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THE PATHWAY FROM INHERITED TRADITIONS TO NEGOTIATED CHOICES: EXPLORING THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DYNAMICS RELATED TO MARRIAGE PERCEPTION AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN MULTAN, PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the socio-cultural dynamics shaping youth perceptions of marriage, focusing on how they navigate the required transition between inherited traditions and negotiated choices. The researchers used a triangulation method, combining quantitative and qualitative research designs. In addition, we surveyed N=400 unmarried students and conducted in-depth interviews with N=12 married university students using a self-administered questionnaire and interview guide for data collection. Multiple regression analysis showed that socio-cultural dynamics account for 87.2% of the variance in students' perceptions of marriage. The thematic analysis also identified six major themes shaping youth perceptions of marriage: negotiated marriage decision-making, family and cultural influence, digital media and contemporary marriage ideals, intergenerational negotiation and compromise, transforming partner-selection criteria, individual agency, and changing life priorities. In conclusion, the university students in the study area do not want to completely abandon their traditional values in spouse selection; rather, they want to negotiate to pursue their personal choice of marriage. Respecting children's spouse preferences, reducing gender pressure on females about marriage, and integrating family decisions, parental authority, and children's agreement can help develop a positive perception of marriage among university students in the study area.

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Introduction

Marriage is a social institution that strengthens the legal bond between a couple and their families (Chambers & Gracia, 2021). Socio-cultural dynamics across societies create and shape perceptions

of marriage (Jackson, 2012). Globally, social norms allow people to choose their own marital partners. In contrast, underdeveloped countries have strong inherited traditions rooted in obsolete ideologies that demand parental authority and kinship intervention in shaping young people's perceptions of marriage (Asim et al., 2021; Diaz & Watkins, 2025). Despite these interventions and outdated cultural patterns, young people still wanted to express their personal preferences when selecting a spouse; the main factors were emotional compatibility, mental understanding, and certain personality traits (Sadeghian et al., 2025).

In Pakistan, marriage is considered a bond between spouses and their families. In addition, parents want to maintain their lineage, mother tongue, caste and class status, and protect various social and religious rituals (Hina et al., 2025; Rasool, 2024). Collective expectations also shape marriage decisions, including family reputation, class, the caste system, and alliances between the spouses' families (Qadeer et al., 2022). Recent research also shows that young people's spouse selection mostly revolves around a person's personality, education, and occupational status (Asim et al., 2024; Mansab, 2024). Young adults do not want to reject traditional cultural patterns and social norms, but they want to maintain their personal choices in marriage decisions. They argue that because they have to spend their lives with a partner, their personal choices must be included in the negotiation process (Ghani et al., 2025; Shah et al., 2025).

The university student age cohort was considered most appropriate for marriage consideration in the given research context (Calik et al., 2026). These perceptions of marriage may reflect competing considerations, emotional compatibility, independent decision-making, and financial preparedness for career development (Galit et al., 2025). Social media also broadens and reshapes young people's ideas of an ideal spouse. In this context, key factors include personality, occupation, financial independence, mental understanding, and emotional compatibility with a future partner (Hassan et al., 2019; Tabassum et al., 2025).

Despite growing scholarly attention to marriage and changing family relationships, context-specific research is still needed on social norms, family and cultural pressures, individual aspirations, and perceived social media influences that shape youth perceptions of marriage (Akhtar & Malik, 2025). In particular, the study context of Multan revealed that family relationships and inherited cultural traditions remain important, while individual preferences are often neglected in spouse selection. An integrated investigation is necessary because comparing the viewpoints of unmarried and married educated youth is imperative and can identify associations among social influences, individual experiences of negotiation, compromise, and constraints on personal choice (Maqsood, 2024). To address this gap, the present study examined whether negotiation is the central nexus that can smooth the transition between social norms and university students' personal choices in Multan, Pakistan.

