

Structural Modeling of the Relationship Between Family Cohesion and Fear of Marriage: The Mediating Role of Self-Esteem Among University Students Approaching Marriage

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Khaleghi, F., Nohi, S., Nasery Fadafan, M., & Aghaei, H. (2027). Structural Modeling of the Relationship Between Family Cohesion and Fear of Marriage: The Mediating Role of Self-Esteem Among University Students Approaching Marriage. *Journal of Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies*, 8(5), 1-14.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.jayps.6462>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to develop and test a structural model of the relationship between family cohesion and fear of marriage, with self-esteem examined as a potential mediating variable among university students approaching marriage.

Methods and Materials: This descriptive-correlational study employed structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population consisted of university students approaching marriage who were enrolled at the Science and Research, North Tehran, and Central Tehran branches of Islamic Azad University during the 2025–2026 academic year. A total of 322 students were selected using convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Fear of Marriage Questionnaire developed by Richard et al. (2007), Olson's Family Cohesion Questionnaire (1999), and Eysenck's Self-Esteem Questionnaire (1976). The hypothesized structural model and direct and indirect relationships among the study variables were analyzed using AMOS software and structural equation modeling.

Findings: The proposed structural model demonstrated an acceptable overall fit to the observed data (CMIN/DF = 2.90, RMSEA = 0.099, GFI = 0.940, NFI = 0.930, TLI = 0.910, and IFI = 0.950). Family cohesion had a positive and statistically significant direct effect on self-esteem ($\beta = 0.97$, $P < 0.001$). However, the direct effect of self-esteem on fear of marriage was not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.061$, $P = 0.846$). Similarly, the direct effect of family cohesion on fear of marriage was nonsignificant ($\beta = 0.030$, $P = 0.328$). Bootstrap analysis further indicated that the indirect effect of family cohesion on fear of marriage through self-esteem was not significant (effect = 0.019, $P = 0.738$, 95% CI [-0.126, 0.200]).

Conclusion: Family cohesion appears to be an important positive predictor of self-esteem among students approaching marriage; however, neither family cohesion nor self-esteem significantly predicted fear of marriage in the proposed structural model. Furthermore, self-esteem did not significantly mediate the relationship between family cohesion and fear of marriage, suggesting that other individual, relational, or sociocultural mechanisms may better explain variations in marriage-related fear.

Keywords: Family Cohesion; Fear of Marriage; Self-Esteem; Marriage; University Students

1. Introduction

Marriage is one of the most consequential developmental and social transitions in adulthood, shaping individuals' emotional well-being, interpersonal functioning, social identity, and future family life. Although marriage continues to represent an important social institution across many cultural contexts, contemporary societies have experienced substantial transformations in attitudes toward marriage, timing of union formation, expectations from intimate partnerships, and perceived costs and benefits of marital commitment. These changes have been accompanied by increasing hesitation, ambivalence, and in some cases explicit fear regarding marriage among young adults. Such concerns are particularly salient among university students who are approaching the age or stage at which marriage is socially and personally relevant. In this developmental period, decisions about intimate commitment are often made simultaneously with decisions regarding education, employment, financial independence, and identity formation. Consequently, marriage may be perceived not merely as a desirable relational milestone but also as a demanding transition involving uncertainty, responsibility, and potential emotional vulnerability. Recent evidence indicates that marriage attitudes among young adults are increasingly shaped by broader social, economic, relational, and gender-related transformations, highlighting the importance of examining psychological mechanisms underlying reluctance or fear toward marriage (Lee et al., 2025; Yoon & Park, 2025).

Changes in marriage patterns have become particularly visible in societies undergoing rapid demographic and cultural transition. In many countries, the age at first marriage has increased, marriage rates have declined, and young adults have become more selective regarding potential partners and the conditions under which they are willing to marry. Socioeconomic inequalities also appear to influence entry into marriage, as educational opportunities, occupational position, financial security, and perceived future prospects may affect both marriage timing and readiness (Liu et al., 2025). Within Iran, evidence suggests that the pattern of marriage has undergone notable change during recent decades, including delayed marriage and a stagnation or decline in marriage formation among younger generations (Khani, 2023). These trends should not be interpreted solely as demographic phenomena, because they may also reflect psychological uncertainty, family-related concerns, interpersonal expectations, and fear of

unsuccessful marital outcomes. Therefore, understanding the psychological and family factors associated with fear of marriage may contribute to a more comprehensive interpretation of contemporary changes in marriage behavior.

Fear of marriage can be conceptualized as a multidimensional psychological state characterized by anxiety, apprehension, avoidance, or negative expectations regarding entering or maintaining a marital relationship. This fear may involve concerns about interpersonal failure, emotional disappointment, partner selection, loss of autonomy, parental expectations, relationship instability, previous relational experiences, or the possibility that romantic attachment may not endure. From this perspective, fear of marriage differs from a simple preference for remaining single because it reflects an emotionally charged appraisal of marriage as potentially threatening or unsafe. Research among contemporary young adults has shown that marriage-related fear may emerge from concerns about relational conflict, financial pressure, emotional burdens, family interference, changing gender expectations, and uncertainty about the long-term stability of intimate relationships (Ren, 2022). Similarly, research on young women has suggested that fears surrounding marriage and pregnancy can be associated with concerns over restricted autonomy, unequal family responsibilities, interpersonal instability, economic pressures, and perceived risks inherent in marital life (Wenqing et al., 2024). These findings support the view that fear of marriage is embedded within a wider psychosocial context rather than being reducible to an isolated individual preference.

