IJBMC
International Journal of Body, Mind and Culture

Volume 13, Issue 11, Article e2026-1098
DOI: 10.61838/ijbmc.v13i11.1098

Article type:
Qualitative Research

Exploring Fear of Marriage among Single Women and Men in Iran: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis

Samaneh. Shadmand[1], Seyed Ali. Hashemianfar[2*], Saeed. Aghasi[3]

1 Department of Sociology, Deh.C., Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran.
2 Department of Social Science, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran.
3 Department of Management, Deh.C., Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran.

Corresponding author email address:
j.hashemian@ltr.ui.ac.ir



Article history:

Received 23 Jan 2026
Revised 28 Feb 2026
Accepted 12 March 2026
Published online 01 Nov 2026

How to cite this article:
Shadmand, S., Hashemianfar, S. A., & Aghasi, S. (2026). Identifying Patterns of Fear of Marriage among Young Women and Men: A Thematic Analysis. International Journal of Body, Mind and Culture, 13(11), Article e2026-1098.
https://doi.org/10.61838/ijbmc.v13i11.1098

© 2026 the authors. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore the psychological, familial, economic, and sociocultural patterns underlying fear of marriage among single women and men in Shahreza, Iran.

Methods and Materials: An exploratory qualitative study within an interpretive–constructivist paradigm was conducted. Participants experiencing marriage-related fear, hesitation, or avoidance were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling until thematic saturation. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. Trustworthiness was supported through participant feedback, reflexive documentation, and an audit trail.

Findings: Five interconnected themes were identified: family and upbringing factors, economic insecurity, psychological and individual concerns, sociocultural pressures, and inadequate communication skills and marriage readiness. Participants described parental conflict, divorce, negative relationship experiences, unemployment, housing insecurity, financial expectations, fear of commitment, and perceived incompatibility as important sources of marriage-related anxiety. Three overarching experiential contexts emerged: adverse childhood and adolescent experiences, contemporary sociocultural insecurity, and difficulty achieving trust and reassurance during premarital relationships. These experiences contributed to uncertainty, avoidance, and prolonged marriage decisions.

Conclusion: Fear of marriage emerged as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by interconnected personal experiences and sociocultural conditions rather than solely individual psychological vulnerability. Context-sensitive premarital counseling, relationship education, and structural support may address the concerns identified.

Keywords: Fear of Marriage, Single Adults, Thematic Analysis, Sociocultural Factors, Marriage Readiness.

Introduction

Marriage is one of the most fundamental social institutions, carrying functions such as responding to emotional and sexual needs, ensuring generational continuity, transmitting cultural capital, and providing economic and psychological support. However, patterns of marriage and family formation have undergone substantial changes in recent decades in many societies, including increases in the age at first marriage, declines in marriage rates and a rise in the ratio of divorces to marriages (bar Aghajanian et al., 2018; Matsuda et al., 2024). In Iran, demographic and social trends likewise indicate that, alongside a decline in marriage rates and shifts in age structure, divorce rates have significantly increased in many provinces, to the extent that in some areas the growth in divorce has outpaced the growth in marriage and has become a major concern for social policymakers (Doosthoseini et al., 2024; Najary Forushani et al., 2025; Tavakolian et al., 2023).

Recent studies of marriage trends in Iran show that marriage and family still retain important symbolic and normative value for young people, yet economic, cultural and structural conditions have made the realization of this value increasingly difficult (bar Aghajanian et al., 2018; Hosseini et al., 2025). Demographic and sociological research has documented, on the one hand, a rise in the average age at marriage for both women and men and, on the other, a widening gap between the "ideal age for marriage" and the "actual age at marriage" (Bagi, 2023; Khalili et al., 2025). This temporal gap may itself create a fertile ground for feelings of uncertainty about marriage, experiences of failure in intimate relationships, and the erosion of traditional images of married life (Hosseini et al., 2025).

Findings from national and international studies on the "causes of delayed marriage" indicate that a combination of economic factors (unemployment, job insecurity, housing and wedding costs), cultural factors (changing expectations around gender and marital roles), educational factors (expansion of higher education and prolonged schooling), and psychological factors (fear of commitment, fear of relationship failure, negative attitudes toward marriage) act together in shaping young people's decisions (Bagi, 2023; Hosseini et al., 2025; Matsuda et al., 2024). In a qualitative study of young people and marriage experts in Yazd, fear of divorce, experiences of harmful relationships in the family of origin, and concerns about postmarital responsibilities were reported as key obstacles to marriage (Hosseini et al., 2025). Future-oriented studies in Iran have further shown that if such trends remain unmanaged, they may lead to "unfavourable scenarios" in the domain of youth marriage in the coming decades (Khalili et al., 2025).

In recent years, the concept of "fear of marriage" or "gamophobia" has emerged in psychological and social science literature as a specific form of strong and persistent fear of entering committed relationships and marriage. Gamophobia is typically classified among social fears and is associated with symptoms such as intense anxiety when talking about marriage, avoidance of marriage-related situations, worry about failing in the spousal role, and a sense of inability to manage long-term commitment (Jarwan & Abu-Al-Rub, 2024; Obeid et al., 2020). Research has shown that fear of relationship commitment and fear of marriage can be linked to factors such as negative romantic experiences, parental or family divorce, negative media portrayals of marriage, insecure attachment styles and low self-esteem (Apostolou & Tekeş, 2024; Ren, 2022; Safiudin & Oladimeji, 2024).