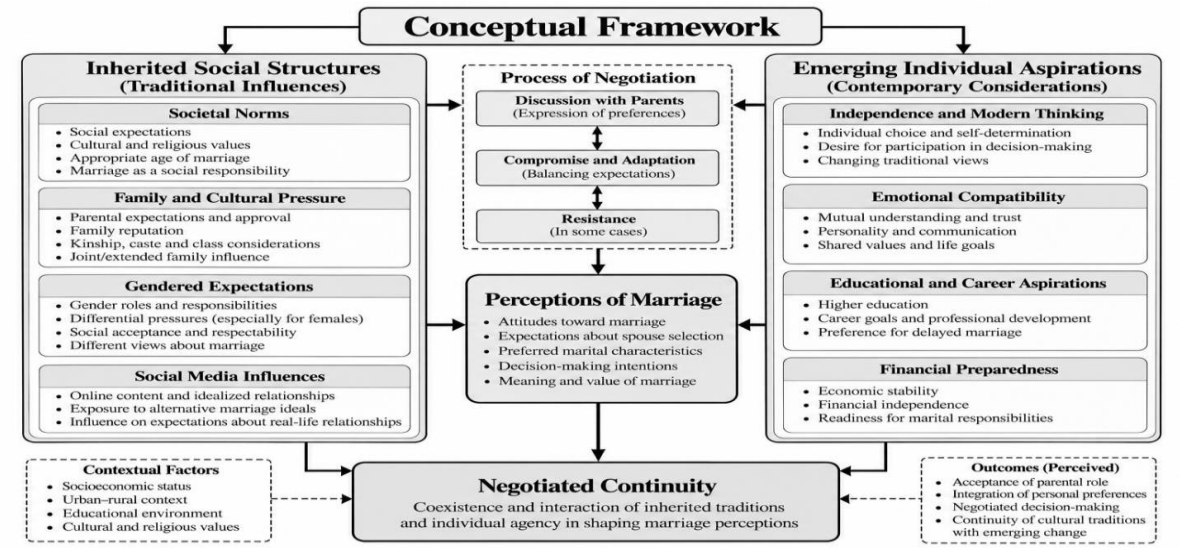
Conceptual framework

This section shows that marriage is a social institution in which young adults move between traditional and modern values in a cyclical manner. This institution relates to individual preferences, gender norms, and cultural traditions. The framework also places "negotiation" at the

nexus of understanding how educated youth interpret marriage and evaluate prospective partners. In this study, social norms include family traditions, cultural pressure, and perceived social media influences as major determinants of spouse selection. The study also found that parental approval, relatives' intervention, kinship, class, and caste systems were major dimensions shaping youth perceptions of marriage. Along with this, gender segregation and gender-biased expectations for females to remain submissive and humble also questioned individual preferences for selecting their spouse. Nowadays, social media also plays a pivotal role in framing marriage, creating relationship ideals, and promoting certain parameters for selecting a spouse among educated youth.

The second dimension is individual aspirations, including career progression, modern lifestyles, and independence. Other aspirations included mutual understanding, communication, shared values, and life goals. This study's conceptual framework rejects traditional norms and integrates personal preferences with individual goals and established social norms. In addition, negotiation mediates the relationship between traditional social norms and youth perceptions of marriage. The negotiation showed that young adults can discuss their personal preferences with their parents while still upholding traditional social values. Like this, young adults can adjust and reach agreement with their family without challenging their normative system. As shown in the conceptual framework, perceptions of marriage are the framework's focal outcome, encompassing attitudes toward marriage, expectations about spouse selection, preferred marital characteristics, decision-making intentions, and the meanings attached to marriage. These

perceptions reflect the interplay of social expectations, contemporary aspirations, and individual negotiation among them. This model also recognizes contextual factors, including socio-economic status, the rural-urban divide, the educational environment, and cultural and religious values. The model's outcomes included acceptance of parental involvement; integration of personal values and preferences; decision-making processes; cultural continuity; and possible expressions for uniform student outcomes.



Methodology

The universe of the present study was all the married and unmarried educated youth in the study vicinity of Multan, Pakistan. The target population was youngsters studying at two major public-sector universities in Multan, i.e., Bahauddin Zakariya University and Emerson University. The study used a triangulation research design comprising quantitative and qualitative methods. It also shows that socio-cultural traditions interact with individual aspirations, family background, gender roles, along with perceived social media influences on marriage-related attitudes.

The quantitative sample comprised N=400 unmarried respondents from the two universities through a multistage sampling technique. From each university, we selected n=200 students from the social and natural sciences departments, respectively. In the qualitative section, we interviewed n=12 married students (6 from each university) to explore in depth the role of social norms in youth perceptions of marriage.

We collected quantitative data through a structured questionnaire and interview guide designed to assess university students' perceptions of marriage and the social factors associated with it, including social norms, gender related perceptions, perceived social media influences, independence, and modern thinking patterns. The questionnaire included statements on parental involvement in marriage decisions, family expectations, and socio-economic considerations, career aspirations, emotional compatibility, and relational ideals. This format also enabled the researchers to investigate how respondents endorsed different traditions and contemporary perspectives on marriage. The researchers collected qualitative data from 12 married university students. The interviews explored participants' experiences and interpretations of marriage-related decision-making, with particular attention to parental authority, cultural boundaries, individual preferences, and changing criteria for spouse selection. Participants also expressed how young adults sought to maintain family relationships while expressing their preferences and negotiating marriage-related choices.

