developed to understand phenomena through human experiences. The inclusion criteria for the study were: being a female student at the Islamic Azad University, Yazd branch; being

single (i.e., not in a formal or permanent marriage); being between the ages of 18 and 25 (the ideal age for marriage according to Yazd women; [36]; and scoring low (between 23 and 31) on the Attitude Towards Marriage scale [37]. While being single was one of the inclusion criteria, participants were also asked at the beginning of the interview whether they were currently in a romantic relationship. Although this aspect was not part of the official inclusion criterion, it was explored during the interviews. Of the participants, two were in a relationship at the time of the interview but did not intend to marry. The remaining participants were not involved in any romantic relationships at the time of the interview. The exclusion criteria included: being divorced, suffering from psychiatric disorders, using drugs, or participating in psychotherapy sessions. This information was obtained through direct questions asked of the participants during the screening stage, which was placed at the top of the questionnaire, as well as prior to the main interview questions regarding attitudes towards marriage.

Procedure

The goal of this method is to describe certain phenomena as they are lived and experienced. The process focuses on capturing participants' descriptions to uncover new insights [38]. In this approach, the primary emphasis is on the perspectives of the research participants, who serve as the main source of data. A fundamental requirement for employing the phenomenological method is the need to clarify the phenomenon in question.

A negative attitude towards marriage is a multidimensional concept, with varying perspectives and factors influencing it. To explore this, the researchers selected participants who scored lower on the "Attitude towards Marriage Scale" as an initial screening criterion, suggesting that they may have developed negative attitudes towards marriage. However, this scale was used merely as an inclusion criterion, and further in-depth exploration of their attitudes was necessary to fully understand their perspectives.

Given this complexity, the researchers selected the phenomenological method for this study. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which allowed participants to express their views as they have experienced them, using their own language and terms. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in private rooms at the School of Life Psychological and Counseling Clinic. The setting ensured confidentiality and created a comfortable environment for participants to share their experiences openly. Interviews were conducted in Persian, the participants' native language, eliminating the need for a translator.

To minimize potential biases and ensure that the data collected accurately reflected the participants' experiences, the researcher employed bracketing to minimize the influence of personal biases on the research process. Bracketing involved the researcher consciously setting aside any preconceived notions, beliefs, or assumptions about marriage to focus entirely on the participants' lived experiences [39]. Before conducting the interviews, the researcher engaged in reflective journaling to identify and document personal biases and potential sources of influence. Additionally, the researcher participated in discussions with colleagues to critically examine and mitigate any subjective interpretations during data collection and analysis. Throughout the study, a reflexive approach was adopted, ensuring that the participants' voices remained central to the findings. The interviews were conducted by the first researcher, a psychologist with nearly eight years of specialized experience in marital issues, who is professionally trained in this area.

Each interview lasted between 30 to 45 min and was recorded with the participants' informed consent. The interviews began with a general question about negative attitudes towards marriage and the factors influencing them. Throughout the research, exploratory questions, such as "Can you explain more about this?" were used to elicit detailed and richer information. Examples of specific questions include: "Can you describe your general attitude towards marriage?", "What factors have contributed to your negative attitude towards marriage?", "Do you have any experiences or observations from your family or those around you that have influenced your attitude towards marriage? Please explain.", "Has your financial or work situation affected your attitude towards marriage? How?", "Do you trust the help and advice of others in deciding to get married?", "Is there a particular incident in the past that has changed your attitude towards marriage? Please explain further.", "Can you elaborate on the feelings that come to mind when you talk about marriage?", "What kind of life or future do you envision for yourself without marriage?", and "As a student, do you think your attitude towards marriage will change in the future?".

The interviews were designed to elicit detailed and nuanced descriptions of participants' attitudes and experiences. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached, defined as the point at which no new themes or insights emerged from the interviews. In total, 12 participants were interviewed.

Material

Marriage attitude questionnaire

This questionnaire was developed by Bratton and Rosen [37] to measure beliefs and attitudes about marriage. It

consists of 23 questions on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The overall score ranges from a minimum of 23 to a maximum of 92, with lower scores indicating more negative attitudes toward marriage. The Marriage Attitude Questionnaire has been previously published and validated [37, 40]. Participants are asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. Previous research has demonstrated that the Marriage Attitude Questionnaire has a suitable and sufficient reliability coefficient [40]. In the present study, the reliability was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.71.

