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Marriage attitudes among university students: The role of gender, family, and cultural norms

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Abstract

This study examines the marriage attitudes of university students by analyzing the role of gender, family structure, and cultural norms in shaping their perceptions of marriage and spouse selection preferences. While marriage attitudes among young adults have been widely studied, limited research has explored how spouse selection criteria and marital perceptions interact, particularly in transitional societies like Türkiye. This study addresses this gap by investigating how cultural and demographic factors influence marriage attitudes in a semi-traditional, semi-modernizing context. A prospective, cross-sectional study was conducted among senior undergraduate students (N=723) at a public university in Türkiye. Participants completed structured surveys measuring sociodemographic characteristics, marriage attitudes (using the Inonu Marriage Attitude Scale-IMAS), and spouse selection preferences. Findings indicate that gender, religious compatibility, and attitudes toward cohabitation and divorce are significant determinants of marriage attitudes, whereas ethnic background and financial expectations play a negligible role. Male students and those who prioritize religious compatibility exhibit more traditional marriage perspectives, while female students and those supporting divorce and cohabitation report less favorable attitudes toward marriage. Personality, affection/love, and family harmony are the most prioritized spouse selection criteria, while political views are the least influential. This study highlights the complex interplay of sociodemographic factors, cultural values, and personal beliefs in shaping marriage attitudes among university students. The findings contribute to marriage and family research by offering empirical insights from a semi-traditional, semi-modernizing society where Western influences and traditional norms intersect. Future research should explore the long-term implications of these evolving attitudes on marriage formation and family dynamics.

Keywords: Attitude, cultural characteristics, gender roles, marriage, students

Introduction

Marriage is a fundamental institution shaped by cultural, social, and economic factors across societies [1]. Although marriage perceptions vary globally, it remains a central mechanism for ensuring family unity and social continuity in most cultures [1]. Homans' Social Exchange Theory posits that marriage decisions are shaped by the perceived benefits and costs of forming a union, while Eagly's Gender Role Theory emphasizes the influence of traditional and evolving gender norms on marital attitudes, indicating that such decisions are not purely individual but are embedded in broader cultural expectations [2-4], complementing this, Family Systems Theory highlights the interconnected roles and dynamics within the family unit that further shape

individuals' perceptions and choices regarding marriage [5]. Underscores the role of parental influence in shaping young adults' perspectives on marriage, emphasizing how family dynamics and upbringing contribute to marital decision-making [5]. This theoretical framework posits that parent-child interactions, familial expectations, and intergenerational value transmission play a fundamental role in determining individuals' attitudes toward marriage and spouse selection [5]. University education represents a pivotal stage in the formation of marital attitudes, as young adults undergo cognitive, emotional, and social transformations that shape their long-term relationship expectations [6,7]. The literature indicates that young adults perceive the ideal age for marriage to be between 22 and 29 years [8], a period that coincides with their university education

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and early post-graduation years. This suggests that higher education serves as a critical context wherein students refine their perspectives on marriage and establish criteria for selecting a lifelong partner [6,7]. Spouse selection is a critical determinant of marital stability, influencing not only individual well-being but also the intergenerational transmission of cultural values, social cohesion, and the fulfillment of societal expectations regarding family life [6,9,10]. Various criteria, including personality traits, lifestyle, educational background, religious beliefs, family structure, and socioeconomic status, play a decisive role in mate selection [7,8,10]. As a distinct social group, university students experience diverse living standards and are exposed to varying sociocultural influences, making them a significant demographic for investigating marriage attitudes and spouse selection preferences [4]. Furthermore, cross-cultural research indicates that attitudes toward marriage are shaped by broader societal transformations, such as shifting gender roles, increasing economic independence, and rising individualization [4]. Understanding their perspectives is essential, as their evolving values and behaviors will shape future family structures and influence social policies. Despite extensive research on marriage attitudes, the interaction between spouse selection criteria and marital perceptions remains insufficiently explored, particularly in transitional societies such as Türkiye. While prior studies have predominantly examined these dimensions separately, this study uniquely integrates them to provide a comprehensive understanding of how young adults align their mate selection preferences with their evolving perspectives on marriage. Moreover, this study addresses a critical gap by examining marriage attitudes in a semi-traditional, semi-modernizing context, offering insights into the intersection of higher education, cultural expectations, and gender norms in shaping marriage decisions. This study aims to explore how university students' attitudes toward marriage are shaped within the framework of gender, family structure, and cultural norms. Accordingly, the following research questions are posed:

1. What are the key sociodemographic and cultural factors influencing university students' attitudes toward marriage?
2. How do cultural and demographic factors shape students' spouse selection preferences, and how do these preferences relate to their attitudes toward marriage?

