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Qualitative Future Study of Youth Marriage on the Horizon of Development Perspective 2040: An Iranian Development Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Youths represent the most critical and constructive human resource within any given society, and the institution of marriage constitutes one of the pivotal phases of existence that transpires during youth. The objective of the current investigation was to ascertain the anticipated trajectories of youth marriage by examining the prospective developments associated with marriage within the temporal framework of 2040.

Methods: The present inquiry was conducted with a practical focus and adopted a descriptive and qualitative approach concerning data acquisition. Following consultations with scholars specialized in research methodologies, a cohort of 20 experts in the domain of marriage was selected as the sample for this study. The data for this research were extracted and subjected to analysis through semi-structured interviews. Given the openness of the responses, the researcher has identified the fundamental factors within the interviews as interrelated components. From the preliminary categorization of the participants' significant phrases, a total of 199 interview excerpts yielded 312 key phrases and 5570 words, leading to the extraction of 61 initial tags. Among these 61 initial labels, 38 components were identified, and the process of naming and selecting these components was informed by literature reviews.

Results The findings derived from the semi-structured interviews with experts suggest the existence of various envisioned futures: a favorable future, an unfavorable future, and a probable future.

Conclusions: Based on the three prospective paradigms of youth marriage, there will be concomitant responsibilities assigned to society, familial structures, and marriage professionals aimed at facilitating youth marriage within the envisioned context of 2040.

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Introduction

Youth constitute one of the most vital and productive demographic groups within any society ([Hawkins, 2018](#)). Among the pivotal life decisions young individuals face, marriage stands as one of the most fundamental. However, the institution of family formation has undergone significant transformations in terms of lifestyle and societal consequences across different historical periods and cultures ([Hasheminezhad et al., 2018](#)). The rapid pace of these changes has rendered traditional coping mechanisms insufficient; failure to adapt risks being overwhelmed by the relentless progression of societal evolution. While the future remains inherently uncertain, human agency can shape its trajectory. One approach to navigating such transformations is through futures studies, a discipline that operates in a dual capacity: it seeks to anticipate the causes and factors driving future changes while simultaneously equipping society to manage them effectively. Rather than merely predicting outcomes, futures studies aim to actively influence and construct the future. The domain of marriage and family formation is no exception to this paradigm.

Individuals enter into marriage for diverse reasons, including legal, social, emotional, economic, spiritual, religious, and familial considerations. Marriage has the potential to foster profound intimacy while also posing significant risks to its participants. A successful marital relationship is characterized by substantial time investment, positive reinforcement, cognitive and emotional expressiveness, effective parent-child dynamics, and warm social interactions ([Elgar et al., 2013](#)). Conversely, unsuccessful marriages often lead to heightened psychological distress.

In recent decades, significant shifts have emerged in marriage patterns, including increased reluctance to marry, delayed marriages, or outright rejection of the institution. In Iran, as in other developing nations undergoing the transition from tradition to modernity, marriage is influenced by the country's dominant religious culture amid broader sociocultural transformations. Key barriers to marriage from the youth perspective include: Fear of post-marital challenges, Unemployment or job instability, Housing insecurity, Limited premarital acquaintance, Familial dependence, Restricted personal freedoms, Restrictive customs and traditions, Deficits in social and communication skills, financial burdens (e.g., dowry obligations), Perceived lack of responsibility or post-marital advancement opportunities, Constraints in spousal selection, Alternative avenues for fulfilling sexual needs, Distrust toward the opposite sex, Pursuit of higher

education, Negative marital experiences of peers and Lack of mandatory military service completion (for men) ([Khalajinia et al., 2018](#)).

For over half a century, Iranian society has experienced profound socioeconomic fluctuations and demographic shifts. Events such as revolution, war, expanded communication networks, and the forces of modernity and globalization have dramatically altered traditional social structures ([Razeghi Nasrabad & Fallahnezhad, 2017](#)).

Human beings possess an innate capacity for future-oriented thinking, evolving from basic anticipatory behaviors in infancy to complex existential and teleological reasoning in adulthood. While individuals vary in their ability to prepare for potential scenarios, the fundamental uncertainty of the future necessitates proactive engagement. Although meticulously constructed plans may falter, the endeavor to shape desirable future outcomes remains a persistent human pursuit—albeit not always a conscious one. This underscores the complexity of addressing core questions in futures studies ([Khoei, 2018](#)).

