Exploring the Formation of the Socio-Cultural Trauma of Fear of Marriage in Men Using the Grounded Theory Method

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Objective: This study aimed to explore the social and cultural trauma underlying the fear of marriage among young men, identifying its causal, contextual, and consequential dimensions through a grounded theory approach.

Methods and Materials: The research adopted a qualitative design based on Strauss and Corbin's systematic grounded theory methodology. Seventeen male participants aged 20–49 years from Shahr-eza were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using a three-stage coding process—open, axial, and selective coding. The analytical framework sought to extract categories related to causal conditions, contextual settings, strategies, and outcomes linked to fear of marriage. Theoretical saturation was achieved when no new data emerged from additional interviews.

Findings: Analysis revealed that fear of marriage in men emerges from the interaction of psychological, familial, and socio-economic factors. Causal conditions included fear of emotional failure, perfectionism, lack of long-term communication skills, and exposure to unsuccessful marital models. Contextual conditions encompassed economic insecurity, family dysfunction, and moral or religious incompatibility between potential partners. Foundational conditions involved intergenerational trauma, inadequate parental support, and difficulties in establishing personal boundaries. Strategic responses included efforts toward financial independence, learning effective communication, and seeking emotional reassurance in potential relationships. The primary consequences observed were depression, increased dependency, and moral looseness, indicating deep-rooted psychosocial distress linked to cultural contradictions between traditional expectations and modern individualistic values.

Conclusion: The study concludes that fear of marriage among men represents a multifaceted sociocultural trauma shaped by the conflict between traditional family expectations and contemporary socio-economic realities. Addressing this issue requires integrated psychosocial, educational, and policy-based interventions that foster emotional competence, economic stability, and cultural adaptation.

Keywords: *trauma, marriage, fear, social factors, cultural conditions*

1. Introduction

Marriage has long been considered one of the most fundamental social institutions, serving as a cornerstone for emotional security, social continuity, and cultural transmission across generations. However, the transition from traditional to modern societies has transformed the meaning, function, and perception of marriage, leading to the emergence of new psychosocial anxieties surrounding it (Afra, 2020; Aghasi & Fallah Minbashi, 2015). Industrialization, globalization, and digital communication have collectively reshaped interpersonal relationships and redefined individual expectations from marital life. In particular, young men are increasingly exposed to contradictory cultural signals—traditional norms that valorize marriage and modern discourses that prioritize autonomy and personal achievement. This tension has contributed to the formation of social and cultural trauma manifesting as a "fear of marriage," a phenomenon now observable across many societies (Noorouzi, 2024; Ren, 2022).

In the Iranian sociocultural context, family remains the primary social unit influencing one's emotional and behavioral development, yet it is undergoing rapid structural and value-based changes. Studies indicate that rising individualism, economic instability, and evolving gender roles have weakened traditional family expectations surrounding marriage (Banarizadeh, 2024; Khani, 2023). The growing divorce rate and delayed marriages among Iranian youth reflect a broader transformation in the cultural logic of relationships. The shift from collective decision-making to personal choice, while expanding freedom, has also intensified anxiety regarding compatibility, economic readiness, and relational trust (Aghasi & Fallah Minbashi, 2015; Ahmadi, 2023). Fear of failure, loss of independence, and social judgment associated with marital breakdown are becoming significant deterrents for young adults considering marriage (Boto-Garcia & Perali, 2023; Wenqing et al., 2024).

From a psychological perspective, fear of marriage can be conceptualized as a form of anticipatory anxiety driven by internalized social experiences and external pressures. Research demonstrates that exposure to unsuccessful marital models within one's family or social network, combined with unresolved interpersonal trauma, contributes to negative cognitive schemas regarding intimacy and commitment (Cantekin & Kunduracı, 2024; Ren, 2022). Similarly, intergenerational patterns of conflict, parental divorce, and emotional neglect foster attachment insecurities that manifest as avoidance of long-term partnerships (Ahmadi, 2023; Ismailpour & Nour Mohammadi Aheri, 2022). These experiences may generate a sense of learned helplessness toward relational stability, prompting individuals to idealize independence or temporary relationships over marriage.