Some studies have examined fear of marriage in relation to the broader phenomenon of singlehood in contemporary societies, demonstrating that a portion of never-married individuals explicitly associate their single status with "fear of commitment" and concern about being hurt in intimate relationships (Apostolou & Tekeş, 2024). Other studies highlight the role of socio-cultural factors—such as rising divorce rates in one's surroundings, shifts in gender norms, economic pressures and academic demands—in reinforcing attitudes that favour postponing or avoiding marriage (Ren, 2022; Wenqing et al., 2024). These findings suggest that "fear of marriage" is not merely an individual psychological

issue but is formed within a wider context of structural and cultural transformations (Curtis & Susman, 1994).

In Iran, an emerging body of work has begun to explore the psychological and social dimensions of fear of marriage. For example, a qualitative study on Iranian women identified psychological factors such as negative schemas about intimacy, fear of losing independence, experiences of violence in the family of origin and pessimistic attitudes toward men as major deterrents to marriage. Another study showed that premarital education can improve communication beliefs and reduce fear of marriage among university students, thereby alleviating part of their concerns (Vafaeinezhad et al., 2023). A recent study on Iranian men conceptualised "fear of marriage" as a form of "socio-cultural trauma" emerging from the interplay of personal experiences, family patterns and media discourses (Curtis & Susman, 1994).

Despite the growth of this literature, several important gaps remain. Many studies focus on a single gender (most often women) or specific groups (such as university students or particular professional categories), and thus rarely address the experiences of young women and men within a shared cultural context (Vafaeinezhad et al., 2023). In some research, "fear of marriage" is treated merely as one variable among others, with limited effort to reconstruct the deeper process through which this fear develops in young people's everyday lives (Apostolou & Tekeş, 2024; Obeid et al., 2020). At the national level, although there are qualitative studies on obstacles to marriage, a coherent and process-oriented account is still lacking of how Iranian youth, in which contexts and under the influence of what kinds of experiences, gradually come to fear marriage (Curtis & Susman, 1994; Hosseini et al., 2025; Khalili et al., 2025).

Against this backdrop, the present study focuses on the "formation of fear of marriage among young women and men" and aims, through a qualitative design and thematic analysis, to reconstruct and explain the lived experiences of youth regarding fear of marriage. Thematic analysis is a flexible approach for identifying patterns of meaning in qualitative data and allows both individual factors and the broader socio-cultural contexts shaping the phenomenon under study to be examined (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Byrne, 2022). In recent years, reflexive and step-by-step versions of this method have provided practical guidance for designing, conducting and reporting qualitative research (Naeem et al., 2023; Silverio et al., 2022). The choice of this approach in the present study is intended to generate a deep, narrative-based understanding of fear of marriage among young women and men and to identify the main themes and subthemes associated with this phenomenon.

Methods and Materials

Study Design

The present study is qualitative and exploratory in nature and is conducted within an interpretive/constructivist paradigm. In this approach, the social reality of "fear of marriage" is understood as something constructed within social interactions, culture and structures of inequality, rather than as a purely individual psychological trait. Instead of measuring variables quantitatively, the study seeks to reconstruct the process through which fear of marriage emerges and is sustained by drawing on participants' narratives and lived experiences, and to offer a contextualised qualitative explanation of this phenomenon. The choice of tools and analytic logic is therefore oriented toward achieving a deep and situated understanding of fear of marriage.

The research setting is the city of Shahreza, a locality with a predominantly religious, family-oriented fabric that has simultaneously been exposed to cultural change and diversified lifestyles due to migration, higher education and new media. In this city, norms such as the necessity of marriage, marrying at relatively young ages and living with one's family until marriage remain salient. At the same time, there are visible signs of delayed marriage, prolonged singlehood, independent single living and new ways of planning for personal and occupational futures. This coexistence of traditional and modern patterns makes Shahreza a suitable context for studying value and meaning tensions regarding marriage and the formation of fear of marriage among young people.

Ijbmc.org
E-ISSN: 2345-5802

Participants in the study are single young women and men residing in Shahreza who are within the socially normative age range for marriage and yet experience some form of fear, hesitation or avoidance regarding marriage. In selecting them, attention was paid to including individuals who had experienced family and social pressures to marry but had postponed or refused marriage for various reasons, and whose personal and family histories—such as witnessing divorce, intense parental conflict or unsuccessful romantic relationships—had shaped their attitudes toward marriage. At the beginning of the fieldwork, the first interview was conducted in a psychological clinic, where the psychologist present evaluated the participant's fear not as a purely individual disorder but as something rooted in family and cultural experiences. This initial encounter reinforced the study's theoretical orientation toward a reading of "socio-cultural trauma of fear of marriage" and contributed to refining the inclusion criteria.

Given the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study, a combination of purposive and snowball sampling was employed. Initially, individuals who were known in advance to have salient experiences of fear or suspension of marriage were selected as starting cases and interviewed. Subsequently, each participant was asked to introduce others whom they believed had similar or complementary experiences, and in this way a chain of sampling gradually formed and expanded. Throughout this process, efforts were made to achieve diversity in terms of gender, age, educational level, employment status, type of living arrangement (living with parents or independent single living) and mode of engagement with marriage, so that different patterns of fear and hesitation could be compared. Sampling and interviewing continued until theoretical saturation was reached, that is, until additional participants no longer contributed new, meaningful themes beyond those already identified.