Data analyses

The data were analyzed using an interpretive analysis method, which is particularly suited for exploring complex and ambiguous issues within the phenomenological approach. Although various analytical methods exist within phenomenology, the interpretive method is often preferred for its ability to uncover deeper meanings in exploratory studies. The goal of this method is to extract concepts and then identify overarching themes. Themes are general characteristics that capture the central meaning of concepts, highlighting both similarities and differences. Each theme should represent a distinct component of the phenomenon under study, with the emphasis on a minimal but sufficient number of categories [41].

The analysis process began by thoroughly reviewing the interview transcripts multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. An interpretive summary was then written for each transcript, aiming to uncover and articulate the hidden meanings within the text. The researchers collaborated to extract themes, refining and evolving these themes as more interviews were conducted. As new data emerged, previously identified themes became clearer, and occasionally new themes were discovered. To resolve any contradictions in interpretation and to clarify categories, the researchers revisited the texts, performing increasingly general analyses by integrating the interpretive summaries. This iterative process ensured that the connections between interpretations and themes were as robust as possible, leading to the final conclusions.

The analysis process began by thoroughly reviewing the interview transcripts multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. An interpretive summary was written for each transcript, aiming to uncover and articulate the hidden meanings within the text. Both of the researchers conducted the analysis collaboratively, with each researcher independently coding the data at first. The researcher who conducted the interviews was the principal investigator, with no pre-existing relationship with the participants. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent. Afterward, the researchers compared their codes, and any discrepancies or disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. This collaborative and comparative process ensured reliability and consistency in the coding.

As new data emerged from subsequent interviews, previously identified themes were refined and clarified. Occasionally, new themes were discovered, expanding the understanding of the phenomenon. To resolve any contradictions in interpretation and to clarify categories, the researchers revisited the texts and performed increasingly general analyses, integrating interpretive summaries into a cohesive framework. This iterative process allowed the connections between interpretations and themes to be as robust as possible, leading to the final conclusions.

During the analysis, data were categorized based on detailed examinations, repeated coding, classifications, and comparisons. Common and related themes were grouped into sub-themes and then consolidated into the main themes, while unrelated themes were discarded. The relationship between categories was examined using a combination of analogical and inductive thinking, involving continuous movement between concepts. The main and secondary themes were named based on relevant theoretical principles.

Validation and coding reliability

To validate the findings and assess the reliability of the coding process, Guba's method was employed, which is based on four key criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability [42].

- Credibility: After the model was developed, participants were asked to review and confirm the extracted themes to ensure they accurately reflected their views.
- Transferability: To verify that the findings were applicable to other participants, the researchers conducted interviews with three additional participants, repeating the analysis steps to ensure no new themes emerged.
- Dependability: The consistency of the participants' responses was tested by asking similar questions in different formats to determine whether their answers remained consistent and non-contradictory.
- Conformability: The research process was designed to be free from bias, with coding also conducted by an independent expert to confirm that no new findings emerged.

To further validate the content and stability of the concepts, follow-up interviews were conducted with three

of the original participants, and the analysis steps were repeated to ensure consistency and accuracy.

Findings

The study participants included 12 unmarried female students from Azad University, Yazd Branch, and aged 18 to 25 years. These individuals were selected based on the study's inclusion and exclusion criteria. The participants represented a diverse range of academic fields, educational levels, family economic statuses, places of residence, prior emotional experiences, and employment statuses, as detailed in Table 1. This diversity provided a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives, enriching the phenomenological analysis.

The study explored the participants' experiences and reasons for holding negative attitudes toward marriage through interpretive qualitative phenomenological analysis. This analysis resulted in the identification of 4 main themes, 10 sub-themes, and 55 semantic units derived from the coding and extraction of these themes (Table 2).

The findings are elaborated below, with each sub-theme supported by participant examples to enhance clarity and depth.