The sociological dimension of this fear, however, cannot be overlooked. As the boundaries between traditional and modern values blur, marriage is increasingly perceived as a high-risk institution, particularly in contexts marked by economic precarity and shifting gender dynamics (Afra, 2020; Khani, 2023). Economic challenges such as unemployment, housing shortages, and the rising costs of wedding ceremonies exacerbate men's perceived inability to fulfill culturally defined roles as providers (Ahmadi, 2023; Banarizadeh, 2024). Moreover, media representations of romantic relationships and the normalization of single lifestyles among peers reinforce alternative life paths that appear more emotionally and financially secure (Fereshteh Vafaeinezhad et al., 2023; F. Vafaeinezhad et al., 2023). Thus, fear of marriage is not merely an individual psychological issue but a multi-layered social construct shaped by intersecting structural, cultural, and emotional factors.

Scholars have identified that the decline of collective familial oversight and the growing emphasis on self-determination have shifted the emotional responsibility for marital success onto the individual (Parker et al., 2022; Schwartz & Han, 2015). This shift has heightened self-monitoring tendencies and perfectionistic standards in mate selection (Boto-Garcia & Perali, 2023). In societies undergoing rapid modernization, individuals are often caught between the desire for emotional fulfillment and the fear of vulnerability, a paradox that amplifies relational ambivalence. As Winfield (Winfield, 2022) notes, social transitions and uncertainty can act as collective traumas, particularly when individuals perceive that they lack control over future relational outcomes. This perception aligns with Noorouzi's (Noorouzi, 2024) conceptualization of "social trauma," wherein societal pressures and value dissonances generate enduring psychological distress at the cultural level.

Iranian studies have begun to examine the psychosocial correlates of fear of marriage in detail. Ismailpour and Nour Mohammadi Aheri (Ismailpour & Nour Mohammadi Aheri, 2022) developed and validated a fear of marriage questionnaire, revealing that the phenomenon is closely linked with economic anxiety, distrust toward the opposite

gender, and perceived incompatibility between modern expectations and traditional gender norms. Similarly, Niakani (Niakani, 2022) found that modern marriage models are often characterized by emotional distance and uncertainty, particularly when partners lack empathy or effective communication. The absence of pre-marital education that addresses emotional and interpersonal competencies further compounds this problem (Fereshteh Vafaeinezhad et al., 2023; F. Vafaeinezhad et al., 2023). In contrast, structured educational interventions emphasizing self-awareness and communication have been shown to mitigate such fears by promoting adaptive relational attitudes.

Beyond individual-level explanations, cultural narratives and collective memory play essential roles in shaping fear of marriage. Parastandeh (Parastandeh, 2021) highlights how cultural expressions and collective narratives reflect deep-seated social attitudes toward family, gender, and commitment. In Iranian society, the idealization of marriage as a sacred institution coexists with widespread discourse about its challenges and failures, generating cognitive dissonance among youth (Aghasi & Fallah Minbashi, 2015; Khani, 2023). Moreover, as Ren (Ren, 2022) and Wenqing (Wenqing et al., 2024) suggest, global trends indicate that similar fears are emerging among both men and women, linked to psychological factors such as perfectionism, fear of disappointment, and relational mistrust. This demonstrates that fear of marriage is not confined to specific cultural boundaries but represents a universal response to contemporary relational uncertainty.

Sociocultural theories suggest that such fears are embedded within broader transformations in gender relations and identity construction. The reversal of the gender gap in education and the rise of women's economic independence have redefined expectations surrounding partnership, creating both empowerment and tension within marital dynamics (Parker et al., 2022; Schwartz & Han, 2015). In Iran, as in many societies, young women's growing autonomy has challenged patriarchal norms of dependence, leading to negotiation of new relational contracts between men and women (Aghasi & Fallah Minbashi, 2015; Khani, 2023). For men, however, these shifts may trigger identity conflicts, as traditional definitions of masculinity rooted in provision and authority lose relevance (Banarizadeh, 2024). Consequently, some men experience existential uncertainty regarding their role in marriage, interpreting commitment as a potential threat to autonomy or self-worth (Ren, 2022; Wenqing et al., 2024).