The main data collection tool was the semi-structured in-depth interview. The interview guide was developed based on the theoretical background and in direct connection with the research question and was organised around several core axes. These included exploring which conditions and experiences had played a role in the participant's non-marriage, how they described their current life and single status, and how they evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of single life. These axes were posed as open-ended questions and, depending on the participant's responses, follow-up questions were used to clarify concrete examples, emotions, doubts and the meanings they attached to their experiences. Interviews were conducted in quiet, mutually agreed locations such as homes, university spaces, clinics or workplaces and, with the informed consent of participants, were audio-recorded. After each interview, the audio file was fully transcribed and the resulting text prepared for analysis.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis within the reflexive framework proposed by Braun and Clarke. In the first phase, the researcher read the interview transcripts several times to become familiar with the data and recorded preliminary impressions of patterns of fear, suspension and avoidance of marriage. Next, the texts were read line by line and segment by segment, and statements related to experiences of fear, hesitation, pressure, failure and participants' narratives of family, economy, culture and intimate relationships were extracted and labelled as initial codes. These codes were then grouped into clusters of shared meaning, and provisional themes such as family and upbringing factors, economic factors, psychological and individual factors, social and cultural factors, and deficiencies in communication skills and readiness for marriage began to take shape. These themes were subsequently reviewed in relation to the full data set; some were merged and others refined, resulting in a smaller but more coherent set of final themes capable of capturing the socio-cultural construction of fear of marriage. For each theme and subtheme, a precise analytical definition was then provided, and its role in the process of forming and sustaining fear of marriage in young people's narratives was explained. The themes were ultimately woven into an integrated, process-oriented narrative that is presented in the findings section.

Throughout the analysis, the process was cyclical and reflexive. The researcher repeatedly moved back and forth between raw data, codes and themes, challenged initial

Ijbmc.org
E-ISSN: 2345-5802

interpretations, revisited field notes and analytic memos, and sought to increase theoretical sensitivity to the data. This reflexivity helped to reduce the influence of the researcher's prior assumptions and enabled a closer approximation to participants' perspectives.

Ethical principles were observed at all stages of the study. Before the start of interviews, the aims and nature of the research, the way in which data would be used and participants' right to withdraw at any stage were explained, and their informed consent was obtained. To protect privacy, names and any identifying details were altered in the written report, and potentially identifying information was removed or coded. Audio files and transcripts were stored securely, with access limited to the researcher.

Several strategies were used to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Summaries of the themes were shared with a subset of participants, who were invited to comment on the extent to which the interpretations reflected their lived experiences; the analysis was adjusted where necessary in light of their feedback. Throughout the analytic process, data, codes and themes were continually compared to ensure the stability and coherence of interpretations. The path of analytic decisions was documented by keeping field notes, theoretical memos and successive versions of the coding scheme, providing an audit trail of the research. The researcher's awareness of their own positionality and of its potential influence on the formulation of questions, interactions with participants and interpretation of data was also treated as an integral part of this reflexive process.

Findings and Results

Overall picture of the findings

Thematic analysis of the interviews showed that the narratives of single young women and men in Shahreza regarding "fear of marriage" are organised around several interconnected domains of meaning. At one level, fears are expressed as a duality of "social fears" and "cultural fears"; that is, on the one hand, structural and economic conditions (unemployment, job insecurity, high costs of marriage, rising divorce) and, on the other hand, value- and norm-related factors (family strictness, social judgment, high expectations, stigma surrounding divorce and singlehood) shape these fears.

At a deeper level, fear of marriage is structured around five major domains: family and upbringing factors, economic factors, psychological and individual factors, social and cultural factors, and deficits in communication skills and readiness for marriage. Although analytically distinct, these themes overlap in participants' lived experiences and form a network of "interwoven fears." In addition, reconstructing the life trajectories of participants revealed three key situations in which fear of marriage is formed: trauma in childhood and adolescence, the socio-cultural trauma of current societal conditions, and the inability to achieve a sense of security and assurance during premarital acquaintance.

Table 1

Main themes and subthemes of fear of marriage among youth in Shahreza

Main theme	Key subthemes (summary)
Family and upbringing factors	Lack of intimacy and agreement between parents; parental divorce or divorce among close relatives; parental opposition to marriage; insufficient emotional and financial support; imposition of cultural/religious expectations; excessive emotional dependence between parents and children; children's financial or caregiving responsibility for parents
Economic factors	Unemployment or lack of a stable income; lack of housing; high costs of marriage and ceremonies; high financial expectations (dowry, baby items, gold, legal guarantees, etc.); status and consumption pressures; delaying marriage to save and acquire assets; economic instability and inflation
Psychological and individual factors	Fear of emotional failure and divorce; fear of marital responsibilities; difficulty in decision-making; lack of love and attachment; decreased desire to marry due to the comfort of single life; prioritising educational and career advancement; negative past relationship experiences; narcissistic tendencies and low emotional self-awareness; constant social comparison

Ijbmc.org
E-ISSN: 2345-5802

Social and cultural factors	Increasing age at marriage and fear of "ageing out"; perception of fewer suitable marriage candidates; cultural, economic, educational and religious differences; pressure to achieve a "successful marriage" and find an ideal spouse; spread of cohabitation, casual relationships or temporary marriage; weakening of the traditional ideal of marriage; mistrust of the opposite sex; impact of divorce and failed marriages among relatives and friends
Deficits in communication skills and readiness for marriage	Lack of skills in interacting with the opposite sex; inability to sustain a long-term relationship; failure to achieve mutual understanding in the acquaintance phase; difficulty in knowing the partner's personality and compatibility; lack of opportunity for informed choice alongside emotional attachment; inability to set boundaries with the family of origin; weaknesses in financial management and timely decision-making