We used SPSS version 21 for the quantitative data analysis and thematic analysis for the qualitative data analysis. Accordingly, we used univariate analysis (frequency, percentage), internal consistency, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis along with mediation analysis in the quantitative section. We used thematic analysis, transcription, translation, data coding, and code comparison. We then grouped these codes into themes describing educated youth's perceptions of marriage. These perceptions are based on traditional, inherited values and young people's personal choice in selecting a spouse.

Table-I: Demographics of the respondents (N=400)

Demographic variables	Categories	n (%)
Age in years	<25 years	112 (28.0)
	25-30 years	256 (64.0)
	>30 years	32 (8.0)
Gender	Female	218 (54.5)

	Male	182 (45.5)
University segregation	Bahauddin Zakariya University	211 (52.7)
	Emerson University	189 (47.3)
Level of education	BS	248 (62.0)
	MPhil	139 (34.8)
	PhD	13 (3.2)
Family type	Nuclear	238 (59.5)
	Extended	108 (27.0)
	Joint	54 (13.5)

Demographics of the respondents

Table I shows that the largest proportion of students were in the 25–30 years age category (n=256, 64.0%), while n=112 (28.0%) were below 25 years old. The data also showed that only n=32 students (8.0%) were older than 30 years. By gender, n=218 (54.5%) respondents were female, while n=182 (45.5%) were male. Additionally, n=248 (62.0%) students were enrolled in the BS program, while n=139 were M.Phil. scholars studying in the first semester. Moreover, n=13 (3.2%) students were enrolled in the Ph.D. program. The family structure variable showed that n=238 (59.5%) belonged to a nuclear family, followed by n=108 (27.0%) belonging to an extended family system, and n=54 (13.5%) belonging to a joint family system. These demographic data describe the sample but do not establish that age, family structure, education level, or gender influenced students' experiences of family expectations or marital decision-making.

Table-II: Inherited social and cultural influences on marriage (N=400)

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Societal norms strongly influence marriage decisions	4 (1.0)	13 (3.3)	64 (16.0)	154 (38.5)	165 (41.3)
People feel pressure from society regarding marriage	5 (1.3)	15 (3.8)	49 (12.3)	192 (48.0)	139 (34.8)
Society decides the appropriate age of marriage	20 (5.0)	40 (10.0)	74 (18.5)	144 (36.0)	122 (30.5)
Marriage is considered a social responsibility in our culture	4 (1.0)	15 (3.8)	47 (11.8)	173 (43.3)	161 (40.3)
Marriage is mostly a family matter in our society	5 (1.3)	10 (2.5)	47 (11.8)	176 (44.0)	162 (40.5)
Family expectations influence marriage perceptions	2 (0.5)	5 (1.3)	42 (10.5)	209 (52.3)	142 (35.5)
Parents play a major role in marriage decisions	0 (0.0)	5 (1.3)	24 (6.0)	155 (38.8)	216 (54.0)

Inherited social and cultural influences on marriage

Table II revealed that n=319 (79.8%) respondents agree or strongly agree that societal norms influence marriage decisions among educated youth. In addition, 331 (82.8%) university students agreed that they feel social pressure when choosing a spouse. This social pressure mainly resides in inherited traditions and parental choice. The data also show that n=334 (83.5%) respondents stated that marriage is a social responsibility. The main reason is that the study area views marriage as a collective, family-based matter, which also reflects respondents' understanding of marriage. In this regard, family expectations were also prominent, with n=351 (87.8%) respondents agreeing that family expectations influence the individual decision to get married.

Table-III: Cultural, socioeconomic, and modern influences on marriage perceptions (N=400)

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Cultural traditions strongly affect marriage thinking	7 (1.8)	11 (2.8)	53 (13.3)	181 (45.3)	148 (37.0)
Social class affects marriage decisions	4 (1.0)	10 (2.5)	48 (12.0)	188 (47.0)	150 (37.5)
Career goals delay marriage decisions	1 (0.3)	12 (3.0)	51 (12.8)	187 (46.8)	149 (37.3)
Financial independence is necessary before marriage	4 (1.0)	11 (2.8)	39 (9.8)	158 (39.5)	188 (47.0)
Young people prefer independent marriage decisions	2 (0.5)	6 (1.5)	51 (12.8)	175 (43.8)	166 (41.5)
Education changes traditional views about marriage	3 (0.8)	7 (1.8)	45 (11.3)	179 (44.8)	166 (41.5)
Emotional compatibility is more important than tradition	0 (0.0)	5 (1.3)	37 (9.3)	129 (32.3)	229 (57.3)