Psychological models also underscore the role of family attachment and early relational experiences in shaping attitudes toward marriage (Ahmadi, 2023; Ismailpour & Nour Mohammadi Aheri, 2022). Children raised in families marked by emotional coldness, marital conflict, or parental divorce may internalize avoidance-based attachment patterns, predisposing them to fear intimacy and long-term commitment. Furthermore, exposure to parental overcontrol or inconsistent support can hinder the development of autonomy and boundary-setting—skills essential for healthy adult relationships (Ahmadi, 2023; Noorouzi, 2024). In the absence of secure attachment models, marriage is perceived not as a partnership but as a potential loss of freedom or emotional safety.

Contemporary cross-cultural studies reveal that the phenomenon of marriage fear is intertwined with broader shifts in human values and social organization (Cantekin & Kunduracı, 2024; Ren, 2022). In collectivist societies transitioning toward individualism, the erosion of traditional community bonds and moral cohesion often generates existential uncertainty, expressed through hesitation to engage in binding commitments (Afra, 2020; Noorouzi, 2024). As globalization intensifies, the diffusion of Western romantic ideals—emphasizing passion, equality, and choice—further complicates individuals' decision-making processes regarding marriage (Parker et al., 2022; Winfield, 2022). This dual exposure to traditional and modern frameworks creates what Ren (Ren, 2022) calls "value duality," a psychological state where individuals oscillate between conformity and rebellion, leading to chronic ambivalence.

Ultimately, fear of marriage can be interpreted as both a personal psychological defense and a social symptom of modernity. The convergence of economic precarity, shifting gender norms, emotional individualism, and weakened family structures has rendered marriage a complex and anxiety-inducing institution (Aghasi & Fallah Minbashi, 2015; Banarizadeh, 2024; Khani, 2023). Addressing this phenomenon requires a multidimensional understanding that integrates sociological, psychological, and cultural perspectives. The present study, therefore, employs a grounded theory approach to analyze the socio-cultural trauma underlying men's fear of marriage, seeking to identify its causal, contextual, and consequential dimensions.

2.   Methods and Materials

In this study, the Strauss and Corbin systematic method was used for data analysis, which is characterized by an orderly approach based on the constant comparative method. This method emphasizes data analysis through the stages of coding and provides a logical paradigm or a developing visual model. Accordingly, the axis of data analysis in the present study is based on open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

Open coding represents the conceptualization of the main elements of theory construction, which in grounded theory is defined as an analytical process through which concepts are identified and categorized according to their properties and dimensions. The main analytical process in this stage involves posing questions about the data, comparing incidents and events of phenomena based on their similarities and differences with other similar events, assigning them a common label, and placing them within a specific category.

Axial coding involves the process of linking subcategories to more central categories, encompassing a complex process of inductive and deductive reasoning performed through several stages to generate and discover constructs based on the paradigm model.

The third stage, selective coding, refers to the process in which the researcher models and develops propositions or hypotheses. At this stage, the categories are presented in relation to each other within a model, and their interrelationships are described. The resulting theory at this point may be presented in various forms, such as narrative statements, diagrams, or sets of propositions or hypotheses.

Decisions related to purposive sampling involve selecting information sources that, in light of prior data, provide the highest level of theoretical insight. At this stage, the main question is which group or subgroup should be approached to enable the most effective multiple comparisons to achieve theoretical goals. The first interview was conducted at the clinic, and based on the data obtained, the next interviewee was selected from among acquaintances. The process of interviewing, guided by emerging data, directed the researcher toward interviewing clients referred to the clinic or employing snowball sampling, which initially began with the group of acquaintances. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached—when no new information emerged from the interviews.

3. Findings and Results

A total of 17 male participants took part in the study. The participants were categorized into three age groups: 20–29 years (3 participants), 30–39 years (9 participants), and 40–49 years (5 participants). In terms of employment status, 12 participants were employed and 5 were unemployed. Regarding educational level, 1 participant had below-diploma education, 7 had a high school diploma, 3 held a bachelor's degree, 3 had a master's degree, and 3 participants held a doctoral degree. The findings show that the sample included individuals from different socioeconomic levels and age groups, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how social and cultural trauma shapes fear of marriage among men.