Table 2

Interpretive mapping of fear of marriage across social and cultural domains

Domain	Salient examples of fears and concerns
Social (structural–economic)	High costs of living and marriage; unemployment and lack of stable work; lack of housing; economic instability; witnessing divorce and marital failure among relatives and friends; family strictness in partner selection; mutual financial dependence between parents and children; social pressure to have a "successful marriage"; perception of shrinking pool of suitable partners
Cultural (value–normative)	Mistrust of the partner; perceived infidelity and lack of commitment; comfort-seeking and fear of losing enjoyment and youth; high expectations and perfectionism; fear of monotony and boredom in married life; anxiety about legal and financial consequences of marriage; value mismatches; perceiving marriage as a barrier to personal development

Table 3

Types of direct fears related to marriage in participants' narratives

Category of fear	Illustrative content
Fears rooted in the family	Conflict and lack of intimacy between parents; parents who themselves discourage marriage; high parental expectations in partner selection
Fear of disappointment in marital life	Absence of love and attachment; failure to achieve a sense of security; fear of personal failure in marriage; fear of sexual dissatisfaction; fear of heavy marital responsibilities
Economic fears	Lack of employment and housing among men; inability to provide dowry and baby items among women; high costs of ceremonies and social rituals
Fear of role-related constraints	Concern about restrictions on social relations and interactions with friends and relatives; fear of increased domestic and caregiving responsibilities
Fear of lack of love and trust	Mistrust of the opposite sex; pessimism toward traditional, family-arranged marriages and non-emotional partner selection
Fear of lack of agreement and compatibility	Worries about not achieving mutual understanding in cultural, emotional and sexual domains; fear of poor compatibility in major life decisions
Fears arising from others' failed marriages	Experiencing parental divorce or divorce among siblings and friends, and internalising these failures as probable future outcomes
Fears related to traditions and marriage rituals	Pressure to comply with lavish engagement, wedding and post-wedding rituals; expectations concerning dowry and baby items; burden of prevailing social norms around marriage and divorce
Gendered fears	Fear of legal and financial obligations and "legal guarantees" among some men; fear of losing status or independence among some women

Table 4

Perceived incompetencies and feelings of inadequacy in the formation of fear of marriage

Area of inadequacy	Key examples in narratives
Boundary-setting with family	Inability to protect the privacy of marital life; sharing marital issues with parents; strong emotional and financial dependence on the family of origin
Effective communication with a spouse	Difficulties in dialogue and conflict resolution; mutual controlling behaviours; problems in role-taking, empathy and cooperation in the couple relationship
Receiving family support	Lack of financial, emotional or practical support from the family for marriage; limited family capacity to help with household tasks or childcare
Financial management	Inability to save; difficulties in providing housing, car, gold and dowry; inefficient management of routine expenses
Achieving a sense of assurance	Failure to reach agreement and mutual understanding; inability to feel "understood" and secure; constant doubt about one's choice
Timely decision-making	Postponing marriage decisions due to military service, siblings' unsettled marital status, or lack of sufficient emotional motivation

Narrative report of the findings

1. Childhood and adolescent trauma: Families that do not model "successful marriage"

The findings show that an important part of fear of marriage is rooted in early life experiences, particularly within the family of origin. Many participants derive their image of marriage directly from their parents' relationship or that of close relatives, where conflict, violence, cold silence, or divorce have replaced intimacy and agreement. One participant who had experienced parental divorce reported years of "fighting and arguments" at home, followed by the separation of his parents and his father's addiction, which left him responsible for supporting his mother and sister. For him, marriage is associated with additional burden and vulnerability rather than security and companionship.

In some narratives, early romantic failures, alongside family conflict, create a compounded trauma. A 29-year-old woman explained that she grew up in a family context where marriages were predominantly traditional and arranged by relatives, and after a broken engagement with her cousin, she "severely" lost her motivation to marry, feeling that in the event of another failure she would not receive adequate emotional support from her family.

Such accounts suggest that the family of origin is not only a potential source of emotional and economic support but also, in many cases, a primary source of fear. Lack of intimacy between parents, divorce, addiction, chronic poverty and experiences of abuse in childhood generate a set of "negative lessons" about marriage. As several participants explicitly stated, they do not want to "repeat their parents' lives." Consequently, marriage shifts from an "ideal" into a "high-risk" endeavour that is better postponed as long as possible—or avoided altogether.

2. Socio-cultural trauma: A society that makes singlehood attractive

Beyond the family, current social and cultural structures also function as major sources of fear. Many participants pointed to economic pressures, intense educational and occupational competition, the heavy emphasis on individual achievement and the rising prevalence of divorce among those around them. A 28-year-old man who had access to his parents' house and car but was unemployed described how his mother had "high expectations" regarding his job and marriage, and how multiple divorces among relatives had made him fearful of introducing potential partners and entering the process of formal courtship.

In other cases, prolonged singlehood and heavy investment in higher education had created a lifestyle from which "returning" to marriage seemed difficult. A 39-year-old doctoral student reported that she had been distrustful of men during her student years, had avoided relationships, and had postponed marriage until completing her education due to the importance she attached to academic and financial stability.

These narratives indicate that fear of marriage is not solely produced by family experiences. It is also shaped by a broader "socio-cultural trauma" stemming from economic insecurity, educational competition, shifting norms and rising divorce rates. Young people who grow up in this context view marriage not merely as a union of two individuals, but as entry into an institution that, in the contemporary social environment, lacks adequate structural support to ensure its success and can easily lead to failure and instability.