Cultural, socioeconomic, and modern influences on marriage perceptions

Table III illustrates the coexistence of traditional influences with emerging socio-economic and individual-oriented considerations. As shown, n=329 (82.3%) respondents agreed or strongly agreed that cultural traditions shape marital attitudes. Similarly, n=338 (84.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that social class affects marriage decisions, suggesting that respondents view socioeconomic and status considerations as relevant. Similarly, n=338 (84.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that social class affects marriage decisions, showing that socio-economic status

considerations remain relevant. Similarly, the table shows that a significant majority of students, i.e., n=338 (84.5%), agreed that social class affects a person's marriage decisions. Another indicator is career goals, which delay youth marriage intentions. Agreeing with this statement, n=336 (84.0%) students validated these findings. In this regard, n=346 (86.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that financial independence is necessary before marriage, indicating that economic readiness has become an important consideration. The table also shows that n=341 respondents (85.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that young people prefer to make marriage decisions independently. Similarly, n=345 (86.3%) respondents agreed or strongly agreed that education is the key factor changing traditional views about marriage, suggesting that respondents see education as a key factor in changing traditional views of marriage. A total of n=358 (89.5%) respondents agreed or strongly agreed that emotional compatibility is the major nexus determining the traditional cultural patterns.

Table-IV: Gender and digital social dynamics in marriage perceptions (N=400)

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Male and female respondents have different views about marriage	0 (0.0)	3 (0.8)	34 (8.5)	195 (48.8)	168 (42.0)
Gender roles influence marriage expectations	1 (0.3)	3 (0.8)	54 (13.5)	224 (56.0)	118 (29.5)
Females experience more social pressure regarding marriage timing	1 (0.3)	6 (1.5)	45 (11.3)	134 (33.5)	214 (53.5)
Social media shapes ideas about ideal marriage among young people	4 (1.0)	12 (3.0)	46 (11.5)	163 (40.8)	175 (43.8)
Online content influences youth expectations about real-life relationships	3 (0.8)	11 (2.8)	50 (12.5)	168 (42.0)	168 (42.0)

Gender and digital social dynamics in marriage perceptions

Table IV shows that respondents perceive gender related differences in marital views. In this regard, it is evident that n=363 (90.8%) respondents believe males and females have different viewpoints on spouse selection. In addition, n=342 respondents (85.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that gender roles influence marriage decisions. As gender discrimination in marriage pressure is a concern, it is stated that females feel more social pressure regarding marriage timing than males. Regarding the effect of digital media, n=338 respondents (84.5%) also agreed or strongly agreed that social media shapes youth perceptions of marriage in the given structural context.

Table-V: Internal consistency reliability of the study constructs (N = 400)

Constructs	Cronbach's α
Perception of marriage	.884
Influence of societal norms	.891
Family pressure and inherited cultural influence	.879
Independence and modern thinking patterns	.856
Gender differences in marriage perception	.842
Influence of social media content on changing marriage perception	.887

Internal consistency reliability of the study constructs

Table V indicates that Cronbach's alpha values range from .842 to .891, exceeding the .70 threshold. All the items show adequate internal consistency, i.e., perception of marriage (α=.884), influence of societal norms (α=.891), family pressure and inherited cultural influence (α=.879), independence and modern thinking patterns (α=.856), gender differences in marriage perception (α=.842), and influence of social media content on changing the marital perception among youth(α=.887).

Table VI: Pearson correlations among the study variables (N = 400)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Perception of Marriage	1	.720**	.680**	.610**	.550**	.640**
2. Societal Norms Influence	.720**	1	.609**	.416**	.414**	.381**
3. Family and Cultural Pressure	.680**	.609**	1	.500**	.522**	.428**
4. Independence and Modern Thinking	.610**	.416**	.500**	1	.491**	.349**
5. Gender Differences in Perception	.550**	.414**	.522**	.491**	1	.466**
6. Social Media Influences	.640**	.381**	.428**	.349**	.466**	1

Pearson correlations

From Table VI, societal norms were positively associated with perceptions of marriage (r = .720, p < .001), followed by family and cultural pressure (r = .680, p < .001) and social media influences (r = .640, p < .001). In addition, independence and modern thinking patterns (r = .610, p < .001), and gender differentials in marriage are not individual choices but are shaped by societal, cultural, familial, individual, and digital influences. In addition, inherited cultural norms were positively associated with family and cultural pressure (r = .609, p < .001), and family and cultural pressure was associated with gender differences (r = .522, p < .001).