Table 1

Open Codes Derived from Initial Coding on Respondents' Perception of the Concept of Fear of Marriage

No.	Open Codes
1	Lack of intimacy between parents (parental disagreement)
2	Parents opposing their son's marriage
3	High expectations and opposition from families
4	Unemployment
5	Lack of housing
6	High cost of living
7	High expenses of wedding ceremonies
8	Obligation to provide marriage dowry (marriage contract pressure on men)
9	Fear of an unsuccessful marriage

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10	Lack of cooperation and participation in marriage decisions
11	Lack of social growth through marriage
12	Distrust toward the opposite gender
13	Inability to set emotional and personal boundaries with parents
14	Escape from life responsibilities
15	Fear of life responsibilities
16	Inability to find a desirable partner
17	High expectations from the prospective partner
18	Disagreement on financial and cultural issues before marriage
19	Lack of mutual understanding during the dating or engagement period
20	Indecisiveness in making marriage-related decisions
21	Lack of emotional or financial support from parents for marriage
22	Moral value discrepancies between partners
23	Disagreement in religious beliefs and practices (e.g., hijab, prayer, fasting)
24	Postponing marriage to save money
25	Postponing marriage to purchase housing
26	Postponing marriage to buy a car
27	Postponing marriage to buy gold or jewelry
28	Financial or emotional responsibility toward supporting parents
29	Comfort and attractiveness of single life among peers and acquaintances

Foundational Conditions

Abraham Maslow believed that human needs are arranged in order of importance as follows: (1) physiological needs, (2) safety needs, (3) social needs, (4) esteem needs, and (5) self-actualization needs. When one need is satisfied, another takes its place. As long as a person's physiological and safety needs are not fulfilled, they will not seek to satisfy social needs, which include establishing relationships with others, belonging, and companionship.

It is important to note that the absence of certain conditions can create a foundation for the formation of fear of marriage. Lack of economic security, the constraints of married life, and disagreements in moral and religious values serve as examples.

Interview with Mohammad, 40 years old:

"The only savings I have for marriage are a few pieces of gold my mother has bought over time and a piece of land. Girls and their families value not only education but also wealth and prestigious jobs. When you go for a proposal, they immediately compare and boast that they rejected someone else before. I've proposed several times, but they didn't accept because of financial issues or because I hadn't completed military service. I work with my father. Nowadays, competition and showing off have increased, and girls are not easily satisfied. During the proposal meetings, they only want things to go their way… From the beginning, they insist they don't want contact with their husband's relatives. Ironically, they want the father's wealth but not his family. All these things create anxiety and fear about marriage."

Contextual Conditions

From a grounded theory perspective, contextual conditions refer to a specific set of circumstances that come together at a particular time and place to create situations or issues to which individuals respond through their actions or interactions. Grounded theory refers to a theory that is

directly extracted from systematically collected and analyzed research data.

The importance of the family's role in transitional events, such as marriage, has been confirmed in global studies. Families actively influence the process of forming marital unions. Young people whose families cannot provide financial support for this transition often face difficulties. For many, the family serves as a stabilizing force, offering a sense of security amid social uncertainty, economic instability, and the changes caused by globalization.

The main categories related to contextual conditions in the present study are grouped into four family-related domains: inability to establish personal boundaries from parents, lack of parental support for marriage, obligation to financially support parents, and the need to assist siblings.

Interview with Afshin, 40 years old:

"My parents' relationship isn't good; they have an emotional divorce. There's always been conflict at home. We have no contact with my father's side of the family. I've suffered a lot and stayed at my grandfather's house to escape the family environment. My uncles supported me and helped me succeed in school. My father was addicted to opium and later methamphetamine, losing his wealth and job. My mother separated her finances to prevent losing everything. Now, I have to provide for my mother and brother. I even feel sorry for my father and help him financially."

Causal Conditions

Causal conditions refer to events and incidents that directly affect a phenomenon. In this study, the main causal categories were identified in 11 areas: emotional failure of others in marriage, perfectionism, the proportion of successful and unsuccessful couples within one's social circle, comfort observed in the single lives of peers, fear of disappointment in marital life, lack of skills for long-term relationships, indecisiveness, lack of attraction to the opposite sex, infidelity, sexual assault, and secret relationships.