The psychological consequences of marriage-related fear may be substantial. Individuals who experience elevated fear of marriage may avoid emotionally close relationships, postpone commitment, become excessively preoccupied with possible negative outcomes, or interpret relational challenges as evidence that marriage is inherently unsafe. Such patterns may reduce the individual's readiness to form stable intimate bonds and may interfere with realistic partner evaluation. Premarital anxiety may also become self-reinforcing when individuals repeatedly focus on possible disappointment, betrayal, incompatibility, or failure. Research examining premarital psychological interventions has shown that fear of marriage can be modified through schema-based education, suggesting that maladaptive beliefs and cognitive-emotional patterns play an important role in its formation and maintenance (Mokhtari et al., 2022). Likewise, differences in intimacy-related experiences and

expectations across forms of marriage suggest that relational schemas, love patterns, empathy, and fear of intimacy may contribute to how individuals perceive marriage and marital stability (Niakani, 2022). These findings indicate that fear of marriage may be responsive to psychological and interpersonal processes that develop well before actual marital formation.

Family context is one of the most important environments in which beliefs about marriage, intimacy, trust, and interpersonal security are formed. Before young adults develop their own marital relationships, their perceptions of closeness, conflict, support, cooperation, and emotional availability are shaped through repeated experiences within the family of origin. Family cohesion is particularly relevant in this regard. Family cohesion generally refers to the emotional bonding, connectedness, support, solidarity, and sense of belonging that characterize relationships among family members. A cohesive family can provide a secure relational environment in which individuals experience emotional support, effective communication, mutual responsiveness, and confidence in close relationships. In contrast, low family cohesion may be associated with relational insecurity, conflict, emotional distance, or weak interpersonal trust. Consequently, family cohesion may influence how young adults anticipate their own future intimate relationships and whether marriage is perceived as a secure developmental transition or as a potential source of emotional risk.

Family cohesion may be especially important during the period preceding marriage because individuals approaching marriage are often actively comparing their expectations for future family life with their experiences in their family of origin. A young adult who has experienced supportive, emotionally connected, and adaptive family relationships may be more likely to develop positive expectations about marital cooperation and long-term commitment. Conversely, exposure to persistent family conflict, poor emotional communication, instability, or low support may contribute to uncertainty about the durability and safety of intimate relationships. Research on young adults approaching marriage has shown that family cohesion-related indicators can contribute to explaining relational tendencies and vulnerability to emotional infidelity, emphasizing the relevance of the family system to emerging patterns of intimate commitment (Yaghoubneshad & Khoshbazan, 2025). Research on marriage planning has likewise emphasized that strengthening family processes may improve young people's preparedness for marriage and

support more deliberate decision-making regarding future family formation (Maurida & Basri, 2025). Thus, family cohesion may be regarded as an important relational resource that influences psychological readiness for marriage.

The importance of the family environment is further supported by evidence demonstrating that early family experiences can have enduring consequences for self-concept and intimate functioning. Harsh, unsupportive, or controlling parenting may influence how individuals evaluate their own worth and relational competence even in adulthood. Recent findings have suggested that childhood harsh parenting can remain associated with self-esteem among women despite later educational attainment and greater autonomy in mate choice (Zhao, 2026). This suggests that family experiences may exert long-term psychological effects not only through direct attitudes toward relationships but also through the development of core personal resources such as self-esteem. Therefore, when examining how family cohesion may relate to fear of marriage, it is important to consider psychological variables that can transmit the effects of family experiences into later relational expectations.

Self-esteem is one such variable. Self-esteem refers to the individual's overall evaluation of personal worth, competence, adequacy, and value. It is a central component of psychological adjustment and influences how individuals interpret social interactions, respond to rejection, regulate emotions, and approach close relationships. Individuals with higher self-esteem are generally more likely to perceive themselves as worthy of affection and capable of coping with relational challenges, whereas those with lower self-esteem may be more sensitive to rejection, criticism, comparison, abandonment, and perceived interpersonal failure. In the context of marriage, self-esteem may therefore influence how individuals interpret the demands and uncertainties associated with commitment. A person with relatively stable self-worth may approach marriage with greater confidence in their ability to communicate, solve problems, and maintain intimacy. By contrast, lower self-esteem may increase apprehension about being inadequate as a partner, making poor partner choices, failing to sustain a relationship, or being emotionally hurt.

Empirical research supports the importance of self-esteem in intimate relationships. Self-esteem has been linked to partner appraisal and marital satisfaction, indicating that individuals' evaluations of themselves can influence how they perceive their partners and the overall quality of marital relationships (Sacco & Phares, 2001). Self-esteem has also

been directly examined within marriage, with evidence suggesting that it is closely connected to relational functioning and marital adjustment (Shackelford, 2001). These findings are theoretically important for premarital populations because expectations about marriage are likely to be influenced not only by beliefs about partners but also by beliefs about the self. If an individual doubts their own worth, desirability, or relational competence, marriage may be experienced as a setting in which these vulnerabilities could be exposed or intensified.

Self-esteem is also shaped by interpersonal and social experiences and is therefore potentially responsive to supportive interventions. Communication skills training has been shown to improve self-esteem alongside other indicators of marital functioning among women receiving counseling services (Korahng Behshti & Torkaman, 2023). Similarly, cognitive-behavioral group counseling during the early period of marriage has been associated with improvements in optimism and self-esteem, illustrating that self-esteem remains a meaningful and modifiable psychological resource during marital transition (Dafei et al., 2021). In student populations, self-esteem has also been associated with motivational and personality-related processes, including goal orientation and locus of control, supporting its role as a broad psychological construct relevant to adaptation and self-regulation (Afrooz et al., 2022). Collectively, these findings suggest that self-esteem may serve as a bridge between social-relational experiences and attitudes toward major life transitions such as marriage.