Table VII: Multiple linear regression predicting perception of marriage (N = 400)

Model Summary

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error of Estimate
1	.872	.761	.758	.998

ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Regression	1247.249	5	249.450	250.504	< .001
Residual	392.341	394	.996	—	—
Total	1639.590	399	—	—	—

Regression Coefficients

Predictor	β	SE (β)	t	p
Societal Norms Influence	.377	.032	11.840	< .001
Family and Cultural Pressure	.176	.035	5.063	< .001
Independence and Modern Thinking	.235	.030	7.758	< .001
Gender Differences in Perception	.037	.032	1.157	.248
Social Media Influences	.322	.029	11.084	< .001

Multiple linear regression predicting perception of marriage

Table VII presents the regression model examining how predictor variables determine marriage perception among youth in the study area. The model also shows a positive, significant relationship, indicating that the predictors explained variation in students' perceptions of marriage among educated youth [F (5, 394) = 250.504, p < .001]. The R^2 value of .761 indicates that the five predictors explained 76.1% of the variance in students' perceptions of marriage, while the adjusted model accounts for approximately 75.8% of the variance in students ' perceptions of marriage after considering model complexity. Among these predictors, societal norms emerged as the strongest and statistically significant predictor (β = .377, t = 11.840, p < .001). This means societal norms among university students in Multan, Pakistan, most strongly influence their perceptions of marriage. In addition, social media influences contributed substantially and significantly (β = .322, t = 11.084, p < .001). This finding suggests that students' social media use influences how they conceptualize marriage. Independence and modern thinking also showed a significant positive association (β = .235, t = 7.758, p < .001), indicating that these individualistic modern orientations also contributed to perceptions of marriage. Family and cultural pressure also contributed positively and significantly (β = .176, t = 5.063, p < .001). This also suggests that family and cultural considerations remain relevant to students' perceptions even after controlling for the predictor

variables. In contrast, the gender differentials in perception did not make a unique contribution to the regression model (β = .037, t = 1.157, p = .248). This shows that gender differentials explained additional variation in youngsters' perceptions of marriage in the study area.

Mediation Analysis

Proposed Mediation Model

For the mediation analysis, social norms and inherited traditions predicted perceptions of marriage (the outcome). Family and cultural pressure, later resolved through negotiation, was the mediating variable. This model is useful because it captures societal expectations related to family and cultural restrictions.

Societal Norms Influence → Family and Cultural Pressure → Perception of Marriage

Table VIII: Mediation analysis of family and cultural pressure in the relationship between societal norms and perception of marriage (N=400)

Effect	β	SE	95% Bootstrap CI	p
Societal Norms → Family/Cultural Pressure (a)	.609	.036	[.538, .679]	< .001
Family/Cultural Pressure → Perception (b)	.384	.041	[.304, .464]	< .001
Societal Norms → Perception, total effect (c)	.720	.032	[.657, .783]	< .001
Societal Norms → Perception, direct effect (c′)	.486	.040	[.408, .564]	< .001
Indirect effect (a × b)	.234	.029	[.180, .294]	< .001

Mediation analysis of family and cultural pressure in the relationship between societal norms and perception of marriage

Table VIII presents the mediation analysis, suggesting that family and cultural pressure mediated the relationship between inherited social norms and youth perceptions of marriage (β = .609, p < .001). This also indicated that social norms were associated with stronger family and cultural pressure regarding spouse choice and marriage. In addition, family and cultural pressure was positively associated with perceptions of marriage after controlling for social norms (β = .384, p < .001). The table also showed that societal norms had a positive, significant total effect on perceptions of marriage (β = .720, p < .001). After adding family and cultural pressure to the model, the direct and indirect effects were significant, i.e., (direct effect: β = .234, 95% bootstrap CI [.180, .294]) and (indirect effect: β = .234, 95% bootstrap CI [.180, .294]). Thus, societal norms appear to influence the perception of marriage both directly and indirectly through family and cultural pressure.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings describe the major emerging patterns of decision-making among youth in the study context. This section explains that inherited social, cultural, and family expectations

shape individuals' preferences when deciding on marriage. The analysis is organized into overarching themes that reflect a shift from prescribed marital expectations toward greater participation, negotiation, and individual agency. The coding framework also reflected the responses and statements about the transition from traditional to emerging negotiated choices.

Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis indicated that marriage decision-making involves balancing individuals' preferences with ongoing family expectations. When selecting a spouse, marriage decision-making balances parental authority with individual preferences. Instead, it framed marriage as either fully family-directed or individually driven. The qualitative analysis identified communication, negotiation, and participation as the major factors shaping marriage perceptions among educated youth. Compromise was the main factor shaping the shift from inherited decisions to negotiated choices. Thus, the themes suggest that changing marriage practices should not be understood as a complete rejection of traditional values; instead, they reflect an emerging process of negotiated agency in which individuals express preferences within their cultural and familial boundaries. The university students agreed that they were not against the traditional value system, but they are increasingly trying to negotiate personal preferences within it.