Interview with Radman, 26 years old:

"I don't own a house or a car, and I don't have a stable job. My problem is that my parents are divorced, even though both come from well-known families in Shahr-eza. Unfortunately, my father's addiction destroyed everything—our lives and future. My mother works, and after the divorce, my father quit his addiction. Now, my brother and I live with him. No one wants to marry us because we didn't finish school and don't come from a stable family. My mother doesn't even think about our marriage.

All the property was divided between my father and us… I have no confidence for marriage; I'm even afraid to think about being with a girl, let alone marrying one."

Strategies and Strategic Interactions

Action, interaction, or reciprocal interaction refers to the strategic methods, habitual behaviors, and ways individuals manage situations when facing challenges. To achieve marriage, individuals adopt behavioral strategies and techniques suited to their contextual and causal conditions. These strategies represent both adaptive and coping mechanisms through which individuals navigate their personal and social realities.

These strategies were classified into five major categories: existence of love and emotional attachment, establishing reassurance in marriage, financial management (among men), learning effective communication with a future spouse, and enhancing interpersonal communication skills.

Interview with Adel, 38 years old:

"My younger brothers got married before me. Seeing their financial struggles, I decided not to marry until I improved my financial situation. Now, I'm satisfied with my job and education. I have a house and a car. Since I was 32, I've gone on a few proposal meetings with my mother. I live independently… The main reason I haven't married yet is that I have very high expectations for my future spouse."

Consequences

Consequences are the conditions that emerge as a result of causal factors and the strategies adopted by individuals. In this study, the consequences refer to the current state of individuals' lives shaped by their fears of marriage and their coping efforts.

Participants who remained single identified four main consequences: moral looseness, increased dependency, depression, and loss of the prime opportunity for marriage.

Interview with Mohammad, 40 years old:

"I've been working since I was 18, and I'm financially well-off. What has stopped me from marrying is my parents' interference. Because I have a house, car, and garden, they worry too much. Every time I go for a proposal, the girl's family insists that my immovable properties be included in the marriage contract. Once the topic of the contract arises, conflicts begin. As I get older, my desire and emotional need for marriage diminish. My family supports me a lot, but I know that a spouse completes a person's spiritual and emotional dimensions."