Material and Methods

Study design

This study was designed as a prospective, cross-sectional investigation to examine the factors influencing marital attitudes and spouse selection criteria among university undergraduate students.

Participants

This study was conducted among senior undergraduate students enrolled in the Faculty of Health Sciences (Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy), Faculty of Social Sciences (Letters), and Faculty of Sciences (Forestry, Sciences) at a public university in Türkiye

between June and November 2024. Senior students were specifically selected as they are the cohort closest to marriage, with the necessary conditions for marriage formation becoming more relevant upon graduation.

The university, located in northeastern Türkiye, is one of the most prestigious institutions in the country, with approximately 2.100 academic staff and a student body of 30.000, including international students. Sample size calculation was performed using OpenEpi software [11], with a 95% confidence interval, 5% Type-I error level, and an estimated prevalence of 50%. Based on the previous year's data ($n=2.157$), the required minimum sample size was determined as 327 participants. To ensure representativeness, a stratified sampling method was employed to proportionally allocate participants from each department. Ultimately, 723 out of 750 students completed the questionnaire, yielding a 96.4% response rate. Inclusion criteria required students to be enrolled in the university's main campus, voluntarily participate, and have Turkish language proficiency as their primary means of communication.

Data collection tools

The data were collected using the university students' sociodemographic attributes, views on marriage [12], ranking judgments of spouse selection criteria [6], and the Inonu Marriage Attitude Scale (IMAS) [13].

Sociodemographic Attributes

This form including nine questions, including statements, such as age, gender and department.

Views on Marriage

This form including eight questions that examine the criteria, such as religion, ethnic origin and nationality.

Spouse Selection Criteria

The 10 most influential spouse selection criteria, as identified by Bozgeyikli and Toprak (2013), include the following, ranked in order of priority [6]:

1. Religious belief
2. Family compatibility
3. Virginity
4. Income level
5. Ethnic background
6. Physical attractiveness
7. Educational level
8. Affection/love
9. Personality
10. Political views

This ranking system was designed to compel participants to

establish clear distinctions between the relative importance of each selection criterion, thus allowing for a more precise evaluation of their underlying preferences in mate selection. The methodology employed in this study required participants to rank these factors in order of importance, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of the hierarchical structure underlying spouse selection preferences among university students.

Inonu Marriage Attitude Scale (IMAS)

The Inonu Marriage Attitude Scale (IMAS), developed by Bayoğlu and Atlı (2014), was employed to assess young adults' attitudes toward marriage. The scale comprises 21 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree), with total scores ranging from 21 to 105. Higher scores indicate more positive attitudes toward marriage, whereas lower scores reflect more negative perspectives.

The IMAS has demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging between 0.87 and 0.90 in prior studies. In the present study, the reliability coefficient was 0.92, confirming high internal reliability. The mean IMAS score among university students was 76.07 ± 15.49 , suggesting an overall positive inclination toward marriage among the participants.

Data Collection

The data were collected through face-to-face interviews conducted by the researchers. Prior to data collection, faculty administrators were contacted to arrange suitable time slots for both the faculty and the researchers to ensure minimal disruption to academic activities. The data collection process took place inside classrooms, where students were informed about the study and invited to participate voluntarily. Each participant completed the questionnaire within 10 to 15 minutes.

Data collection

During data collection, participants were informed about the study's purpose and procedures, and written consent was obtained from those who agreed to participate. The questionnaires were distributed individually in sealed envelopes in the nurses' work units and collected in the same manner on the same day. Completion time for the forms was approximately 20–30 minutes.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 24. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were computed to summarize participants' sociodemographic characteristics and spouse selection rankings.

To identify the factors influencing marital attitudes, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted. The IMAS score served as the dependent variable, while independent variables included age group, academic grade level, department, relationship status, parental education, parental employment, and longest-resided

location. Additionally, eight categorical variables capturing participants' views on marriage were incorporated into the analysis.