3. Failure to achieve reassurance during acquaintance: A decision endlessly deferred

Another cluster of findings relates to participants' experiences in the stages of "getting to know" and "acquainting" themselves with a potential spouse. Social change and the weakening of extended family authority have encouraged many young women and men to seek more rational and individualised partner choices. However, the resources and skills needed for such choices are often underdeveloped.

Ijbmc.org
E-ISSN: 2345-5802

Many participants described long-term romantic relationships that, for various reasons—economic, ethical, commitment-related or family-related—did not culminate in marriage. These "suspended relationships" drained their emotional energy and undermined their trust in starting new relationships. A 58-year-old woman involved in a hidden relationship with a divorced man spoke of her fear of divorcing at this age, the lack of financial consensus between them and the constant stress of secrecy; together, these factors made marriage seem like a "high-risk, high-cost" option.

A 38-year-old man reported that he had postponed marriage for years to focus on improving his family's financial situation and now, despite owning a house and car, maintained extremely high expectations for a future spouse and even demanded "sexual agreement before marriage." Such patterns contribute to the reproduction of doubt and suspension in decision-making.

In these situations, fear of marriage is experienced less as fear of "marriage itself" and more as an inability to reach "reassurance" and "certainty" in one's decision. Individuals feel trapped between staying and leaving, between commitment and freedom, between fear of failure and fear of loneliness.

4. Family and upbringing factors: Marriage under distorted role expectations

The theme of "family and upbringing factors" highlights how the structure and culture of the family of origin provide the primary context for the formation of fear of marriage. In some families, children effectively assume parental roles: providing financial support, caring for siblings, or looking after parents in midlife. Within such arrangements, marriage is perceived as a threat to established roles, as young people fear that marriage will mean "abandoning" their parents or reducing their emotional and financial support.

In other families, marriage is defined primarily as a "religious/cultural duty," with limited attention to the emotional and skill-related readiness of children. Pressure to hold lavish ceremonies, intense focus on appearances, dowry and rituals, and lack of discussion about communication skills and conflict management lead young people to imagine marriage as a "costly and controlling project" rather than a pathway for personal and emotional growth.

5. Economic factors: An insecure economy and marriage as financial risk

In participants' narratives, economic insecurity emerges as one of the most salient contexts of fear. Men spoke of unemployment, lack of stable work, absence of housing, fear of being unable to provide even minimal welfare for a future family and anxiety about the costs of wedding ceremonies. Women expressed concern about the costs of dowry, baby items and financial expectations of both families.

Economic fluctuations and inflation have turned marriage into an "uncertain project" whose entry costs are continually increasing, while access to stable jobs and adequate housing remains limited. Several participants explicitly stated that they had postponed marriage to first acquire "a house, a car and sufficient savings," yet this delay itself led to older age at marriage, fewer suitable candidates and, ultimately, intensified fear of marriage.

6. Psychological and individual factors: Fear of failure and loss of self

At the individual level, fear of emotional failure, fear of divorce, fear of sexual dissatisfaction and fear of losing personal freedom and identity are among the most prominent themes. Some participants cited previous unsuccessful romantic relationships as the main source of their mistrust of marriage. Others perceived single life as so comfortable and "controllable" that the idea of entering a committed, intertwined relationship triggered anxiety.

Moreover, prioritising educational and career advancement, idealised standards in partner selection and constant comparison of oneself and others—in social media and academic or work settings—have led some young people to accept a potential spouse only if he or she meets a complex set of economic, physical, educational and personality

Ijbmc.org
E-ISSN: 2345-5802

criteria. In practice, these criteria reduce the likelihood of satisfaction with any given option and intensify fear of making the "wrong choice."

7. Deficits in communication skills and readiness for marriage: The gap between wanting and being able to marry

The findings indicate that even among participants who are relatively well positioned economically and familially, deficits in communication skills and difficulties in building a stable, intimate relationship constitute major contributors to fear of marriage.

A considerable number of participants reported difficulties in frank conversation, inability to express needs and emotions, fear of conflict and lack of familiarity with healthy boundary-setting in intimate relationships. In addition, weaknesses in financial management, timely decision-making and acceptance of shared responsibility reinforce the sense that they are "not ready for marriage," even if their age, education or social position would suggest otherwise. As a result, the gap between "wanting to marry" and "being able to marry" deepens and itself becomes a source of fear.

Analytical synthesis

Taken together, the findings show that fear of marriage among young women and men in Shahreza emerges at the intersection of three levels: childhood and adolescent trauma (family experiences), the socio-cultural trauma of current societal conditions (economic insecurity, shifting norms, rising divorce) and the failure to achieve reassurance during acquaintance and adult relationships. Across these levels, five clusters of family, economic, psychological–individual, social–cultural and skill-related factors form the main context for the formation and persistence of fear. In the narratives analysed here, fear of marriage appears not as a purely individual "phobia," but as a meaningful response to a complex combination of personal experiences and socio-cultural structures in which marriage is experienced less as the "natural pathway to adulthood" and more as a major emotional, economic and identity risk.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that fear of marriage among young women and men in Shahreza is a multidimensional phenomenon emerging at the intersection of family experiences, economic pressures, cultural change, and individual psychological characteristics. This result is consistent with recent qualitative research in Iran indicating that declining marriage rates and the spread of negative or cautious attitudes toward marriage reflect a combination of objective conditions (economic and structural) and the subjective meanings young people assign to marriage (Keshavarz et al., 2018; Tabkhi et al., 2025).