Negotiated marriage decision-making

A glance at the transcripts revealed that participants wanted negotiation only to present their own personal choices when selecting a spouse. Otherwise, 10/12 participants agreed that they respect traditional social norms and parental authority in spouse selection. In addition, participants emphasized the need to balance personal choices with family approval. However, the extent of individual autonomy varied across participants. In consensus, participants identified several parameters for marriage perception, such as education, age, communication, occupational characteristics, and personality standards. Nevertheless, personal choice remained subject to parental approval and cultural expectations. 3/12 participants said they wanted to maintain their family's lineage, language, and caste system. While 5/12 participants argued that they wanted to choose a spouse of their own by considering the parameters set by their parents, their parents still wanted them to marry through arranged marriage. One participant argued that negotiation is necessary when parents are open-minded; otherwise, they will reject their children's arguments about marriage. The findings also revealed that marriage decision-making involved negotiated agency rather than complete independence. A married female M.Phil. student explained that normative values in rural and urban areas of Multan are orthodox. Although there is room for negotiation, the transition from traditional values is still slow, especially for ten females. Further, she said that;

"I always preferred to tell my parents, especially my mother, about my marriage preferences, but still parental opinion gets the largest space."

Family and cultural influence

The transcriptions showed that family structure, kinship, class, caste, family reputation, and cultural traditions continued to shape participants' perceptions of marriage. Although participants expressed personal preferences for spouse selection, their choices remained embedded in established social expectations. All participants, especially women, agreed that they always preferred parental preference when choosing a spouse. 8/12 participants reported that cultural norms around marriage and spouse selection strongly shape the study's context in Multan. The interview also revealed that, because parents held conservative, authoritative views about their children, choosing a spouse based on individual choice was not considered a pious act in the study area. Therefore, when their choice of spouse was fully rejected, they wanted to negotiate with their parents. On the other hand, participants also reported that their parents saw them as immature; therefore, they sometimes wanted to make the final decision about their marriage. 7/12 participants reported that the main reason for excluding them from choosing their spouse was "preserving the traditional norms of the family." The other reported reason cited by 10/12 respondents was that the family, along with society, believed that "young people have no experience and exposure to make the decision for their marriage." A review of the transcripts also indicated that, in the study area, the family, especially parents, has the right to accept or reject any proposal, whether arranged or love marriage. 11/12 participants reported respecting traditional values and elders when selecting a spouse. They also appeared to negotiate and adapt these expectations by incorporating personal preferences for education, personality, occupation, and emotional compatibility. One of the married participants, who is doing a PhD, indicated that;

"We respect our traditional cultural patterns for marriage decisions. Our perceptions are shaped in accordance with these inherited traditions, but we only want the negotiation in which our personal choice and parental decision must be integrated."

Digital media and contemporary marriage ideals

Interview participants indicated that social media and online content shape youth perceptions of marriage. Transcripts indicated that youth are highly influenced by and connected to social media, which shapes perceptions of marriage across cultures. In this regard, Western culture and values about choosing a life partner remain dominant. The key question is how social media shapes their understanding of marriage and relationships. Female participants reported that social media content provided an additional source of relationship ideals alongside family socialization, cultural traditions, and personal experience. Therefore, social media is changing marital perceptions by shaping established marriage expectations and emerging individual priorities among university students. Participants also suggested that personality compatibility, educational and occupational aspirations, financial preparedness, and individual decision-making mattered. The findings also showed that social media transforms individual perceptions of marriage through inherited social norms, shifting life priorities, and contemporary social influences. Endorsing this, a 23-year-old married male student studying BS Sociology argued that;

"I think social media is not doing anything wrong by indicating that individual choice should be preferred in marriage. If the norms are staying intact but the negotiation with parents about the

individual's marriage choice is brought forth, then this is not a sin. Our socialization also tells us which parameters to follow when making our individual choice about marriage. Social media is just polishing it."