Futures studies transcend interdisciplinary boundaries, operating on a general thematic principle that necessitates collaborative research across multiple disciplines ([Fateh Rad et al., 2013](#)). This methodological framework ensures comprehensive analysis and strategic foresight.

Existing studies in Iran have explored marriage and futures studies from various angles. For instance, [Kargar \(2015\)](#) examined cultural policies for family strengthening through a futures studies lens, analyzing trends and drivers of familial change. Similarly, [Yahya Pourkomleh \(2016\)](#) investigated the future of women's studies in Iran, defining its scope and proposing a forward-looking framework for the field. In a qualitative investigation concerning the impact of beliefs pertaining to marriage on the preparedness for marriage, [Yahya Pourkomleh \(2016\)](#) deduced that the findings indicated the significance of various beliefs, including but not limited to: beliefs concerning the necessary resources for marriage, beliefs regarding the requisite experiences for marriage, beliefs about the capabilities needed for marriage, the readiness of the family of origin for marriage, beliefs about the physical attributes of the prospective partner, beliefs about the competencies of the prospective partner, beliefs concerning the familial characteristics of the prospective partner, beliefs about the experiences of the prospective partner, beliefs regarding the religious convictions of the prospective partner, beliefs about the process of acquaintance and selection of a spouse, beliefs concerning impediments to marriage, beliefs regarding facilitators of

marriage, beliefs about the attainment of religious objectives within marriage, beliefs about the fulfillment of needs through marriage, beliefs regarding the acquisition of capabilities via marriage, beliefs about the rectification of deficiencies within marriage, and beliefs pertaining to the establishment of a framework through marriage, all of which significantly influence individuals' perceptions of their readiness for marriage. Furthermore, in an investigation centered on the future studies related to the phenomenon of singleness in Iran, methodologies such as structural analysis, the Delphi technique, interaction analysis, and scenario writing—with particular emphasis on the Godeh scenario writing approach—were employed.

[Rezazadeh et al. \(2019\)](#) executed a study entitled The Effectiveness of Premarital Education Programs on Attitudes Toward Marriage, Resilience, and Expectations of Marriage, wherein it was reported that the aforementioned educational interventions yielded significant effects.

In the research titled Changing Opinions: Evidence on Marriage Equality Attitudes from Panel Data, [Armenia and Troia \(2017\)](#) scrutinized the transformations and evolutions of marriage in contemporary society.

Given the foundational principles of futures studies alongside the marriage process, it appears imperative to formulate a theoretical and foundational framework for these two critically significant domains. While it is acknowledged that a considerable amount of qualitative research has been undertaken regarding marriage in the past, no studies were identified that specifically establish a basis for futures research in the context of marriage. Consequently, the researcher endeavored to adopt a qualitative methodology to articulate a theoretical framework for the future study of youth marriage within the developmental perspective of 1420, drawing upon the insights and perspectives of experts in the field. The outcomes of the current investigation are anticipated to provide valuable insights for all subsequent research endeavors in the domain of youth marriage leading up to 1420, thereby alleviating the necessity for researchers in the field of marriage to derive their theoretical foundations from disparate and occasionally unrelated sources.

Material and Methods

This study was applied in purpose and employed a descriptive, qualitative approach to data collection. It compiled factors that strengthen marriage from the perspective of 2040, utilizing expert opinions.

The statistical population included all specialists and experts in marriage-related fields, such as marriage counseling, marital psychology, divorce counseling, and the sociology of marriage. However, due to the lack of a comprehensive database of such professionals, an exact estimate of the population size was unattainable.

In qualitative research, there is no strict rule for sample size; rather, it depends on research objectives, data collection time, and available resources. Typically, participant numbers remain below 50, often ranging between 15 and 20. Some scholars suggest that 30 participants suffice for information saturation, as additional responses may become repetitive without contributing new insights. Following consultations with research methodology experts, the study selected 20 prominent marriage specialists as the sample size.

To ensure comprehensive and valid findings on factors influencing marriage, respondents were chosen from five geographical regions (North, South, West, East, and Center) based on Iran's administrative divisions. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with experts in family counseling, couples therapy, marriage sociology, family economics, marital culture, and religious aspects of marriage. The brainstorming method was employed to elicit detailed responses.