Participants' narratives highlighted the central role of the family and experiences in the family of origin, such as longstanding conflicts, emotional or verbal violence, and emotional divorce between parents. This aligns with the literature on fear of commitment and marriage, which emphasizes that the quality of parental relationships and family communication patterns substantially shape later fears of commitment and withdrawal from long-term relationships (Obeid et al., 2020; A. Saadat et al., 2023). The Lebanese Fear of Relationship Commitment Scale likewise captures social, emotional, and physical facets of commitment-related fear that closely mirror many experiences described by participants in this study (Obeid et al., 2020).

Economic insecurity was another key axis in the formation of marriage fear. Unemployment, unstable jobs, high housing costs, and the financial burdens of dowry and wedding ceremonies were repeatedly mentioned. These concerns echo recent international studies showing that job insecurity, inflation, and financial pressures are among the most important drivers of delayed marriage (Akhtar & Malik, 2025; ISSA & KALWANI, 2024; Mugiyama, 2025). Rising education levels and more complex career trajectories further transform marriage into a costly and risky investment, a pattern reported in several contexts (Akhtar & Malik, 2025; Mugiyama, 2025).

Another important insight from this study is that fear of marriage is strongly shaped by direct and indirect exposure

Ijbmc.org
E-ISSN: 2345-5802

to unsuccessful marriages, high-conflict relationships, divorce, and early marriages with negative outcomes. This corresponds to recent research on early and child marriage in Iran, which documents adverse effects on marital quality, psychological well-being, and perceived agency among young women (Pourtaheri et al., 2024; Yoosefi Lebni et al., 2025; Zolfaghary et al., 2024). From this perspective, young people's fear of marriage may represent a protective response grounded in concrete observations of harmful or unstable relationships, rather than an irrational phobia.

At the individual level, participants pointed to perfectionistic standards in choosing a spouse, fear of intimacy, fragile self-concept, and sensitivity to failure. Recent work on fear of relationship commitment and singlehood confirms that higher commitment fear is associated with a greater likelihood of remaining single, poorer relationship quality, and difficulties in partner selection (Apostolou & Tekeş, 2024; Obeid et al., 2020). Newer studies also highlight the role of self-esteem and maladaptive schemas in amplifying fear of marriage and triggering self-sabotaging behaviors in relationships (Apostolou & Tekeş, 2024; A Study on Moderating Role of Self Esteem…, 2025).

Participants frequently referred to the influence of media and social networks in amplifying negative and sensational stories about divorce, infidelity, and marital conflict. This resonates with emerging research on gamophobia and social media, suggesting that highly negative and dramatized representations of relationships can reinforce fear of marriage and commitment (Safiudin & Oladimeji, 2024; The Impact of Social Media on Gamophobia…, 2025). In combination with lived experiences in families and communities, these media narratives create a "dark horizon" for the imagined future of marriage.

The findings also point to a substantial gap in systematic education on life skills, mate selection, and relationship management. Recent Iranian and international studies demonstrate that premarital education—including communication skills, emotion regulation, conflict resolution, realistic expectations, and family-of-origin exploration—can reduce negative attitudes toward marriage and increase psychological readiness for entering a committed relationship (Rezaei et al., 2023; A. Saadat et al., 2023) Research on indigenous premarital counseling and education models in Iran also indicates that such interventions can reduce perfectionism, unrealistic ideals of a spouse, and diffuse fears about marriage, thereby promoting more realistic partner choice (Rezaei et al., 2023).

Culturally, the data highlight a tension between the continued symbolic value of marriage and a growing desire for independence, self-realization, and more egalitarian gender roles among Iranian youth. This tension parallels recent findings on young people's attitudes toward marriage, gender, and sexuality in both Iran and other societies, which document the coexistence of strong family norms and expanding acceptance of singlehood and non-traditional life paths (Keshavarz et al., 2018; Khalajabadi-Farahani, 2025; Sonkaya & Öcal, 2024). The present study suggests that fear of marriage is, in part, a reflection of this unresolved conflict between a traditional family-centered order and emerging ideals of individuality and gender equality.

Methodologically, the use of thematic qualitative analysis allowed for a nuanced understanding of the meaning-making processes surrounding fear of marriage, an approach increasingly recommended in contemporary Iranian marriage research (A. Saadat et al., 2023; Sadeghian et al., 2025; Tabkhi et al., 2025). Nonetheless, the purposive sampling of young adults in Shahreza limits generalizability. Future studies should extend this work using larger and more diverse samples across different provinces and social groups and adopt mixed-method designs combining in-depth interviews with validated psychometric tools such as the Lebanese Fear of Relationship Commitment Scale (Obeid et al., 2020).

This study concludes that fear of marriage among 18–35-year-old women and men in Shahreza results from the interplay of three main levels: structural–economic (job insecurity, inflation, housing and wedding costs), socio-cultural (shifting gender roles, increased acceptance of singlehood, negative media portrayals of marriage) and individual–family factors (exposure to parental conflict and

Ijbmc.org
E-ISSN: 2345-5802

divorce, maladaptive schemas, perfectionism in partner choice, and fragile self-esteem). This multi-layered picture is consistent with recent qualitative and quantitative research on marriage attitudes, delayed marriage, and fear of commitment in Iran and internationally (Apostolou & Tekeş, 2024; Keshavarz et al., 2018; Obeid et al., 2020; Tabkhi et al., 2025).