Intergenerational negotiation along with compromise

The transcriptions indicated that marriage decision-making involved the ongoing negotiation between the parental expectations and individual choices. All 12 participants agreed that they did not want to fully reject parental authority and advice when choosing a spouse. Instead, they wanted to create a mediation in which their personal choice, along with cultural integration, should be intact. 4/12 participants said their parents expected them to obey their marriage decisions without question, but this is not possible. They said balancing parental expectations and personal choice is important, and that negotiation must remain intact to express their preferences, maintain their relationship with their parents, and still choose their own marital partner. Communication is an important way to manage generational differences and reach mutually acceptable decisions. The interviews also reflected that compromise was central to negotiating marriage choices. Participants weighed their preferences when considering a prospective spouse while staying attentive to parental concerns and cultural expectations. The first author asked about the role of negotiation in challenging the traditional normative system. In response, 9/12 participants negated this issue and argued that they wanted a mediation path where family and personal preferences aligned. Endorsing this fact, a male married participant who was doing a Ph.D. in Biotechnology argued that;

"My parents totally negated my marriage choice, and I was forced to marry my maternal cousin. She is nice, but our communication and bond of love are still limited. I think parents should consider that their children can negotiate, and a point of consensus can be developed for the selection of a spouse."

Transforming the criteria for partner selection

The data revealed that participants argued that everyone has different standards when selecting a spouse. Married female participants argued that women were not considered "noble" when they put forward their demands/criteria for selecting a spouse. In contrast, male participants said their parents and relatives asked them to state their demands regarding a future spouse's personality, education, occupation, and behavior. The only problem these male participants faced was that their parents, especially their mother, said she would find an exact female who would meet their demands, but they wanted to choose their spouse themselves. Interviews with the female participants revealed that their parents preferred a spouse who was occupationally and financially stable and could ensure their future social security. In contrast, all participants argued that parental norms and priorities in their children's marriage centered on compatibility, understanding, and mutual support. Parents and other family members forced, and sometimes even blackmailed, participants into considering family reputation, kinship, caste, socio-economic background, inherited expectations, personality, and occupational characteristics when selecting a spouse. However, the transcribed data still showed consensus that parents and children should

negotiate partner selection, as children were the major stakeholders in this wedlock. A married female studying in BS (Social Sciences) program endorsed this argument and revealed that;

"There is no harm in negotiating the priorities of a person for selecting their spouse with their parents. Now the criterion for selecting the spouse is changed; it cannot be imposed, but rather it must be decided with the consent of the children, as they have to spend their lives."

Individual agency and changing life priorities

Data revealed that the young generation's life priorities change over time. In this regard, education, career opportunities, and personal goals became more dominant for youth than their parents' priorities when choosing a spouse, such as caste, class, and lineage. In addition, 10/12 participants reported that they considered marriage readiness exclusively in terms of family expectations and socially prescribed timelines. Participants also reported that establishing educational, professional, and financial stability is a major part of their perception of marriage among youth. In contrast, elders, especially parents, often neglect this. For example, when answering questions about the traditional value system, it was evident that families often believed the traditional marriage system should be considered, in which women's careers, preferred lifestyles, and personal aspirations should not be considered in the perception of marriage. In answering the questions, participants also said that questioning specific family expectations did not necessarily mean rejecting marriage or abandoning family values. Instead, it means negotiating the timing of marriage and the characteristics of a life partner within their cultural settings. A married male student doing an M.Phil. in Islamic Studies divulged that;

"We respect our elders' normative patterns for selecting our spouse. But nowadays, individuals have their own choices that cannot be neglected. Therefore, there must be a mediation path that must rejoin the family expectations and the individual choices for marriage."

Discussion

This study investigated the social dynamics and perceptions of marriage among educated youth in Multan (Pakistan). It also examined how inherited traditions, family expectations, individual aspirations, gender-based expectations, and digital influence shaped youth perceptions of marriage in this structural context (Asim et al., 2024). Quantitative findings from 400 unmarried university students were complemented by 12 interviews with married university students. The findings showed that marriage remains a socially and culturally embedded institution rather than solely an individual decision. In support of these findings depicted in the present study, it was also found in the studies conducted by Akanle & Isaiah-Ojo (2026) and Wang et al. (2026) that young adults increasingly played an important role in spouse selection and focused on negotiating with their parents to ensure their choices and priorities were considered.