To ensure the robustness of the statistical model, assumptions of normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were tested. Standardized beta coefficients (β) were reported to assess the relative influence of each predictor, and statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Ethics Committee Approval

This study received ethical approval from the Scientific Research Ethics Committee of a university, confirming its compliance with ethical and scientific standards. Institutional permission was also obtained from the university where the study was conducted (Approval Numbers: E-13562490-050.01.04.517805/63582098-200-E.230). The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, ensuring ethical integrity, voluntary participation, and the protection of participants' rights and confidentiality.

Result

Descriptive Statistics and Regression Analysis of Sociodemographic and Cultural Factors Influencing University Students' Marriage Attitudes

The majority of participants were aged 18–21 years (48.1%), female (58%), and enrolled in the Faculty of Health Sciences (38.9%). Most students originated from nuclear families (83.3%), resided in urban areas (62.2%), and reported an income level above the minimum wage (58.8%). Regarding parental education, 63.9% of mothers and 43.6% of fathers had only completed primary education (Table 1).

The findings indicate that gender is a significant determinant of marriage attitudes, with male students exhibiting more traditional views compared to female students ($p < .001$, $\beta = 5.033$). Field of study also influences marriage attitudes, as students from natural sciences hold more traditional views than those in social sciences ($p = 0.022$, $\beta = 3.3$) (Table 1).

Romantic relationship status is another important factor, with students currently in relationships demonstrating more favorable attitudes toward marriage than their single counterparts ($p < .001$, $\beta = 4.124$). In contrast, age was not found to be a significant factor, as no statistically significant differences were detected between age groups (Table 1).

Parental education level, particularly maternal education, shows a marginal effect on marriage attitudes ($p = 0.055$, $\beta = -3.534$), whereas paternal education and family income level were not statistically significant predictors ($p = 0.090$, $\beta = 1.844$) (Table 1). Decision-making autonomy in spouse selection plays a crucial role, as students who make their own choices but seek family approval exhibit more favorable attitudes toward marriage ($p = 0.004$, $\beta = 6.12$) (Table 2).

Findings on Cultural and Demographic Factors Influencing Spouse Selection Preferences and Their Relationship with Marriage Attitudes

Religious compatibility emerges as a strong predictor of marriage attitudes, with students who prioritize religious compatibility exhibiting significantly more favorable views toward marriage ($p<.001$, $\beta=4.41$) (Table 2). Conversely, ethnic background does not significantly influence marriage attitudes ($p=0.697$) (Table 2).

Attitudes toward divorce and premarital cohabitation strongly predict marriage perspectives. Students who support divorce exhibit lower IMAS scores, indicating less favorable attitudes toward marriage ($p<.001$, $\beta=-5.285$), while those who oppose premarital cohabitation display higher IMAS scores, reflecting more traditional marriage attitudes ($p<.001$, $\beta=5.153$) (Table 2).

Financial considerations in a spouse were not a primary concern, as financial expectations did not significantly affect marriage attitudes ($p=0.282$). Likewise, willingness to marry someone met online was not a significant predictor ($p=0.896$), although students who completely rejected online acquaintances as potential marriage partners had lower IMAS scores ($p=0.053$) (Table 2).

Regarding spouse selection preferences, university students ranked "personality" as the most critical factor, followed by "affection/love" and "harmony between families", while "political views" were the least influential (Table 2).

When analyzed by gender, female students prioritized "personality," "affection/love," and "religious belief," while ranking "political views" as the least important. In contrast, male students also ranked "personality" as the most crucial factor, followed by "affection/love" and "virginity," with "political views" remaining the least influential selection criterion (Figure 1).