The potential mediating role of self-esteem becomes particularly plausible when family cohesion and fear of marriage are considered together. Cohesive family environments may foster a sense of personal security, belonging, and acceptance, thereby contributing to more positive self-evaluations. Individuals who grow up in families characterized by emotional support and connectedness may internalize the belief that they are valued and capable of sustaining meaningful relationships. Higher self-esteem may then reduce the likelihood of interpreting marriage primarily through the lens of anticipated rejection, failure, disappointment, or inadequacy. Conversely, lower family cohesion may limit access to emotional reassurance and secure relational experiences, contributing to poorer self-evaluation and greater sensitivity to the perceived risks of marital commitment. In this framework, family cohesion would not necessarily influence fear of marriage only through a direct pathway; rather, part of its influence may operate through the psychological resource of self-esteem.

At the same time, fear of marriage is likely to be shaped by multiple levels of influence, and self-esteem should not be considered its sole psychological determinant. Social narratives regarding divorce, infidelity, conflict, and unstable relationships may amplify concerns among young adults who are considering marriage. Qualitative research on extramarital relationships has highlighted complex interpersonal, emotional, and contextual processes that contribute to relationship breakdown and relational dissatisfaction (Fouladiyan et al., 2021). Exposure to such experiences within one's social environment may strengthen beliefs that intimate commitment is fragile or risky. Similarly, when young adults observe repeated conflict, marital instability, or dissolution among family members and peers, they may develop heightened caution toward marriage even when their own self-esteem is relatively intact. This indicates that the relationship between family cohesion, self-esteem, and fear of marriage may be complex and should be tested empirically rather than assumed.

Contemporary gender and family-role expectations may also contribute to marriage-related ambivalence. In societies where traditional gender norms coexist with increasing educational, occupational, and personal autonomy, young adults may experience tension between expectations for marriage and aspirations for independence. Evidence from South Korea, for example, indicates that gender-role attitudes are meaningfully related to marriage desires among never-married adults (Yoon & Park, 2025). Perceived gender conflict has likewise been associated with attitudes toward marriage and childbearing, suggesting that broader social tensions can become incorporated into personal expectations regarding family formation (Lee et al., 2025). Although these findings emerge from a different cultural setting, they illustrate a broader principle: attitudes toward marriage are shaped by the interaction of individual psychology with social and relational contexts. Therefore, examining family cohesion and self-esteem within a structural model may provide a more precise account of one important pathway through which young adults develop marriage-related fears.

The issue also carries practical significance for premarital counseling and preventive psychological services. Interventions that focus exclusively on partner selection or communication techniques may be insufficient when fear of marriage is rooted in deeper perceptions of family relationships and personal worth. Premarital education has demonstrated effectiveness in reducing fear of marriage and modifying maladaptive schema modes, supporting the value

of psychological preparation before marriage (Mokhtari et al., 2022). Family-strengthening approaches may likewise support more adaptive marriage planning, especially when they improve communication, emotional support, and relational readiness (Maurida & Basri, 2025). Moreover, research on early marriage and psychological development indicates that emotional regulation and marital adjustment are closely intertwined, suggesting that psychological readiness for marriage should be considered alongside chronological or social readiness (Noor & Za, 2025). This reinforces the need for models that identify mechanisms associated with fear of marriage before individuals enter marital relationships.

The relevance of such research is particularly evident among university students approaching marriage. University students often experience a transitional developmental stage in which educational, occupational, relational, and family decisions converge. Those who are engaged or undergoing formal marriage arrangements may experience heightened psychological pressure as abstract attitudes toward marriage become immediate personal decisions. Within this context, family cohesion may function as an emotional resource, whereas self-esteem may influence the individual's perceived capacity to manage the demands of commitment. Understanding the direct and indirect relationships among these constructs may help differentiate whether fear of marriage is primarily associated with family relational experiences, intrapersonal self-evaluation, or a combination of both. Such clarification is essential for designing targeted counseling interventions rather than relying on general assumptions about marriage reluctance.

Despite growing research on changing marriage patterns, fear of marriage, self-esteem, family functioning, and premarital adjustment, relatively limited attention has been devoted to testing an integrated structural model that simultaneously examines family cohesion as an antecedent, self-esteem as a potential mediator, and fear of marriage as an outcome among students approaching marriage. Existing studies have often examined demographic trends in marriage (Khani, 2023), psychological explanations for marriage fear (Ren, 2022; Wenqing et al., 2024), family and relational predictors of premarital behavior (Yaghoubnezhad & Khoshbazan, 2025), or self-esteem in relation to marital and interpersonal functioning (Sacco & Phares, 2001; Shackelford, 2001). Other studies have demonstrated that self-esteem is responsive to counseling and relational interventions (Dafei et al., 2021; Korahng Behshti & Torkaman, 2023), while more recent work has highlighted

the enduring effects of family experiences on self-esteem and relationship-related development (Zhao, 2026). However, these lines of research have rarely been integrated within a single explanatory framework focusing specifically on individuals at the threshold of marriage.

Accordingly, the present study aimed to model the structural relationship between family cohesion and fear of marriage and to examine the mediating role of self-esteem among university students approaching marriage.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study was applied in terms of purpose and descriptive-correlational in terms of methodology, employing a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach. This research design was selected to examine the direct and indirect relationships among family cohesion, self-esteem, and fear of marriage and to assess the fit of the proposed conceptual model.