The interview tool's validity was confirmed in both content and form by experts in research methodology and marriage studies. Reliability was assessed using the test-retest method, yielding a high correlation coefficient of 0.92 between two interviews conducted with a short interval. This strong reliability (above 0.90) reflects the interviewees' expertise and familiarity with the subject. Given the open-ended nature of responses, the researcher treated key interview factors as correlated components.

Ethical Considerations

Participants provided informed consent after being briefed on the research objectives, methodology, potential risks, benefits, and duration. They were assured of confidentiality, with expert opinions published anonymously. These terms were formalized in a written consent form. The final research results were reviewed and validated by the participating experts.

Eligibility required expertise in marriage-related fields: If any participant withdrew due to personal or procedural reasons, the researcher acknowledged their contribution, expressed gratitude, and respected their decision.

Results

Table 1 presents descriptive information about the participants in the study based on gender, education, type of activity, and geographic region (demographic variables). The experts participating in the study were divided into two groups of men and women based on gender, and into three groups of master's degree students, doctoral students, and doctoral students based on education. The participants were also divided into four groups of freelance consultants, faculty, university professors, and welfare organization consultants based on activity type. University professors are professors who teach part-time or for a fee at a university but are not permanent faculty members of that university. The geographical region of the participants is the same as the area of residence and employment of the experts (specialists), which are divided into five regions of the country: North, South, West, East, and Center.

Table 1. Descriptive information about the demographic variables of the study

Demographic variable		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	7	35
	Male	13	65
Education	MA	3	15
	PhD student	4	20
	PhD	13	65
Job type	Counselor	5	25
	faculty member	6	30
	Lecture	7	35
	Welfare office counselor	2	10
Region	North	3	15
	South	6	30
	West	3	15
	East	3	15
	Center	5	25

Based on the theoretical framework of the research, the qualitative findings of this study are the indicators of future youth marriage in various economic, cultural, social, legal, individual-psychological, and educational-training areas that have been collected from the perspective of

marriage experts. Based on the indicators related to the summary approach, the researcher has compiled the indicators of future Iranian youth marriage through the following steps:

1. Labeling the initial sentences of the interviewees
2. Extracting the components
3. Compiling the final indicators
4. Providing a conceptual (visual) model of the indicators and components
5. Labeling the initial (key) sentences of the interviewees

Based on this, 62 labels were created, which include items such as salary and wages, cultural compatibility of the two families, and self-awareness training. In the next stage of the qualitative study, the researcher extracted the components based on the initial labels using scientific texts in the field under discussion. In the next section, the obtained components are categorized into more general areas. These general categories are considered as the main indicators in the topic of future studies of marriage. The results of this extraction are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Extraction of final components and indicators based on initial labels

Final indicators	Future youth marriage components	Primary tags
Economic factors	Monthly income	Fixed monthly salary/Variable monthly salary/Special marriage items in youth salary slips
	Housing	Free government housing/Government assistance to youth to cover part of the cost of house rent/Help with housing construction
	Financial dependence on families	Families' financial assistance to young couples/Young couples' financial assistance to families (financial responsibility)
	Current expenses	Food expenses/Clothing expenses/Entertainment expenses/Travel expenses/Party expenses (invitations)
	Medical expenses	Expenses of unexpected illnesses/Expenses of common illnesses
	Economic comparison	Very high income/Indulgence in luxuries in life
Cultural factors	Religious beliefs	Religious recommendations for marriage/Family commitment to religious issues/Education and training functions in the field of religious issues of marriage
	Customs	Differences in customs and traditions in urban and rural life/Self-made customs of humans in the present era
	Ethnic differences	Ethnic differences
	Religious prejudices	Religious prejudices
	Cultural compatibility between two families	Cultural compatibility of two families
	Intellectual independence of couples	Intellectual independence of couples
Social factors	Cultural biases	Cultural prejudices
	Government decisions	Facilities provided by the government to facilitate youth marriage/Government's intellectual approach
	Youth employment	Youth employment
	Intra-family communication	Communications within the family
	Family structure	Traditional family structure/New family structure