Intrapersonal factors

Interpersonal factors play a crucial role in shaping individual attitudes and decisions about marriage. These factors include beliefs, emotions, and personality traits that directly influence one's perspective on marriage and marital relationships. One of the most significant interpersonal factors is negative emotions about the future. Many individuals experience fears about their ability to identify negative traits in their partner or concerns about a potential failed marriage, infidelity, or divorce. As one participant expressed:

> *"When I think about marriage, I'm always afraid that I won't be able to recognize the negative traits in my partner. Before marriage, I focus on many positive traits, but there's always a fear in my heart that I might miss something or face significant problems in the future." (Participant 5).*

Another key factor is a sense of inadequacy to build a marital life. Individuals often feel unprepared to take on the responsibilities of marriage, which creates hesitation and doubt. For example, one participant shared:

> *"I'm scared of whether I'll properly understand my partner's traits. When I think about marriage, I'm very worried that I might not find someone who truly suits me. I even fear that after marriage, I'll realize I lack enough understanding of myself or the needs of married life." (Participant 8).*

Additionally, unpreparedness to face marital challenges is a common concern. This includes discomfort with the routine and limitations of married life, as illustrated by another participant:

> *"I dislike the daily routines and limitations that marriage brings. I feel like I can't accept them and deal with the problems of marital relationships." (Participant 3).*

Idealism in choosing a partner also significantly impacts attitudes toward marriage. Some individuals set

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the participants

ID	Age (years)	Field of Study	Educational Level	Family Economic Status	Place of Residence (Urban/Rural)	Previous Emotional Experience (Yes/No)	Job Status
1	18	Psychology	Bachelor's	Middle-class	Urban	Yes	Student
2	19	Computer Engineering	Bachelor's	Middle to High	Urban	Yes	Student
3	21	Management	Bachelor's	Medium to High	Urban	Yes	Student
4	20	Persian Literature	Bachelor's	Medium	Rural	No	Student
5	23	Law	Bachelor's	Average	Urban	Yes	Student/Employee
6	25	Electrical Engineering	Master's	High	Urban	Yes	Student
7	22	Nursing	Bachelor's	Medium	Rural	No	Student
8	24	Psychology	Master's	Average	Urban	Yes	Student/Consultant
9	18	Accounting	Bachelor's	Medium to Low	Rural	No	Student
10	21	Pure Mathematics	Bachelor's	High	Urban	Yes	Student
11	19	English Language and Literature	Bachelor's	Medium	Urban	Yes	Student
12	22	Mechanical Engineering	Bachelor's	Medium to High	Urban	Yes	Student/Intern

Table 2 Core themes and sub-themes related

Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Semantic Units	Individual Experiences
Intrapersonal Factors	Negative Emotions about the Future	Fear of not recognizing negative traits in a partner, worry about an unsuccessful marriage, concern about lack of personal growth after marriage, fear of loneliness after marriage, worry about experiencing betrayal and divorce, hopelessness regarding happiness, doubt in multiple relationships, fear of dishonesty, skepticism about pre-marriage promises	"I've always been afraid that after marriage, I might discover hidden negative traits in my spouse. This worry that I might not be able to recognize these traits has always been with me."
	Inadequacy for Building a Marital Life	Lack of necessary homemaking skills, inability to correctly assess a partner's traits, inability to create satisfaction in marital life, lack of sufficient experience for married life, feeling the need to undergo various marriage education courses, inadequate self-awareness, insufficient understanding of marital life needs, being too young for marriage, inability to make appropriate choices, discrepancy between perceptions of a person before and after marriage, lack of maturity, lack of skills in balancing work and home responsibilities	"I feel like I don't have the necessary ability to create a successful life. I'm always worried that I won't be able to manage the household well or keep my spouse happy."
	Unpreparedness to Face Marital Challenges	Inability to tolerate instability in life, unwillingness to accept responsibility, inability to endure arguments and conflicts in married life, lack of acceptance of daily life routines, unwillingness to accept the limitations of married life, inability to tolerate relationship problems in marriage	"The thought of facing marital problems terrifies me. I can't imagine days where there are arguments and conflicts."
	Idealism	Expectation of perfection, lack of alignment with all criteria, having many and strict criteria, absence of a man with desired traits (e.g., authority, trustworthiness, maturity), need for high accuracy in making the right choice, desire to be fully understood, complete alignment of cultural and financial backgrounds	"I've never been able to find a man who meets all my criteria. It seems there's always something missing."
	Feeling of No Need for Marriage	Financial stability, experience of peace and psychological stability, fulfillment of sexual needs, gradual and strict change in marriage criteria, feeling of independence from marriage, sufficiency in feeling loved by oneself and others	"I have a job and an independent life, and I feel that I don't need to get married to feel happy."
Family Factors	Family Idealism	Family's strict criteria, complete alignment of cultural and financial backgrounds, family origin	"My family has always had very strict criteria for marriage. I always think that if I find a man, they won't accept him."
	Generation Gap	Mismatch between individual and family criteria, mismatch between individual and extended family criteria, differing views on marriage stages between the individual and family, restrictions on social interactions needed for proper understanding	"My parents can't understand my views on marriage. It seems like we live in two different worlds."
Social Factors	Imitating Others' Lives	Competition with friends over choices, observing dissatisfaction in the marital lives of others, increasing divorce rates in society, witnessing unsuccessful marriages	"I've always seen unsuccessful marriages. Whenever I think about marriage, I remember all those divorces and separations."
	Lack of Trust in Others' Help	Unwillingness to accept advice from others, absence of suitable people for advice, lack of well-wishers in introductions	"I've never been able to trust the advice of others. It seems like no one really cares about me."
Economic Factors	Financial	Lack of financial independence, financial problems after marriage	"Marriage without financial independence doesn't make sense to me. I'm always worried that financial issues might cause problems in my marriage."