The statistical population consisted of all unmarried university students approaching marriage who were enrolled at the Science and Research, North Tehran, and Central Tehran branches of Islamic Azad University during the 2025–2026 academic year. The study sample was selected using convenience sampling.

Given that an adequate sample size is a prerequisite for obtaining stable estimates in structural equation modeling, and based on Kline's (2016) recommendation of recruiting at least 10–15 participants per observed variable, the minimum required sample size was estimated to be 300 participants. Ultimately, 322 students participated in the study in accordance with the specified inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The inclusion criteria were being unmarried, being at the stage of approaching marriage (being engaged and having undergone a formal marriage proposal), being enrolled at one of the university branches included in the study, willingness to participate, and completion of the informed consent form. Incomplete questionnaires or questionnaires exhibiting invalid response patterns were excluded from the final analysis.

After obtaining the necessary permissions from the university, the researcher visited the university branches included in the study and, in coordination with the relevant educational authorities, identified students who met the eligibility criteria. After participants were provided with the necessary information regarding the objectives of the study,

confidentiality of their information, and the voluntary nature of participation, informed consent was obtained. The study questionnaires were then administered to the students in person. Upon completion, the questionnaires were collected and prepared for statistical analysis.

2.2. Measures

Fear of Marriage Questionnaire: The Fear of Marriage Questionnaire developed by Richard and Olson (2007) consists of 30 items and assesses the following dimensions: environmental factors associated with fear of marriage (Items 1–4), friends and relatives (Items 5–7), fear of personal failure (Items 8–10), fear of frustration and disappointment (Items 11–13), failure in previous relationships (Items 14–15), inability to maintain lasting relationships (Items 16–18), doubts regarding partner selection (Items 19–21), parental expectations (Items 22–25), desire to remain single (Items 26–29), and fear of the impermanence of love (Item 30). Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, with 3 representing neither agree nor disagree. The internal consistency of the questionnaire, as assessed using Cronbach's alpha, has been reported as 0.97. Its convergent and construct validity have also been reported to be satisfactory. In the study by Zeinabpour et al. (2020), the reliability of this scale was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.90.

Family Cohesion Questionnaire: This scale was developed by Razavieh and Samani based on the theoretical foundations of family cohesion and inspired by Olson's (1999) Circumplex Model. The scale consists of 28 items designed to assess the degree of family cohesion and the interconnectedness among family members, which is considered one of the principal components underlying family cohesion. The questionnaire is completed by children or offspring within the family and has broad applicability in both counseling and research settings. All 28 items are scored on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. An alpha coefficient of 0.79 has been reported for the total scale (Samani, 2002). In another investigation conducted by Samani, the internal consistency coefficient was reported as 0.85, Cronbach's alpha as 0.79, and test-retest reliability as 0.80.

Eysenck Self-Esteem Questionnaire: This 30-item questionnaire was developed by Eysenck in 1976. Respondents are required to answer each item using one of three response options: yes = 1, no = 0, or do not know = 0.5. Items 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 24, 25, 26, 27, and 28 are reverse-scored (Mehrabizadeh Honarmand et al., 2005). Hormozinejad (2001) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.88 for this instrument and construct validity coefficients of 0.74 for female university students and 0.79 for male university students.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26 and AMOS version 26. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, mean, and standard deviation, were used to describe the study variables. For inferential analysis, the statistical assumptions were initially evaluated, including data normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test, detection of outliers, and assessment of multicollinearity. Subsequently, relationships among the study variables were examined using Pearson's correlation coefficient. Finally, the proposed conceptual model was tested through structural equation modeling using the maximum likelihood estimation method. Model fit was evaluated using several fit indices, including the chi-square to degrees-of-freedom ratio (χ^2/df), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR).

3. Findings and Results

The final sample consisted of 322 university students approaching marriage. Regarding educational level, 127 participants (39.6%) had a diploma, 149 (49.6%) held a bachelor's degree, and 46 (13.7%) held a master's degree. The mean age of the participants was 34.16 years ($SD = 6.70$), with ages ranging from 21 to 39 years. Thus, the study sample represented unmarried students approaching marriage across the young-adult age range.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

Variable/Component	Mean	Standard Deviation
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Fear of marriage	7.70	1.10
Fear of interpersonal failure	9.40	0.90
Friends and relatives	7.30	1.20
Fear of frustration and disappointment	8.50	1.40
Failure in previous relationships	8.40	1.30
Inability to maintain lasting relationships	10.10	1.50
Doubts regarding partner selection	9.50	1.20
Parental expectations	8.30	1.10
Desire to remain single	9.70	1.40
Fear of the impermanence of love	8.40	1.20
Family cohesion	78.40	11.70
Social problem solving	71.80	12.60
Cognitive flexibility	81.70	12.80
Self-esteem	19.50	4.20

As shown in Table 1, among the dimensions related to fear of marriage, inability to maintain lasting relationships had the highest mean score ($M = 10.10$, $SD = 1.50$), followed by desire to remain single ($M = 9.70$, $SD = 1.40$), doubts regarding partner selection ($M = 9.50$, $SD = 1.20$), and fear

of interpersonal failure ($M = 9.40$, $SD = 0.90$). The mean scores for family cohesion, social problem solving, and cognitive flexibility were 78.40 ($SD = 11.70$), 71.80 ($SD = 12.60$), and 81.70 ($SD = 12.80$), respectively. The mean self-esteem score was 19.50 ($SD = 4.20$).