	Family privacy	Family privacy
	Status comparisons	Relationship around social status
	Cyberspace	Cyberspace as a threat to the foundation of the family and a factor in causing discord between couples/Cyberspace and constructive and good relationships
	Youth's Attitudes to Marriage	Young people's negative attitude towards marriage/Young people's positive attitude towards marriage
	Social Judgments	Social judgments
	Fashionist Among Youth	Fashionist among young people
Legal factors	Religious laws	Religious laws
	National and international laws	National marriage laws/International marriage laws
	Individual rights of couples	Individual rights of couples
	Extent of use of legal rights	Rate of use of legal rights
Individual and psychological factors	Couple attachment style	Secure attachment style and young marriage/Avoidant attachment style and marriage/Ambivalent attachment style and marriage
	Parental parenting style	Permissive parenting style and children's future marriage/Authoritative parenting style and children's future marriage/Authoritative parenting style and children's future marriage
	Married life knowledge	Knowledge of married life
	Intellectual maturity	Intellectual maturity
	Cognitive flexibility	Cognitive flexibility
	Self-knowledge	Self-knowledge
	Perception of the other person	Mutual understanding
Educational and training factors	Educational macro-planning	Educational macro-planning
	Family education in schools	Family education in schools
	Self-awareness education	Self-awareness education
	Attention to students' character development	Attention to students' character development

Discussion

The present study's findings align with prior research across multiple domains:

Economic factors: Supported by studies from [Afsharkohan and Vaezzadeh \(2019\)](#), [Hatami Varzaneh et al. \(2017\)](#), [Eltejaei and Azizzadeh \(2016\)](#) and [Taati et al. \(2021\)](#).

Cultural factors: Consistent with [Khodadadi Sangdeh et al. \(2021\)](#), [Malhotra and Tsui \(1999\)](#) and [Perelli-Harris and Bernardi \(2015\)](#).

Social factors: Corroborated by [Yahya Pourkomleh \(2016\)](#), [Afsharkohan et al. \(2019\)](#) and [Gholami Gharab and Hosseini Ajdad Niaki \(2018\)](#).

Legal factors: Supported by [Yahya Pourkomleh \(2016\)](#), Psychological/personal factors: Aligned with [Khodadadi Sangdeh et al. \(2021\)](#) and Educational factors consistent with [Fateh Rad et al. \(2013\)](#).

Based on semi-structured interviews with experts, three potential futures for youth marriage were identified:

1. Desired Future (70–100% of marriage indicators achieved)

By 2040, youth marriage would thrive under optimal conditions:

Legal: National and international laws prioritize removing marriage barriers.

Economic: Stable incomes align with inflation; housing and living costs are manageable.

Cultural: Ministries promote healthy marriages; cultural challenges are resolved.

Social: Societal efforts enhance marital stability; cyberspace supports families.

Educational: Schools and universities implement marriage education programs.

Psychological: Counselors play a central role in marital well-being; life expectancy ranks Iran among the top 10 globally.

2. Undesirable Future (0–30% of indicators achieved)

A worst-case scenario by 2040:

Legal: No progress in removing marriage obstacles.

Economic: Recession makes marriage financially unfeasible.

Cultural: Negative attitudes prevail; marriage rates plummet.

Social: Family structures collapse; cyberspace discourages marriage.

Psychological: Counselors are marginalized; youth face unresolved mental health challenges.

Educational: No preparation for marriage; schools and universities neglect the issue.

3. Possible Future (30–70% of indicators achieved)

A realistic middle-ground scenario:

Legal: Partial reforms support marriage but gaps remain.

Economic: Inflation persists, but insurance eases healthcare burdens.

Cultural: Prejudices diminish; social factors improve by 50%.

Social: NGOs actively address marriage challenges.

Psychological: Universities integrate marital counseling; moderate progress occurs.

Educational: Schools partially succeed in educating families about marriage.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To facilitate youth marriage by 2040, collective action is needed:

Societal Duties

- Eliminate harmful traditions (e.g., excessive dowries).
- Promote easy marriage laws and cultural shifts.
- Address celibacy's societal risks (crime, insecurity).

Family Duties

- Foster independence while providing support.
- Adopt balanced parenting styles to prepare youth for marriage.

Expert Duties

- Psychologists: Highlight marriage's psychological benefits.
- Religious Leaders: Emphasize marriage's spiritual and social value.
- Key Focus Areas:
 - Marital identity development.
 - Safe, nurturing relationships.
 - Sustaining passion and excitement.
 - Healthy independence from extended families.

Future Research Directions

- Explore youth perspectives on marriage factors.
- Conduct mixed-methods studies on extracted components.
- Examine theoretical links between sociological/psychological variables.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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