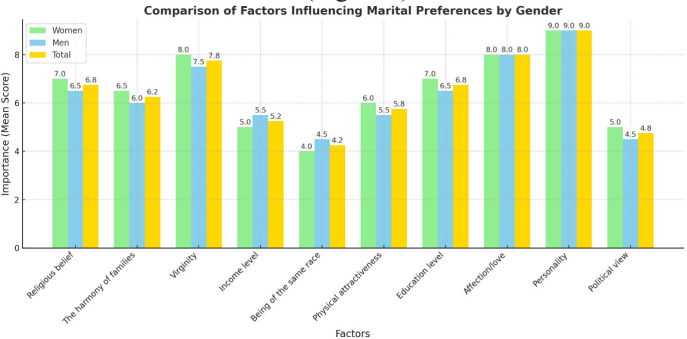


Figure 1. Distribution of Mean Values for University Students' Ranking of Spouse Selection Criteria

Table 1. Multiple linear regression analysis of sociodemographic factors influencing university students' marriage attitudes

Constant	n	%	β_0 (95% CI) 62.776 (54.656 – 70.895)	S. Error 4.135	β_1	t 15.181	p <.001	r ¹	r ²	VIF
Age group										
18-21	348	48.1	3.984 (-1.172 – 9.139)	2.626	0.129	1.517	0.130	0.003	0.057	6.574
22-24	302	41.9	0.041 (-3.709 – 3.792)	1.910	0.001	0.022	0.983	-0.007	0.001	3.339
25 +	73	10.1	Referans							
Class/Year of Study										
1st Year	362	50.1	Referans							
4th Year	361	49.9	4.025 (-0.182 – 8.232)	2.143	0.130	1.878	0.061	0.023	0.071	4.378
Gender										
Female	419	58.0	Referans							
Male	304	42.0	5.033 (2.586 – 7.48)	1.246	0.160	4.039	<.001	0.077	0.152	1.443
Field of Study										
Social	260	36.0	Referans							
Science	182	25.2	3.3 (0.475 – 6.125)	1.439	0.093	2.293	0.022	0.169	0.087	1.509
Health	281	38.9	-0.297 (-3.021 – 2.426)	1.387	-0.009	-0.214	0.830	-0.078	-0.008	1.743
Romantic Relationship Status										
No	511	70.7	Referans							
Yes	211	29.2	4.124 (1.816 – 6.432)	1.176	0.121	3.508	<.001	0.087	0.132	1.089
Family Type										
Nuclear	602	83.3	Referans							
Extended	121	16.7	-0.373 (-3.191 – 2.444)	1.435	-0.009	-0.260	0.795	0.059	-0.010	1.095
Mother's Education Level										
Primary	462	63.9	Referans							
High school	150	20.7	-1.699 (-4.537 – 1.139)	1.446	-0.044	-1.175	0.240	-0.078	-0.045	1.311
University	111	15.4	-3.534 (-7.137 – 0.069)	1.835	-0.082	-1.926	0.055	-0.149	-0.073	1.669
Father's Education Level										
Primary	315	43.6	Referans							
High school	203	28.1	0.276 (-2.425 – 2.977)	1.376	0.008	0.201	0.841	-0.022	0.008	1.458
University	205	28.4	0.314 (-2.875 – 3.503)	1.624	0.009	0.193	0.847	-0.114	0.007	2.044
Longest Place of Residence										
Village	77	10.7	1.746 (-1.862 – 5.354)	1.838	0.035	0.950	0.342	0.078	0.036	1.226
Town	196	27.1	-0.836 (-3.248 – 1.577)	1.229	-0.024	-0.680	0.497	0.007	-0.026	1.138
City	450	62.2	Referans							
Income Level										
Below Minimum Wage	312	43.2	Referans							
Above Minimum Wage	411	56.8	1.844 (-0.291 – 3.98)	1.088	0.059	1.696	0.090	0.039	0.064	1.107

F: 7.878, p: 0.000, R²: %24.1, Adjusted R²: 0.211, β_0 : Unstandardized beta coefficient, β_1 : Standardized beta coefficient, r¹: Zero-order correlation, r²: Partial correlation

Table 2. Multiple linear regression analysis of cultural attitudes and beliefs influencing marriage attitudes