Table 2

Correlation Matrix of the Study Variable

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Fear of marriage	1													
2. Fear of interpersonal failure	.31*	1												
3. Friends and relatives	.21*	.19*	1											
4. Fear of frustration and disappointment	.37*	.22*	.38*	1										
5. Failure in previous relationships	.19*	.37*	.34*	.32*	1									
6. Inability to maintain lasting relationships	.36*	.34*	.37*	.34*	.31*	1								
7. Doubts regarding partner selection	.33*	.34*	.38*	.32*	.37*	.42*	1							
8. Parental expectations	.24*	.26*	-.21*	.39	.38*	.37*	.32*	1						
9. Desire to remain single	.34*	.25*	.39	.28*	.25*	.33*	.37*	.46*	1					
10. Fear of the impermanence of love	.32*	.34*	.39*	.27*	.35	.33*	.27*	-.20*	-.36*	1				
11. Family cohesion	-.16*	-.23*	-.12*	-.14*	-.24*	-.13*	-.09	-.11*	-.24*	.68*	1			
12. Social problem solving	-.17*	-.23*	-.25*	-.26*	-.16*	-.23*	-.15*	.26*	-.24*	.15*	.13*	1		
13. Cognitive flexibility	.06	-.15*	-.19*	-.18*	-.21*	-.24*	-.17*	.16*	-.13*	.19*	.18*	.05	1	
14. Self-esteem	-.21*	-.19*	-.17*	-.14*	-.16*	-.18*	-.17*	-.16*	-.19*	.31*	.36*	.27	.12*	1

As presented in Table 2, fear of marriage was positively and significantly correlated with most of its constituent dimensions, with coefficients ranging from $r = .19$ to $r = .37$. Family cohesion was negatively and significantly correlated with overall fear of marriage ($r = -.16$) and with several dimensions of marriage-related fear. Self-esteem was also negatively associated with fear of marriage ($r = -.21$) and with most of its dimensions. In contrast, family cohesion was positively related to self-esteem ($r = .36$), indicating that greater perceived family cohesion was associated with higher self-esteem. The correlations were generally small to

moderate in magnitude, suggesting that although the constructs were related, they remained empirically distinguishable.

Before testing the structural model, the assumptions underlying the analysis were examined. According to the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, the statistic for fear of marriage was 1.278 ($p = .076$), and the statistic for family cohesion was 1.285 ($p = .089$), indicating no statistically significant deviation from normality for these variables. For self-esteem, however, the reported significance level was $p = .001$, indicating a statistically significant departure from

normality. In addition, the data were screened for outliers and multicollinearity before structural equation modeling. No evidence was identified that would preclude estimation

of the proposed structural model. Accordingly, the hypothesized relationships were subsequently examined using structural equation modeling in AMOS.

Table 3

Direct and Indirect Effects in the Structural Model

Effect Type	Independent Variable	Mediator	Dependent Variable	B	SE	β / Indirect Effect	t	p	95% Bootstrap CI
Direct	Family cohesion	—	Self-esteem	.99	.015	.97	65.10	< .001	—
Direct	Self-esteem	—	Fear of marriage	.097	.097	.061	.19	.846	—
Direct	Family cohesion	—	Fear of marriage	.019	.099	.030	.97	.328	—
Indirect	Family cohesion	Self-esteem	Fear of marriage	—	—	.019	—	.738	[-.126, .200]

Table 3 presents the direct and indirect effects specified in the structural model. Family cohesion had a strong, positive, and statistically significant direct effect on self-esteem ($\beta = .97$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher family cohesion was associated with higher levels of self-esteem. In contrast, the direct effect of self-esteem on fear of marriage was not statistically significant ($\beta = .061$, $p = .846$). The direct effect of family cohesion on fear of marriage was also nonsignificant ($\beta = .030$, $p = .328$). Bootstrap analysis was

used to examine the mediating role of self-esteem. The indirect effect of family cohesion on fear of marriage through self-esteem was .019, with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval ranging from $-.126$ to $.200$ ($p = .738$). Because the confidence interval included zero and the corresponding probability value exceeded .05, the indirect effect was not statistically significant. Therefore, self-esteem did not significantly mediate the relationship between family cohesion and fear of marriage.