Accordingly, fear of marriage should not be reduced to individual weakness or pathology. Rather, it can be understood as a relatively rational response to real economic risks, observed relational failures, and uncertainty about the scripts of modern intimate life. Any intervention aimed at reducing fear of marriage therefore requires a multi-level perspective that simultaneously integrates economic support measures, legal and welfare protections for families, critical reflection on media discourses, and systematic educational and counseling services (Akhtar & Malik, 2025; issa & kalwani, 2024; A. Saadat et al., 2023).

In practice, the findings support the expansion of premarital education and counseling programs in schools, universities, and community counseling centers. Such programs should move beyond generic advice and focus on concrete skills: communication, conflict resolution, emotional regulation, realistic expectations, identification of personal schemas, and gradual exposure to fears related to commitment (A. Saadat et al., 2023; Rezaei et al., 2023). Recent evidence suggests that culturally grounded, evidence-based models of premarital and couple education can enhance marital quality and lower the risk of marital breakdown when they are aligned with the lived realities of Iranian couples (A. Saadat et al., 2023; S. A. Saadat et al., 2023).

At the policy level, the results highlight the need to align family and population policies with the economic and cultural realities of the younger generation. Purely exhortative pro-marriage policies, without addressing actual living costs and job insecurity, are unlikely to substantially reduce fear of marriage. Recent discussions of family-strengthening frameworks in Iran underline that successful approaches combine economic support, family education, accessible counseling, and robust legal protections for women and children (A. Saadat et al., 2023; Principle of Family Consolidation in the Iranian Legal System, 2024).

Future research should further explore how social media use, premarital romantic experiences, and evolving gender norms interact with structural and psychological factors to shape fear of marriage over time. Longitudinal and comparative studies across regions and cultures would allow a more precise understanding of which aspects of marriage-related fear are context-specific and which reflect global trends in intimate life (Apostolou & Tekeş, 2024; Safiudin & Oladimeji, 2024). Overall, reframing fear of marriage as a socio-cultural trauma rather than a purely individual defect opens space for more empathic, non-blaming, and structurally informed interventions to support young adults in making informed decisions about whether, when, and how to marry.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their gratitude and appreciation to all participants.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

References

Akhtar, F., & Malik, R. a. (2025). The Socio-Economic Matrix of Marriage: An Empirical Study of Delay in Marriage Patterns in Punjab. *Annals of Human and Social Sciences*, *6*(4), 148-165. https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2025(6-IV)12

Apostolou, M., & Tekeş, B. (2024). Fear of relationship commitment and singlehood. *Evolutionary Psychological Science*, *10*(1), 10-18. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40806-023-00382-z

Bagi, M. (2023). Reasons for delayed marriage and its determinants in Iran. *Journal of Applied Sociology*, *34*(1), 31-50. DOI:10.22108/jas.2022.134561.2312

bar Aghajanian, A., Vaezzade, S., Kohan, J. A., & Thompson, V. (2018). Recent trends of marriage in Iran. *Open Family Studies Journal*, *10*, 1-8. https://doi.org/10.2174/1874922401810010001

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health*, *11*(4), 589-597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Byrne, D. (2022). A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Quality & quantity*, *56*(3), 1391-1412. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y

Curtis, J. M., & Susman, V. M. (1994). Factors related to fear of marriage. *Psychological reports*, *74*(3), 859-863. https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.1994.74.3.859

Doosthoseini, M., Sheikholeslami, A., & Soltani, N. (2024). The Factors Influencing the Divorce in the Islamic Republic of Iran's Army Personnel from the Perspective of Psychologists and Psychiatrists Working in the Army. *ANNALS OF MILITARY AND HEALTH SCIENCES RESEARCH Учредители: Briefland*, *22*(4). https://doi.org/10.5812/amh-147547

Hosseini, S., Farajkhoda, T., Zare Sakhvidi, M., Mobin, E., Sharifi, M., Zarezadeh, F., & Esmaeilifar, S. (2025). Exploring Factors Related to Youth Marriage in Yazd: A Qualitative Study. *Health research and development*, *3*(1), 27-36. https://doi.org/10.61186/jhrd.3.1.27

Issa, a., & kalwani, j. (2024). influence of socioeconomic factors on marriage decision among university students in morogoro municipality, tanzania. *east african journal of arts and social sciences учредители: east african Nature and Science Organization*, *7*(2), 269-283. https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.7.2.2411

Jarwan, A. S., & Abu-Al-Rub, Y. K. (2024). Gamophobia and its relationship with family communication patterns among unmarried postgraduate students at Yarmouk University. *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture*, *8*(2), 206-227. https://doi.org/10.70082/esiculture.vi.682

Keshavarz, M., Shariati, M., Ebadi, A., & Behboodi, M. Z. (2018). Desire and attitude to marriage among unmarried Iranian youth: a qualitative study. https://doi.org/10.15296/ijwhr.2018.71

Khalajabadi-Farahani, F. (2025). Shifting Paradigms: Marriage Salience and Premarital Intimacy and Sex among Elite Women in Tehran. In. https://doi.org/10.30958/ajda.1-3-2

Khalili, Z., Amirfakhraei, A., & Zarei, E. (2025). Qualitative Future Study of Youth Marriage on the Horizon of Development Perspective 2040: An Iranian Development Perspective. *Iranian Evolutionary Educational Psychology Journal*, *7*(2), 0-0. https://ieepj.hormozgan.ac.ir/article-1-63-en.html