Constant	n	%	β ₀ (95% CI)	S. Error	β ₁	t	p	r ¹	r ²	VIF
Spouse Selection Decision										
Self-Decides, Seeks Family Approval	650	89.9	6.12 (2.002 – 10.238)	2.098	0.119	2.918	0.004	0.163	0.110	1.523
Family Decides, Seeks Self Approval	16	2.2	3.648 (-4.291 – 11.588)	4.044	0.035	0.902	0.367	0.022	0.034	1.350
Independent	57	7.9	Referans							
Is it important that your spouse is of the same nationality?										
Yes	237	32.8	-0.1 (-2.655 – 2.456)	1.301	-0.003	-0.077	0.939	0.081	-0.003	1.447
No	486	67.2	Referans							
Is it important that your spouse follows the same religion?										
Yes	427	59.1	4.41 (1.989 - 6.831)	1.233	0.140	3.576	<.001	0.269	0.135	1.403
No	296	40.9	Referans							
Is it important that your spouse is of the same ethnic background?										
Yes	161	22.3	-0.578 (-3.486 – 2.33)	1.481	-0.016	-0.390	0.697	0.076	-0.015	1.448
No	562	77.7	Referans							
Do you approve of premarital cohabitation?										
Yes	155	21.4	-5.081 (-8.673 - -1.488)	1.830	-0.135	-2.776	0.006	-0.320	-0.105	2.151
no	464	64.2	5.153 (2.004 – 8.301)	1.604	0.160	3.213	<.001	0.310	0.121	2.255
Neutral	104	14.4	Referans							
Would you marry someone you met online?										
Never considered it	286	39.6	Referans							
Yes, I would marry	94	13.0	0.221 (-3.093 – 3.534)	1.688	0.005	0.131	0.896	0.004	0.005	1.229
No, I would not marry	343	47.4	-2.211 (-4.45 – 0.029)	1.141	-0.071	-1.938	0.053	-0.030	-0.073	1.237
Do you think divorce is appropriate for couples who do not get along?										
Yes	568	78.6	-5.285 (-8.322 - -2.248)	1.547	-0.140	-3.416	<.001	-0.194	-0.129	1.537
no	55	7.6	-0.667 (-5.332 – 3.998)	2.376	-0.011	-0.281	0.779	0.125	-0.011	1.513
Neutral	100	13.8	Referans							
How should your spouse's financial status be?										
Better than mine	315	43.6	1.609 (-1.326 – 4.545)	1.495	0.040	1.076	0.282	0.018	0.041	1.274
Same as mine	203	28.1	-1.086 (-3.565 – 1.392)	1.262	-0.032	-0.861	0.390	-0.055	-0.033	1.227
Financial status does not matter	205	28.4	Referans							

F: 7.878, p: 0.000, R²: %24.1, Adjusted R²: 0.211, β₀: Unstandardized beta coefficient, β₁: Standardized beta coefficient, r¹: Zero-order correlation, r²: Partial correlation

Discussion

University years represent a critical period in which individuals' attitudes toward marriage become more established, shaping their perceptions of marital relationships and influencing spouse selection criteria [14,15]. A key finding of this study is that Turkish university students exhibit more favorable attitudes toward marriage compared to their Western counterparts, a trend consistent with prior research conducted in Türkiye [9,16]. Similar findings have been observed among Iranian university students, suggesting that moderately positive attitudes toward marriage may be a characteristic of societies where marriage is regarded as a social and familial responsibility [17]. In contrast, in North America and Europe, individualization and career-oriented lifestyles contribute to delayed marriage decisions, whereas in collectivist societies like Türkiye, marriage continues to be perceived as a social and familial obligation, explaining the observed differences [8,18].

Gender differences play a pivotal role in shaping marriage attitudes. In line with previous studies [9,16,19,20], the present findings indicate that male students exhibit more positive attitudes toward marriage compared to female students [9,16,19,20]. However, some research contradicts this trend, suggesting that female students may hold more favorable marriage attitudes under specific conditions [21-25]. This divergence may be explained by traditional gender roles and evolving expectations regarding economic independence. Women today are increasingly

prioritizing career aspirations and autonomy, which may lead them to adopt a more cautious stance toward marriage [26,28]. While Türkiye's patriarchal family structure continues to shape gendered social expectations, higher education appears to mitigate these effects by fostering more egalitarian perspectives on marriage and gender roles.

The results show that the educational level of the parents has a significant effect on the attitudes of university students towards marriage [26,28]. It was observed that students whose mothers had a lower level of education had a more favourable view of marriage, which may be explained by the protective effect of traditional family structures and the transmission of cultural values from one generation to the next [29]. According to social learning theory, parents, as the main socialisation agents, transmit marriage and family values to their children through direct reinforcement or observational learning processes [5]. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the enduring influence of family background on individuals' marriage expectations and decision-making processes [5,29]. In addition, students with employed mothers had more positive attitudes towards marriage than those with unemployed mothers, possibly because employed mothers reinforce marriage as a collaborative and economically sustainable institution.