high expectations for their future spouse, making it difficult to find someone who meets all their criteria. One participant explained:

> *"I always think my spouse should be perfect and flawless. I think about so many traits my partner should have, like confidence, maturity, and the ability to support me. Sometimes I feel like no one can have all these traits." (Participant 2).*

Finally, the perception of not needing marriage and valuing individual independence has become increasingly prevalent. For instance, one participant stated:

> *"I feel like I don't need to get married right now. My financial situation is good, and I've achieved psychological peace. I feel like I can have a good life without needing to get married." (Participant 7).*

Family factors

Family factors have a profound impact on an individual's attitude toward marriage and their decision-making in this regard. Families, as the first social and cultural sources for the individual, can significantly influence their identity and viewpoints, especially in matters like marriage. For example, the expectations and criteria that families have when choosing a spouse can lead to idealism in the individual. This idealism may push the person to search for a life partner with ideal traits that may be hard to find in reality. In such situations, the individual may encounter rigid family standards and feel unable to meet them, or they may feel that no one can fully meet their expectations. This type of attitude can lead to confusion or delays in marriage-related decisions, ultimately dissuading the person from entering into marriage or making them hesitant in choosing a life partner.

For instance, one participant shared: *"My family insists that my spouse should perfectly match us in terms of culture and financial status. It's very important to them that the other family also has a good background and standing."* (Participant 12). This reflects how family ideals can shape an individual's views and expectations about marriage.

In addition to idealism, generation gap between the individual and their family can also influence the individual's attitude toward marriage. Families, particularly parents, often hold specific views on marriage based on their own experiences and values, which may not align with those of the younger generation. These differences can arise in various areas, such as expectations for marital roles, the level of personal independence, or the importance of family relationships. When the individual is exposed to these differences, they may feel a conflict between their family's values and their personal desires. This conflict can be especially prominent when the individual seeks more independence in their decision-making. On the other hand, the individual may feel pressured to conform to family expectations, potentially compromising their own beliefs. As a result, generational differences can significantly affect the individual's attitude toward marriage and how they choose a life partner.

One participant noted: *"My family and I have different views on choosing a spouse and the stages of marriage. While they focus more on traditional criteria and family background, I pay more attention to individual characteristics and compatibility with my partner. These differences sometimes cause difficulties in decision-making."* (Participant 7). This highlights how generational differences can lead to conflicting views on marriage and partner selection.

Social factors

Social factors play a significant role in shaping an individual's attitude toward marriage. In different societies, individuals are influenced by the experiences and opinions of others, which can have a profound impact on their decisions. One such factor is Imitating Others' Lives. Many individuals, especially young people, form their attitudes about marriage based on the experiences and relationships they observe around them. If they witness successful marriages, it may inspire a positive view and motivation toward marriage. However, conversely, observing unsuccessful marriages or problems in others' relationships can lead to doubt and fear about the decision to marry. In societies with high divorce rates or where individuals witness many issues in others' family relationships, concerns about marriage and marital relationships can arise, causing the individual to reconsider entering into such a relationship.