Matsuda, S., Sasaki, T., Shin, J., & Bae, J. (2024). Deterioration in youth employment, social contexts, and marriage decline in Japan and South Korea. *Asian Population Studies*, *20*(2), 203-221. https://doi.org/10.1080/17441730.2023.2211402

Mugiyama, R. (2025). Decomposing delayed first marriage and birth across cohorts. *Demographic Research*, *52*, 635-688. https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2025.52.21

Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A step-by-step process of thematic analysis to develop a conceptual model in qualitative research. *International journal of qualitative methods*, *22*, 16094069231205789. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205789

Najary Forushani, S., Fazeli Mehrabadi, A., & Masomabad, L. (2025). Exploring the Lived Experiences of Couples in Unsuccessful Marriages: A Phenomenological Study. *International Journal of Body, Mind & Culture (2345-5802)*, *12*(2). https://doi.org/10.61838/ijbmc.v12i2.836

Obeid, S., Fares, K., Haddad, C., Lahoud, N., Akel, M., Zakhour, M., Kheir, N., Salameh, P., & Hallit, S. (2020). Construction and validation of the Lebanese fear of relationship commitment scale among a representative sample of the Lebanese population. *Perspectives in psychiatric care*, *56*(2), 280-289. https://doi.org/10.1111/ppc.12424

Pourtaheri, A., Mahdizadeh, M. S., Tehrani, H., Jamali, J., & Peyman, N. (2024). Individual and interpersonal factors influencing child marriage: A qualitative content analysis study. *Plos one*, *19*(11), e0313933. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0313933

Ren, J. (2022). Analysis of the psychological factors of contemporary youth's fear of marriage in China. *International Journal of Frontiers in Sociology*, *4*(13), 31-34. https://doi.org/10.25236/IJFS.2022.041305

Rezaei, E., Taher, M., Shabani, Z., & Hosseinkhanzadeh, A. A. (2023). Development and validation of a premarital education program based on mental health literacy. *Shahroud Journal of Medical Sciences*, *9*(2), 16-21.

Saadat, A., Fallah, M. H., & Yazdi, S. V. (2023). Examination of Cultural Components of Spouse Selection Based on Iranian Culture: A Qualitative Study. *The Journal of Tolooebehdasht*. https://doi.org/10.18502/tbj.v22i3.13684

Saadat, S. A., Fallah, M. H., & Yazdi, S. V. (2023). Developing and Validating Educational Strategies for Couples to Enhance Family Bonds: A Qualitative Expert Analysis. *THRITA Учредители: Briefland*, *12*(1). https://doi.org/10.5812/thrita-138488

Sadeghian, E., Ghasemi, S. A., & Maddineshat, M. (2025). Exploring marriage beliefs from the perspectives of married students. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *16*, 1481905. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1481905

Safiudin, K., & Oladimeji, R. M. (2024). Gender Problems in Indonesia: The phenomenon of gamophobia in a permissive society. *An-Nisa'Journal of Gender Studies*, *17*(1), 67-82. https://doi.org/10.35719/annisa.v17i1.245

Silverio, S. A., Sheen, K. S., Bramante, A., Knighting, K., Koops, T. U., Montgomery, E., November, L., Soulsby, L. K., Stevenson, J. H., & Watkins, M. (2022). Sensitive, challenging, and difficult topics: Experiences and practical considerations for qualitative researchers. *International journal of qualitative methods*, *21*, 16094069221124739. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221124739

Sonkaya, Z. İ., & Öcal, N. Ü. (2024). Young people's attitudes toward marriage, gender roles, and related factors: Attitudes toward marriage, gender roles. *BMC Public Health*, *24*(1), 3347. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-20904-z

Tabkhi, F., Manshadi, M. D., & Rezapour-Mirsaleh, Y. (2025). Phenomenological investigation of negative attitudes towards marriage in female students. *BMC psychology*, *13*(1), 654. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-02520-7

Tavakolian, N., Madadizadeh, F., Taheri Soodejani, M., & Lotfi, M. H. (2023). Identifying Factors Related to Divorce in Iranian Couples: A Case Study in Yazd, Iran. *Journal of Community Health Research*, *12*(2), 228-235. https://doi.org/10.18502/jchr.v12i27.14418

Vafaeinezhad, F., Koraei, A., & Pasha, R. (2023). Comparison of the Effect of Premarital Education with Selection Method and Knowledge and El Sun's Approach on Communication Beliefs of Students' Fear of Marriage. *Razi Journal of Medical Sciences*, *29*(10), 193-202. DOI:10.61838/kman.aftj.5.5.7

Wenqing, Y., Panting, H., Yinghui, W., & Mengting, L. (2024). Analysis of the Reasons for Contemporary Young Women's Fear of Marriage and Pregnancy—Based on Bengbu. *Academic Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences*, *7*(2). https://doi.org/10.25236/AJHSS.2024.070204

Yoosefi Lebni, J., Saki, M., Madineh, D., Ziapour, A., Ahmadi, A., & Torabi, A. (2025). Social determinants of violence against adolescent married women and how the women respond to it: A qualitative study in the Kurdish areas of Iran. *Psychological trauma: theory, research, practice, and policy*, *17*(1), 154. https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001672

Zolfaghary, F., Agajani-Delavar, M., Adib-Rad, H., Bakouei, F., & Kazem-Aslani, M. (2024). Child marriage and quality of marriage among young married women in a rural district, Lorestan Province, Iran. *BMC Research Notes*, *17*(1), 218. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13104-024-06880-y