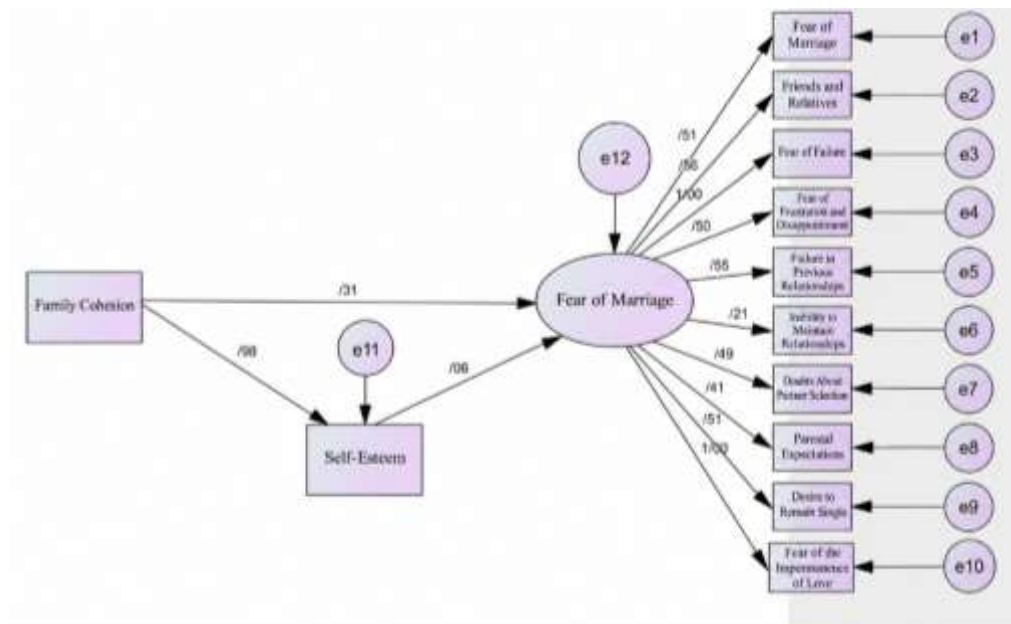
Table 4

Goodness-of-Fit Indices for the Structural Model

Index Category	Fit Index	Recommended Criterion	Obtained Value
Absolute fit	Degrees of freedom (df)	—	43
Absolute fit	Chi-square (χ^2)	—	126.10
Absolute fit	p-value	—	< .001
Absolute fit	χ^2/df (CMIN/df)	1–5	2.90
Comparative/relative fit	RMSEA	$\leq .10$	.099
Comparative/relative fit	GFI	$\geq .90$	.940
Comparative/relative fit	NFI	$\geq .90$	.930
Comparative/relative fit	TLI	$\geq .90$	.910
Comparative/relative fit	IFI	$\geq .90$	.950
Comparative/relative fit	RFI	$\geq .60$	.730
Parsimonious fit	PCFI	$\geq .60$	.600
Parsimonious fit	PNFI	$\geq .60$	.620

As shown in Table 4, the structural model demonstrated an overall acceptable fit to the observed data. The chi-square to degrees-of-freedom ratio was 2.90, which was within the commonly accepted range. The GFI (.940), NFI (.930), TLI (.910), and IFI (.950) all met or exceeded the recommended threshold of .90. The RFI was .730, while the parsimonious fit indices PCFI and PNFI were .600 and .620, respectively,

and therefore satisfied the specified criteria. The RMSEA value was .099, which was below the reported upper threshold of .10, although it was close to that boundary. Taken together, these indices indicated that the hypothesized structural model provided an acceptable representation of the observed covariance structure and was sufficiently adequate for interpretation of the estimated structural paths.

Figure 1*Structural Relationships Between Family Cohesion and Fear of Marriage Through the Mediating Role of Self-Esteem*

4. Discussion

The present study examined the structural relationship between family cohesion and fear of marriage, with self-esteem considered as a potential mediating mechanism among university students approaching marriage. The structural equation modeling results indicated that the proposed model demonstrated an overall acceptable fit to the observed data. Family cohesion had a strong, positive, and statistically significant direct effect on self-esteem, whereas the direct effect of self-esteem on fear of marriage was not statistically significant. Likewise, the direct effect of family cohesion on fear of marriage was nonsignificant. Bootstrap analysis further showed that the indirect effect of family cohesion on fear of marriage through self-esteem was not statistically significant, indicating that self-esteem did not mediate the relationship between family cohesion and fear of marriage. At the bivariate level, however, family cohesion and self-esteem were both negatively associated with fear of marriage. These findings suggest that although supportive family relationships are meaningfully associated with stronger self-evaluations, their influence on marriage-related fear may not operate through a simple direct or self-esteem-mediated pathway.

The first major finding was that family cohesion significantly and positively predicted self-esteem. This result is theoretically plausible because family cohesion reflects emotional connectedness, mutual support,

belonging, and relational security within the family system. Individuals raised in cohesive family environments are more likely to experience acceptance, validation, emotional availability, and confidence in interpersonal relationships, all of which may contribute to the formation of a stable and positive sense of self-worth. When family members communicate supportively and maintain strong emotional bonds, young adults may internalize a sense of being valued and competent. This interpretation is consistent with evidence demonstrating the enduring role of family experiences in shaping self-evaluation. Zhao showed that childhood family experiences, particularly harsh parenting, could exert long-term effects on self-esteem even among women who had achieved higher education and greater autonomy in mate selection, underscoring the persistence of family-origin influences on self-concept (Zhao, 2026). From this perspective, the positive relationship observed between family cohesion and self-esteem in the present study can be understood as evidence that emotionally supportive family environments function as a developmental resource for strengthening self-worth.

The relationship between family cohesion and self-esteem can also be interpreted through the broader literature on self-esteem as a construct shaped by social acceptance, relational validation, and interpersonal competence. Afrooz and colleagues reported that self-esteem among university students was related to motivational and psychological processes such as goal orientation and locus of control, suggesting that self-esteem reflects a broader pattern of

adaptive psychological functioning rather than an isolated personal trait (Afrooz et al., 2022). Similarly, communication-based interventions have been shown to improve self-esteem, indicating that relational processes and the quality of interpersonal interactions can meaningfully influence how individuals evaluate themselves (Korahng Behshti & Torkaman, 2023). The present finding therefore supports the proposition that cohesive family relationships may provide the interpersonal conditions through which young adults develop greater confidence in their personal worth and relational competence.

The second major finding was that self-esteem did not have a statistically significant direct effect on fear of marriage in the structural model. This result is noteworthy because the bivariate correlation between self-esteem and fear of marriage was negative, suggesting that higher self-esteem was associated with lower fear of marriage at the zero-order level. However, once family cohesion and the broader structural relationships were considered simultaneously, the predictive contribution of self-esteem became nonsignificant. This pattern implies that the association between self-esteem and fear of marriage may be shared with other relational or contextual variables rather than representing a unique causal pathway. Fear of marriage is a multidimensional construct that may include concerns regarding failure, intimacy, disappointment, partner selection, parental expectations, loss of autonomy, instability, and previous relational experiences. Consequently, a global evaluation of self-worth may be insufficient to independently explain such a complex phenomenon.