For example, participant number 11 shared: *"The marital lives of those around me have made me very worried. Many of my friends and family members have experienced separations or serious problems in their marriages, and this has made me doubt my decision to marry. I think the high divorce rate in society has had a very negative impact on my mind."* This reflects how observing the marriages of others can influence an individual's attitude toward marriage.

Additionally, "lack of trust in others' help" is another social factor that can negatively affect an individual's attitude toward marriage. In many cases, especially when individuals need advice and support regarding choosing a partner or making decisions about marriage, they may struggle to find trust in external sources. This issue can be particularly noticeable when an individual feels that their family or friends are not offering enough support, or when their suggestions

do not align with the individual's personal needs. Lack of trust in others' help can leave the individual feeling isolated in their decisions, and this sense of isolation and uncertainty, especially in critical matters like marriage, can lead to doubts and mistrust in the process of choosing a life partner and starting a family.

Participant number 5 noted: *"I haven't found anyone I can trust and seek advice from. My family and friends never really offer any help, and no one genuinely wants to assist me."* This illustrates how a lack of trust in others can affect an individual's confidence and decision-making regarding marriage.

Economic factors

Economic factors are among the most important considerations in individuals' decisions regarding marriage, and they can have profound effects on attitudes and behaviors in this area. One of the main aspects of these factors is financial issues. Lack of financial independence or facing economic difficulties can be one of the primary reasons for delaying marriage or even being reluctant to marry. Individuals may feel that they need financial stability and adequate resources to take on the economic responsibilities of marriage. Financial pressures, especially in situations where the cost of living is high, can lead an individual to postpone or even decide against marriage. Particularly in societies where financial security is considered one of the main prerequisites for marriage, these concerns can create significant barriers to making marriage decisions.

For example, one participant shared: *"I still don't have financial independence, and this is one of the reasons I'm not getting married. I'm afraid that after marriage, I'll face financial problems and won't be able to manage the shared life properly." (Participant 10).* This illustrates how financial concerns can impact the decision to marry.

Economic issues can also affect an individual's view of marital relationships and roles. In some societies, financial importance is directly tied to power and responsibility within marriage, and individuals who are not in a good financial position may feel that they cannot play an effective role in a shared life. In these circumstances, financial concerns and anxieties can lead to doubts about starting a life together. Furthermore, economic problems after marriage can turn into significant challenges that harm the marital relationship. In general, financial issues can act as a deterrent in marriage decisions and ultimately have long-term effects on an individual's life and relationships.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the phenomenology of negative attitudes towards marriage among female students at the Islamic Azad University, Yazd Branch. The findings indicate that these negative attitudes are shaped by various intrapersonal, familial, social, and economic factors. Each of these factors uniquely influences the students' attitudes and decisions regarding marriage through different mechanisms. In the following, we will discuss relevant studies that align with our findings, alongside the detailed explanations of the themes identified in this study:

- Intrapersonal Factors

Previous studies have highlighted various factors influencing women's attitudes toward marriage. In terms of intrapersonal factors, Niazi et al. [43] emphasized the role of individualism, fear of marital failure, and the focus on physical appearance as key barriers to marriage. Additionally, Khosravi et al. [44] argued that negative emotions such as depression, isolation, and social pressure significantly affect women's perspectives on marriage. Talebpour and Biranvand [45] discussed how psychological challenges, such as the lack of preparedness for marital responsibilities, which arise from previous negative experiences, also contribute to reluctance toward marriage. In a similar vein, a study conducted in Qom examined factors influencing young people's desire to remain single, highlighting variables such as individualism, social trust, and attitudes toward marriage. The study found a positive relationship between individualism, social trust, and traditional family values in choosing a spouse with the inclination to remain unmarried, emphasizing the role of cultural and social factors in shaping marriage-related attitudes [46]. Below, the themes identified in the study are further explained:

a) Negative Emotions about the Future

The fear of the unknown and uncertainties about marriage appear to be central reasons behind negative attitudes. These feelings are likely rooted in the broader societal fears about infidelity, divorce, and emotional dissatisfaction. The socio-cultural context of Yazd, where traditional values coexist with modern expectations, plays a significant role in shaping these anxieties. Women often feel pressure to reconcile personal aspirations with traditional roles, which creates an underlying tension. The influence of media, which alternates between portraying idealized and negative aspects of marriage, might amplify these fears, presenting a skewed view of marital life. The uncertainty about the future might stem not

only from personal experiences but also from the societal expectations that dictate the roles individuals must play in marriage.