Figure 1

Final Paradigm Model
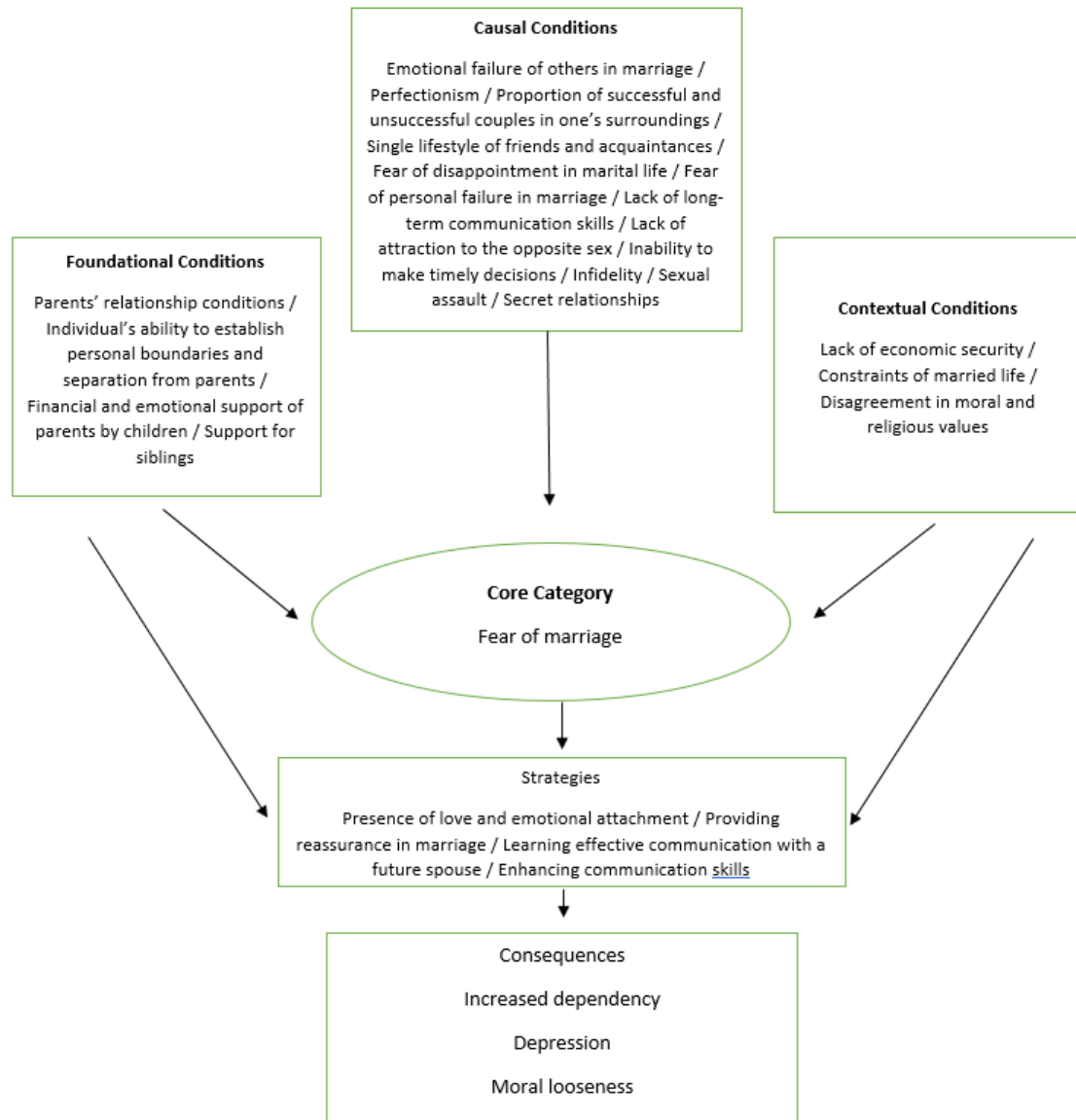
4.   Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study revealed that the social and cultural trauma of fear of marriage among young men emerges through a complex interplay of psychological, familial, and socio-economic factors. Analysis of interviews demonstrated that economic insecurity, intergenerational conflict, and inconsistent parental support constitute the central contextual and causal conditions that shape men's perceptions of marriage. Participants often associated marriage with loss of autonomy, financial instability, and emotional entrapment, reflecting a broader socio-cultural tension between traditional expectations and modern individualistic values. The results align with sociological findings that show how rapid modernization and the decline of collective family structures contribute to uncertainty surrounding marriage and family formation (Afra, 2020; Banarizadeh, 2024). In particular, the findings affirm that when material and emotional stability are not guaranteed, men interpret marriage not as a social achievement but as a potential risk to their personal and economic security (Ahmadi, 2023; Khani, 2023).

The study also found that emotional and relational failures observed in others' marriages act as vicarious traumas that reinforce fear and avoidance behaviors among participants. Young men reported learning indirectly from the marital conflicts of parents or peers, which cultivated a sense of distrust toward intimacy and commitment. This observation supports previous research suggesting that intergenerational exposure to marital instability contributes to avoidance-based attachment and commitment phobia (Ahmadi, 2023; Ren, 2022). Consistent with the findings of Cantekin and Kunduracı (Cantekin & Kunduracı, 2024), family belonging and parental attitudes play crucial roles in shaping emotional readiness for marriage. Participants raised in families characterized by emotional detachment, authoritarian parenting, or inconsistent support were more likely to internalize anxiety and pessimism toward marriage. This reflects the role of early relational experiences as the foundation for later interpersonal competence and trust formation, which are essential for sustaining long-term romantic bonds.