This finding should not be interpreted as indicating that self-esteem is irrelevant to intimate relationships. Previous research has consistently demonstrated that self-esteem is important for marital functioning and relationship quality. Shackelford found that self-esteem plays an important role within marriage and is associated with several dimensions of relational functioning (Shackelford, 2001). Sacco and Phares similarly demonstrated that self-esteem is related to partner appraisal and marital satisfaction, indicating that individuals' evaluations of themselves can affect how they perceive their intimate partners and relationships (Sacco & Phares, 2001). Furthermore, cognitive-behavioral counseling has been shown to improve self-esteem among women during the early stage of marriage, suggesting that self-esteem remains a meaningful psychological resource during marital adjustment (Dafei et al., 2021). Therefore, the nonsignificant structural effect observed in the present study

may reflect the specific outcome under investigation—fear of marriage before or at the threshold of marriage—rather than an absence of importance for marital functioning more generally.

Fear of marriage may depend more strongly on specific beliefs and schemas about intimacy and marital relationships than on generalized self-esteem. Mokhtari and colleagues showed that schema-based premarital education could reduce fear of marriage, which supports the importance of maladaptive relational schemas and marriage-specific cognitions in the development of such fears (Mokhtari et al., 2022). Likewise, Niakani's findings regarding differences in fear of intimacy, love styles, and marriage stability across traditional and modern marriages suggest that marriage-related concerns may be closely connected to interpersonal expectations and intimacy processes rather than only to general self-evaluation (Niakani, 2022). Thus, although individuals with higher self-esteem may generally feel more confident, their fear of marriage may remain elevated if they hold negative schemas regarding commitment, betrayal, relational instability, or marital responsibility.

The third finding was that family cohesion did not significantly predict fear of marriage directly within the structural model. This result also contrasts somewhat with the negative bivariate association between family cohesion and fear of marriage. One interpretation is that family cohesion alone may not be sufficient to determine how young adults perceive marriage. A cohesive family can provide emotional security, but individuals may still develop fears about marriage based on social observations, previous romantic experiences, economic uncertainty, perceived gender inequality, concerns about marital failure, or expectations regarding future responsibilities. In other words, a positive family-of-origin experience may reduce some relational vulnerabilities without necessarily eliminating concerns regarding marriage as a social and developmental institution.

This interpretation is consistent with contemporary research showing that fear or reluctance toward marriage is influenced by a wide range of psychological, social, and cultural factors. Ren identified psychological factors underlying contemporary young adults' fear of marriage, emphasizing that concerns about personal freedom, relational failure, economic pressure, and changing expectations regarding intimacy may all contribute to avoidance of marriage (Ren, 2022). Wenqing and colleagues similarly showed that fear of marriage among young women may be related to perceived burdens of marital life, concerns

about reproductive expectations, family responsibilities, and threats to personal autonomy (Wenqing et al., 2024). These findings support the present result by suggesting that even strong family cohesion may not independently reduce fear of marriage when individuals are simultaneously exposed to broader societal and interpersonal sources of apprehension.

The changing social context of marriage may be particularly relevant in interpreting the nonsignificant direct effect of family cohesion. In Iran, marriage patterns have changed substantially in recent years, with delayed marriage and stagnation in marriage formation becoming increasingly salient social concerns (Khani, 2023). These demographic changes may reflect not only family-level influences but also economic uncertainty, changing educational trajectories, shifts in gender expectations, and changing standards for partner selection. Comparable developments have been documented internationally. Liu and colleagues showed that age at first marriage in China has become increasingly differentiated across socioeconomic groups, illustrating the importance of structural conditions in marriage timing (Liu et al., 2025). Yoon and Park demonstrated that gender-role attitudes are associated with marriage desires among never-married adults, while Lee and colleagues found that perceived gender conflict can shape attitudes toward marriage and childbearing (Lee et al., 2025; Yoon & Park, 2025). Together, these findings imply that fear of marriage should be understood as a product of multiple overlapping systems rather than as an outcome determined predominantly by family cohesion.

The nonsignificant indirect effect of family cohesion on fear of marriage through self-esteem represented the central finding concerning the proposed mediation mechanism. Although family cohesion significantly increased self-esteem, self-esteem did not subsequently predict fear of marriage strongly enough to establish a statistically significant indirect pathway. The bootstrap confidence interval included zero, confirming the absence of mediation. This result indicates that the psychological benefits of family cohesion for self-esteem do not necessarily translate into lower marriage-related fear. In statistical and conceptual terms, the first segment of the hypothesized mediation pathway was supported, whereas the second segment was not.

Several mechanisms may explain the absence of mediation. First, self-esteem may be too broad a psychological construct to transmit the effects of family cohesion to a marriage-specific form of fear. More proximal variables such as fear of intimacy, attachment insecurity,

relationship self-efficacy, maladaptive schemas, trust, perceived partner availability, or beliefs about marital permanence may be stronger mediators. Second, fear of marriage may be influenced by prior exposure to unsuccessful relationships, divorce, or extramarital involvement within one's social environment. Fouladiyan and colleagues documented the complex relational, interpersonal, and contextual processes involved in the formation of extramarital affairs among individuals seeking divorce, illustrating how relationship instability may be rooted in multiple interacting factors (Fouladiyan et al., 2021). Exposure to narratives or experiences of marital instability could shape fear of marriage independently of an individual's level of self-esteem.