b) Feelings of Inadequacy for Establishing a Marital Life

Feelings of inadequacy stem from a lack of preparation for managing marital life, which is often due to the absence of comprehensive education on relationships. This is particularly prominent in Yazd, where women are expected to fulfill traditional family roles while also pursuing academic and professional success [36]. These dual expectations can overwhelm women, creating a sense of not being fully equipped for marriage. The socio-cultural context does not provide adequate training in emotional and interpersonal skills that are essential for navigating a successful marriage. This gap leaves women feeling underprepared and uncertain about their ability to meet the demands of marital life.

c) Unpreparedness for Facing Marital Problems

The challenges and complexities of marital life cause many women to feel unprepared for the difficulties that might arise. These feelings of unpreparedness could be attributed to the lack of open dialogue about marital issues within the community [47]. In Yazd, traditional gender roles and the expectation that women be nurturing may prevent discussions about the less glamorous aspects of marriage, such as conflict and emotional strain. Women, in this context, might feel unprepared for the realities of these struggles, given the cultural discouragement of such conversations. The lack of awareness about the daily challenges in marriage might lead to heightened fears and apprehensions about entering such relationships.

d) Idealism

Idealism about marriage is another prominent factor contributing to negative attitudes. Many women hold high expectations for their future partners, hoping to find someone who meets an array of often unattainable qualities. This idealism can create an unrealistic view of relationships and cause delays in pursuing marriage. The socio-cultural environment, which encourages high standards for partners, further intensifies these expectations. However, when these expectations do not align with reality, women may feel disillusioned. The cultural emphasis on finding an ideal partner may overshadow the understanding that successful relationships are not always based on perfection, but rather on compatibility and mutual respect.

e) Feeling of Not Needing Marriage

The perception of not needing marriage is increasingly common among young women, particularly those who have achieved financial independence and emotional stability. This sense of self-sufficiency allows them to feel that they can live fulfilling lives without the need for a marital relationship. In Yazd, where societal values are undergoing transformation, this shift in mindset reflects broader changes in how marriage is viewed. The pressure to conform to traditional gender roles may be lessening, especially as women experience the satisfaction and independence that comes with living on their own terms. This sense of independence could be seen as a challenge to the traditional view of marriage as an essential life milestone.

- Family Factors

When it comes to familial factors, studies such as Marvat et al. [48] found that family pressure to select the right partner and economic expectations are major reasons for young people's hesitance to marry. Shahnavaz and Azam Azadeh [49] in their meta-analytic studied reinforce the idea that familial expectations and generational differences significantly impact marriage decisions. Khosravi et al. [44] also noted the influence of these generational differences on the development of marriage attitudes, particularly when young women face conflict between their views and those of their families. In a similar vein, a study conducted in Kermanshah highlighted that factors like parental involvement, parenting approaches, and strictness from parents are closely associated with the postponement of marriage [50]. The themes identified in the study are elaborated upon in the following sections:

a) Family Idealism

In Iran, families, as an important and influential institution, play a significant role in their children's major life decisions, including marriage [51]. Young women often face direct pressure from parents, who emphasize high standards for a potential spouse. This includes financial stability, social status, and specific personality traits. Such pressures can create anxiety and doubts, reinforcing negative attitudes toward marriage. The mismatch between these familial expectations and personal desires often makes young women feel that finding a suitable partner is difficult, reducing their inclination toward marriage. These findings reflect the deep cultural role families play in shaping marital views, highlighting the tension between familial expectations and individual autonomy.

b) Generational differences between Daughters and their Families

Generational differences between young women and their families, especially in cultural, social, and even technological areas [52], can lead to significant disagreements on marriage-related issues. Parents may hold views and values that seem unacceptable or outdated to today's young women. These generational differences may manifest in issues such as choosing a spouse, gender roles within the family, and expectations from marital life, leading to conflicts in the decision-making process of young women.