The results also highlighted economic constraints—including unemployment, high living costs, and the pressure to provide—as dominant barriers to marriage among male participants. Men perceived marriage as a financial burden that could jeopardize their independence and stability. Similar conclusions have been reached in several Iranian studies that emphasize how economic factors such as job insecurity and housing shortages serve as significant deterrents to marriage (Banarizadeh, 2024; Khani, 2023). This perception is further reinforced by societal expectations that equate masculinity with material provision and financial success (Afra, 2020; Aghasi & Fallah Minbashi, 2015). Such expectations place young men in a paradoxical position: while traditional norms still demand that they be financial providers, modern economic realities prevent many from achieving this standard, thereby producing chronic anxiety and avoidance. These findings align with the theoretical framework of social trauma proposed by Noorouzi (Noorouzi, 2024), who argued that the gap between cultural expectations and lived economic realities generates psychological distress that manifests in avoidance of major social commitments, including marriage.

From a psychological standpoint, the data revealed that fear of emotional failure and perfectionistic tendencies are major intrapersonal contributors to the fear of marriage. Participants frequently expressed concerns about making irreversible choices or failing to meet the expectations of a potential partner. This aligns with research by Boto-Garcia and Perali (Boto-Garcia & Perali, 2023), who demonstrated that perfectionism and fear of commitment often coexist as cognitive distortions within individuals exposed to unstable relational models. The current study supports their view that individuals with heightened sensitivity to failure tend to perceive marriage as an evaluative arena where personal inadequacies could be exposed. Furthermore, the qualitative data suggest that fear of relational disappointment and lack of long-term communication skills reinforce avoidance, supporting findings from Ismailpour and Nour Mohammadi Aheri (Ismailpour & Nour Mohammadi Aheri, 2022), who developed a fear of marriage questionnaire and identified deficits in communication and empathy as core predictors of marital anxiety.

Interestingly, the perception of single life as easier and less restrictive emerged as a recurring theme. Many participants reported that observing friends and acquaintances living comfortably as singles increased their reluctance to pursue marriage. This mirrors findings from Niakani (Niakani, 2022), who reported that modern marriage is increasingly compared to the perceived freedoms of single life, making commitment appear as a loss rather than a gain. The normalization of singlehood and the decline of marriage as a social necessity, noted by Khani (Khani, 2023), reinforce the cultural acceptability of delaying or avoiding marriage altogether. In this context, the participants' preference for independence reflects not just a personal choice but a broader cultural shift toward individualistic lifestyles in post-industrial societies (Afra, 2020; Banarizadeh, 2024).

The results also identified family dysfunction and role reversal as contextual foundations for fear of marriage. Several participants described households marked by emotional neglect, financial dependency on children, or parental conflict. These findings align with Ahmadi (Ahmadi, 2023), who found that poor father-child communication significantly reduces trust and secure attachment in adulthood. Likewise, Ren (Ren, 2022) emphasized that family instability during formative years contributes to emotional detachment and anxiety in intimate relationships. In the present study, men who were required to financially or emotionally support parents and siblings reported ambivalence toward starting their own families. This dynamic echoes findings from Noorouzi (Noorouzi, 2024), who conceptualized family dysfunction as a form of social trauma wherein individuals internalize responsibility for parental well-being, thereby delaying their personal developmental milestones, including marriage.

Furthermore, cultural contradictions between modern and traditional values were found to intensify the trauma of marriage fear. Participants simultaneously acknowledged marriage as a social ideal while expressing skepticism about its practicality and fairness. This reflects what Ren (Ren, 2022) and Wenqing (Wenqing et al., 2024) described as "value duality," in which young adults oscillate between collectivist traditions emphasizing duty and modern norms that prioritize self-realization. Within this cognitive dissonance, marriage becomes a site of negotiation between inherited moral obligations and emerging individual aspirations. Such ambivalence parallels global findings on shifting gender relations, where new female empowerment and educational achievements have redefined the balance of authority and emotional expectations in marital partnerships (Parker et al., 2022; Schwartz & Han, 2015). These structural changes, while positive for gender equality, have inadvertently created uncertainty about traditional male roles, thereby heightening men's fear of inadequacy and loss of control within marriage (Aghasi & Fallah Minbashi, 2015; Banarizadeh, 2024).