The findings also indicate that inherited traditional values and the family's normative system persist in the study area. Data revealed that 92.8% of respondents agreed that parents were the main decision-makers in their child's marriage. Similarly, 87.8% of respondents reported family

expectations. These findings also align with a previous study by Yasmin et al. (2026), which argued that media and family expectations play an imperative role in youth perceptions of marriage. In addition, the data showed that marriage represents a social responsibility, with 83.5% of respondents agreeing with this statement, along with culturally established obligations and personal aspirations. Yue et al. (2026) supported these findings with a mixed-methods study of 238 college students, including a quantitative phase and 12 qualitative interviews. In support, this research depicted that gender social experiences, reproductive concerns, economic pressure, and childbearing attitudes were the main factors that created the perception of marriage among youth. Institutional concerns and cultural norms also shaped youth perceptions of marriage. Qadeer et al. (2022) also depicted that parental approval, family reputation, kinship, social class, and respect for elders must endorse continuing the spouse selection. The major findings showed that respect for elders and adherence to the normative system strongly influenced marriage decisions. The regression results showed that societal norms are the strongest predictor of perceptions of marriage ($\beta = .377$, $p < .001$). In addition, family and cultural pressure also contributed to perceptions of marriage ($\beta = .176$, $p < .001$). These findings show that individual perceptions of marriage are closely tied to the social environment in which people form and negotiate marriage-related expectations. Previous studies in Pakistan and China also supported these findings (see Asim et al., 2024; Chen & Huang, 2026).

The second section examined whether social and cultural expectations continued to influence individual considerations. In this regard, 89.5% of respondents strongly agreed that emotional compatibility, personality type, and financial independence were necessary prerequisites for marriage. The quantitative section also showed that 86.3% of respondents agreed that education is the main factor in deciding on a spouse (see Malasari & Ratnasari, 2026; Shams-Ghahfarokhi, 2026). In addition, a previous study from Pakistan also validated that family background, kinship, class, caste, and social status do not determine marriage. Instead, it focuses on respondents' individual background and relationship references (Rizvi, 2026; Torrisi et al., 2026; Shah et al., 2025). The results also showed a positive, significant relationship between independence and modern thinking and marriage perceptions, which contributed to the regression model ($\beta = .235$, $p < .001$). These statistical results should be distinguished from high descriptive agreement with individual-oriented values. The subjective results showed that various factors contributed to personal choices ranging from financial stability to emotional compatibility (also see related studies of Chen et al., 2015 and Nisa et al., 2026).

The qualitative findings showed that 7/12 married students reported that they could choose their spouse but still respect their parents' norms about marriage. The findings also showed mixed responses among married university students, who emphasized negotiation to express personal preferences while maintaining relationships with parents and making marriage decisions. Takvam Kindt (2022) and Sabri (2025) found that negotiation is a key factor in how parents' traditional values shape their children's marriage decisions. Furthermore, the findings also showed that gender and familial expectations play a role. In this regard, 87% of respondents agreed that female students experience more gender pressure in developing their perceptions about marriage as

compared to male students. A previous study conducted by Tabkhi et al. (2025) depicted those negative emotions about marriage, family issues, mistrust in intimate support, economic issues, and inability to face marital challenges that affected male students more as compared to female students. In addition, 85.5% of respondents believe that gender roles influence marriage perceptions, while 90.8% perceived differences between male and female respondents' views about marriage. Furthermore, gender differences in perception contributed significantly to the regression model ($\beta = .037$, $p = .248$). These results indicated that the gender differences did not independently predict the variation after controlling for other variables.

Other findings indicated that social media and contemporary marriage ideals also played an important role in shaping youth perceptions of marriage. The quantitative findings showed that 84.5% of respondents strongly agreed that social media shapes marriage ideals, while 84% agreed that online content on social media changes marriage expectations among youth ($\beta = .322$, $p < .001$). Previous studies in India and Pakistan supported these findings and argued that media content cannot be ignored when developing youth marital perceptions (see Asim et al., 2024; Megha et al., 2025).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concluded that marriage is a sacred social institution guided by societal norms and inherited values. In this regard, the youngsters do not want to completely reject their inherited traditions, parental authority, and normative values when selecting a spouse. Instead, they want to negotiate with their parents, so their personal choices for future marital partners are considered. To shape youth perceptions of marriage by integrating traditional norms and youth negotiation, the authors proposed the following recommendations.

1. Parents and other family members should create opportunities for young adults in their spouse selection. They should not exclude family participation; involve young adults in marital decision-making and let them express their specific preferences for a spouse.
2. Communication must be strengthened between parents and their children. In this regard, the parents should provide an open environment for their children to discuss their marriage preferences and related expectations.
3. A balanced consideration between the young adult's own personal choice about marriage and parental concerns about integrating with their norms should be made. Family guidance should complement, not override, young adults, and it should consider communication, mutual understanding, shared expectations, family background, kinship system, and social status.
4. Parents should respect the educational goals, career aspirations, and financial preparedness before marriage, especially for young girls.
5. Females are targeted more for gender pressure regarding the development of perceptions about marriage. Therefore, females should have the freedom to choose a spouse and set priorities for their future husband.
6. Instead of negating the marriage perception of youth, it must be linked with the traditional normative system and individual preferences for marriage.

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