Cultural values play a central role in shaping both marriage attitudes and spouse selection preferences [10]. One of the most

significant findings of this study is that students who prioritize religious compatibility exhibit significantly more favorable attitudes toward marriage. This supports existing research emphasizing the role of religion in reinforcing traditional marital norms and expectations [6,8,30]. Conversely, ethnic background was not a significant predictor of marriage attitudes, suggesting that in contemporary Turkish society, ethnicity is less central to spouse selection than religious and familial considerations.

Views on divorce and premarital cohabitation were found to be strong predictors of marriage attitudes [8,18,31,33]. Students who support divorce in cases of marital discord exhibited lower IMAS scores, indicating less favorable attitudes toward marriage [8,18]. This aligns with national and international findings suggesting that young people increasingly normalize divorce as a legitimate outcome of marital dissatisfaction [8,18,31,33]. Moreover, students who opposed premarital cohabitation displayed significantly more favorable attitudes toward marriage. While cohabitation is widely accepted in many Western societies [18,32-35], it remains stigmatized in Türkiye and other patriarchal cultures, where marriage continues to be regarded as a formalized and socially endorsed institution [8,31].

The findings regarding spouse selection criteria provide further insight into evolving marital expectations [30]. Among university students, the most prioritized spouse selection criterion was personality, followed by affection/love and family harmony, consistent with prior studies emphasizing the role of emotional compatibility in marital stability [6,30]. Gender differences were evident in secondary spouse selection preferences. Female students emphasized religious compatibility, whereas male students placed greater importance on virginity. These findings align with previous research suggesting that cultural expectations regarding chastity remain more pronounced for women in patriarchal societies [6,7,30,36,37]. Although virginity norms are evolving globally, the persistence of male preference for virginity in spouse selection in Türkiye reflects deeply ingrained sociocultural and religious influences.

Additionally, religious belief continues to shape marital expectations by influencing values, behaviors, and social norms [38]. The emphasis placed on religious compatibility by female students may be attributed to Islamic teachings, which traditionally prohibit Muslim women from marrying outside their faith. This restriction is reinforced not only by religious doctrine but also by social conventions and patrilineal family structures, where lineage is transmitted through the male line.

Finally, an important finding of this study is that political alignment ranked as the least important factor in spouse selection. This supports prior research indicating that young adults, particularly university students, prioritize personal compatibility over ideological alignment when selecting a partner [6,8,30,36]. The relative insignificance of political compatibility may reflect a pragmatic approach to relationship stability, particularly given the historical and contemporary political tensions in Türkiye.

Conclusion

This study highlights the complex interplay between sociodemographic factors, cultural norms, and individual preferences in shaping university students' attitudes toward marriage and spouse selection criteria. Gender, religious compatibility, and attitudes toward cohabitation and divorce emerge as key determinants of marital perspectives, while parental education and financial factors play a less significant role. The findings contribute to the broader literature on marriage and family studies by providing empirical insights from a semi-traditional, semi-modernizing society, where Western influences and traditional values intersect. Future research should further explore how higher education and evolving gender roles continue to reshape marriage perceptions in Türkiye and similar societies undergoing sociocultural transitions.

Strengths and Limitations

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of university students' marriage attitudes by integrating sociodemographic, cultural, and individual factors, offering valuable insights into a semi-traditional, semi-modernizing society. A key strength lies in its large and diverse sample, enhancing the generalizability of findings within the Turkish university context. The inclusion of a validated scale (IMAS) and robust statistical analyses strengthens the study's methodological rigor. Additionally, the structured examination of spouse selection criteria and marital attitudes fills a critical gap in the literature by linking these dimensions, which are often studied separately. However, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences, and self-reported measures may introduce social desirability bias, particularly regarding sensitive topics such as religious beliefs and premarital cohabitation. Additionally, the study is limited to a single university setting, restricting broader national representativeness. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and qualitative methodologies to capture evolving marriage perceptions over time and provide deeper contextual understanding.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in the study.

Financial Disclosure

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Ethical Approval

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