Another significant finding relates to the role of social comparison and cultural pressure in reinforcing marital hesitation. Participants frequently mentioned that engagement negotiations are now influenced by societal prestige, material competition, and unrealistic marital standards. This observation corroborates Parastandeh's (Parastandeh, 2021) assertion that collective cultural memory—transmitted through social discourse, media, and community norms—shapes contemporary anxieties surrounding marriage. As participants compared themselves to others who possessed more wealth or higher social standing, their sense of readiness diminished. The internalization of comparative inadequacy is consistent with Afra's (Afra, 2020) sociological findings on individualism and status consciousness in Iranian urban life. These cultural pressures interact with economic realities to create a psychological state of learned avoidance, in which individuals rationalize non-marriage as a protective strategy against social judgment and potential failure.

The data further suggest that religious and moral incongruences between potential partners represent another key source of anxiety. Many participants cited disagreement over values such as modesty, prayer, or lifestyle preferences as deterrents to pursuing relationships. This observation parallels findings from Aghasi and Fallah Minbashi (Aghasi & Fallah Minbashi, 2015), who reported that moral and ideological dissimilarity predicts hesitation in marital

commitment. As modernization encourages greater value diversity, the likelihood of encountering ideological mismatches increases, thereby complicating the decision-making process. At the same time, religious expectations surrounding marriage remain strong in Iranian society, producing tension between freedom of choice and adherence to collective moral codes (Ahmadi, 2023; Niakani, 2022).

In line with global perspectives, the findings of this study resonate with research conducted in other cultural contexts. For example, Cantekin and Kunduracı (Cantekin & Kunduracı, 2024) found similar patterns of marriage anxiety among university students in Turkey, suggesting that the phenomenon transcends national boundaries and is rooted in shared psychological mechanisms of uncertainty and value conflict. Likewise, Ren (Ren, 2022) and Wenqing (Wenqing et al., 2024) observed comparable fears among Chinese youth, where rapid modernization and shifting gender roles have produced comparable anxieties. These cross-cultural consistencies imply that the fear of marriage may be a global psychosocial response to modern life transitions rather than a culturally isolated issue.

Finally, the strategic responses identified in this study—such as efforts to develop communication skills, seek emotional security, and establish financial independence—reflect adaptive coping mechanisms. Participants who reported higher emotional self-awareness or positive parental models demonstrated lower levels of fear. This outcome corresponds with the findings of Vafaeinezhad and colleagues (Fereshteh Vafaeinezhad et al., 2023; F. Vafaeinezhad et al., 2023), who confirmed that premarital education focusing on communication and self-understanding significantly reduces marriage anxiety. Such strategies serve as protective factors that mitigate the effects of social and cultural trauma by enhancing individuals' capacity for intimacy and resilience. The present study thereby underscores the importance of psychological preparation and skill-building interventions to address the multifaceted roots of marital fear among men.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

This study, while comprehensive in its qualitative depth, is limited by its sample size and geographical scope, which restricts the generalizability of findings. All participants were drawn from a single Iranian city, and their experiences may not represent men from different cultural, economic, or ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, the reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases, as participants may have

underreported or rationalized their fears due to social desirability. The interpretive nature of grounded theory also means that findings are context-dependent and influenced by the researcher's analytical lens. Finally, the study focused exclusively on men, omitting comparative perspectives from women that could have enriched the understanding of gendered dimensions of marital fear.

Future research should adopt a comparative cross-cultural approach to examine how fear of marriage manifests across different societies with varying gender norms and economic conditions. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in tracking how such fears evolve over time and whether they decrease following interventions such as premarital counseling or socio-economic empowerment programs. Quantitative validation of the qualitative constructs identified in this study could also enhance theoretical precision. Additionally, integrating neuropsychological or psychophysiological assessments may provide deeper insight into the emotional regulation processes underlying marital avoidance. Including both male and female participants would allow researchers to explore interactional patterns and mutual perceptions contributing to marriage-related anxiety.

Practitioners should focus on developing comprehensive premarital education programs that integrate financial literacy, emotional regulation, and communication skills. Psychologists and counselors can design interventions addressing cognitive distortions related to perfectionism, fear of failure, and mistrust in relationships. Social policy makers should also consider implementing community-based initiatives that reduce the economic burden of marriage through housing support or employment programs for young adults. Religious and cultural leaders can contribute by promoting balanced narratives around marriage that acknowledge both its challenges and developmental potential. Collectively, such strategies could help alleviate the social trauma associated with marriage fear and foster healthier pathways toward family formation.

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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.

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.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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