Third, family cohesion may influence marriage-related outcomes through mechanisms other than self-esteem. For example, cohesive families may improve communication skills, emotion regulation, social support, problem-solving abilities, and the capacity to manage interpersonal conflict. Yaghoubnezhad and Khoshbazan found that personality characteristics and family cohesion indicators contributed to explaining tendencies toward emotional infidelity among young people approaching marriage, supporting the relevance of family functioning for premarital relational behavior (Yaghoubnezhad & Khoshbazan, 2025). However, the pathway from family cohesion to relational outcomes may involve specific interpersonal competencies rather than global self-worth. Similarly, family-strengthening processes have been associated with better marriage planning among adolescents and young women, suggesting that family functioning can contribute to readiness for marriage through practical and relational mechanisms (Maurida & Basri, 2025).

The present findings also highlight an important distinction between general psychological readiness and specific fear regarding marital commitment. Noor and Za emphasized the importance of emotional regulation and psychological development for marital adjustment, indicating that successful adaptation to marriage depends on capacities extending beyond self-esteem alone (Noor & Za, 2025). A person may have relatively high self-esteem while simultaneously experiencing considerable uncertainty about commitment, intimacy, partner selection, or future marital roles. Conversely, an individual with lower self-esteem may nevertheless hold positive views of marriage due to secure attachment, supportive premarital experiences, or confidence in a specific partner. Therefore, the absence of a mediating effect does not undermine the importance of self-

esteem; rather, it suggests that the psychological architecture of fear of marriage is more differentiated than a simple family cohesion–self-esteem pathway.

Another important consideration concerns the overall model fit. Most indices indicated acceptable fit, including GFI, NFI, TLI, and IFI, while the chi-square to degrees-of-freedom ratio was within the acceptable range. The RMSEA value of .099 was close to the upper acceptable boundary, suggesting that the model should be considered adequate but not optimal. This pattern is consistent with the substantive findings because the proposed model captured part of the covariance structure but did not fully account for fear of marriage. The nonsignificant direct and indirect paths imply that additional variables may be necessary to improve explanatory power. Thus, the current model may be better viewed as a partial framework that establishes the importance of family cohesion for self-esteem while simultaneously demonstrating that fear of marriage requires a broader explanatory structure.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the findings contribute to the literature by showing that family cohesion is strongly related to self-esteem among university students approaching marriage, but that neither family cohesion nor self-esteem independently explains fear of marriage within the proposed structural model. These results complement previous research emphasizing the psychological relevance of self-esteem in intimate relationships (Sacco & Phares, 2001; Shackelford, 2001), the role of family processes in premarital functioning (Maurida & Basri, 2025; Yaghoubnezhad & Khoshbazan, 2025), and the multidimensional nature of contemporary marriage-related concerns (Ren, 2022; Wenqing et al., 2024). They also suggest that interventions aimed at reducing fear of marriage should move beyond strengthening self-esteem alone and consider marriage-specific schemas, fear of intimacy, attachment processes, social pressures, and contemporary expectations regarding marital roles.

6. Limitations & Suggestions

The present study had several limitations. First, the cross-sectional correlational design prevents causal conclusions regarding the temporal relationships among family cohesion, self-esteem, and fear of marriage. Although structural equation modeling enables simultaneous examination of theoretically specified relationships, it cannot establish

causal direction without longitudinal or experimental evidence. Second, participants were selected through convenience sampling from three branches of Islamic Azad University in Tehran, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to students in other universities, geographic regions, socioeconomic groups, or nonstudent populations. Third, all constructs were measured using self-report questionnaires, making the results potentially susceptible to common-method variance, social desirability, and response bias. Fourth, the model included only family cohesion and self-esteem as predictors of fear of marriage and therefore did not capture other potentially important psychological and contextual factors. Finally, the RMSEA value was close to the upper boundary of acceptability, suggesting that the proposed structural model could be improved by incorporating additional theoretically relevant pathways.

Future studies should examine the proposed relationships using longitudinal designs to determine whether family cohesion and self-esteem predict changes in fear of marriage over time, particularly across the transition from engagement to marriage. Probability sampling and recruitment from multiple universities, cities, and cultural settings would improve external validity. Future research should also test more comprehensive models incorporating attachment style, fear of intimacy, relationship self-efficacy, maladaptive schemas, emotional regulation, prior romantic relationship experiences, perceived parental marital quality, economic insecurity, gender-role attitudes, and social expectations surrounding marriage. Multiple-mediator and moderated-mediation models may be particularly useful for determining whether family cohesion influences fear of marriage indirectly through more proximal interpersonal mechanisms. Dyadic studies involving both partners could also provide a more complete understanding of how individual and relational factors interact before marriage.

From a practical perspective, premarital counseling programs should assess fear of marriage as a multidimensional psychological construct rather than assuming that reluctance toward marriage reflects low self-esteem or poor family relationships alone. Counselors can evaluate specific concerns involving intimacy, relational failure, partner selection, parental expectations, commitment, and anticipated loss of autonomy while also assessing family-of-origin relationships and self-worth. Programs for students approaching marriage may benefit from integrating communication training, realistic expectation setting, relationship problem-solving, emotion regulation, and exploration of maladaptive beliefs about

marriage. Because family cohesion was strongly associated with self-esteem, family-based interventions aimed at improving emotional support and constructive communication may still be beneficial for strengthening psychological resources, even though such improvements may not directly reduce fear of marriage without targeted intervention on marriage-specific concerns.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

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.

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 contributed to this article.

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