- Social Factors

In terms of social factors, Talebpour and Biranvand [45] argue that social conditions, such as parental addiction or family-related issues, discourage marriage. Khosravi et al. [44] mention how societal pressure toward singleness and the distrust in familial advice negatively impact marriage decisions. Shahnavaz and Azam Azadeh [49] explore how the process of socialization and the evolving cultural norms around marriage and singleness shape societal attitudes toward marriage. Additionally, a study conducted in Tabriz on youth aged 20 to 40 revealed that factors such as family expectations, the expectations of youth themselves, social distrust, enjoyment of singlehood, education, and gender are all significantly related to delayed marriage. The study found that five independent variables—education, expectations, social distrust, family pressure, and enjoyment of single life—accounted for 51.1% of the variance in the age at marriage [53]. Similarly, a study conducted in Kermanshah also pointed out that factors such as individuals' attitudes toward gender equality, gender inequality, along with enjoying single life, were significantly related to the delay in marriage [50]. The themes recognized in the study are discussed in more detail below:

a) Modeling Others' Lives

In the Yazd context, young women's attitudes toward marriage are influenced by witnessing the marital difficulties of those around them. With divorce rates rising in society, these personal examples shape young women's perceptions, creating fear and hesitation. Observing dissatisfaction in the marriages of family members or friends not only leads to reluctance about marriage but also affects their expectations of marital life. Furthermore, imitative behaviors and competition with others are prevalent, particularly among women, due to the cultural emphasis on public image and family reputation [54]. The desire to avoid the perceived failures of others leads many young women to fear repeating those same mistakes. These cultural pressures, along with social stigmas associated with marital failure, intensify their negative perceptions of marriage. This context is unique to societies where family reputation and public perception hold significant weight, thus impacting personal decisions such as marriage.

b) Lack of Trust in Others' Advice

A common theme observed in this study is young women's skepticism toward marriage advice from family, friends, or other trusted figures. In the Iranian cultural setting, family plays a central role in marriage decisions, yet many young women find that their families' perspectives are rooted in outdated or idealized views of marriage [36]. This mismatch in understanding contributes to a lack of trust in the advice they receive. Additionally, personal experiences, such as witnessing family members or friends being pressured into marriage decisions or observing failed marriages, reinforce their hesitancy. The socio-cultural pressure to marry, coupled with limited access to reliable counseling, results in these women making decisions about marriage based on their own limited understanding and without trusted guidance. This reflects a gap in both the availability of practical advice and the cultural attitudes toward the evolving needs of young women today.

- Economic Factors

Regarding economic factors, Niazi et al. [43] stressed that financial insecurity and economic pressures are significant reasons why young people might avoid marriage. Marvat et al. [48] discussed how the high costs associated with marriage, particularly in the current economic climate, serve as a barrier. Talebpour and Biranvand [45] also identified financial difficulties as a major obstacle for young individuals in making the decision to marry. The following section provides a more detailed explanation of the themes identified in the study:

a) Lack of Financial Independence

Among young female students at Yazd Islamic Azad University, financial independence is a significant concern influencing attitudes towards marriage. These women often face uncertainty regarding their economic futures due to their limited financial autonomy while still pursuing higher education. In this context, financial dependence on a future spouse becomes a major apprehension. Many students fear being unable to support

themselves after marriage, particularly given the perceived financial instability in Iran. The societal pressures to manage significant financial.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small, and participants were selected from a single university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations. Furthermore, although the qualitative approach offers rich insights into individual experiences, it may be subject to biases in the data collection process, such as researcher bias or participant self-reporting biases. Additionally, the process of sample selection may have introduced a certain level of homogeneity, which could affect the diversity of perspectives on marriage. The study also relied on self-reported data, which may lead to social desirability bias, influencing the accuracy of participants' responses. Finally, while the qualitative analysis offers an in-depth exploration of the topic, it might not fully capture all the relevant dimensions or broader factors influencing attitudes toward marriage. Additionally, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to draw conclusions about changes over time or causal relationships.

Practical implication

While the findings provide insights into the factors influencing negative attitudes towards marriage, future research should aim to explore these dynamics in a broader context. Educational interventions and counseling services may help address these attitudes, but further empirical support is needed to assess their effectiveness.

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Data availability
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Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate
The research was conducted in accordance with Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University, Yazd branch, under the research code [IR.IAU.YAZD.REC.1403.040]. Prior to each interview, participants were given detailed explanations about the study's objectives, the purpose of recording the interview, and assurances regarding the confidentiality of their information. Written consent was obtained from all participants.

Consent for publication
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Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

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