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Narrative Tension and Marriage-Birth Dilemma: A Study on the Generation Mechanism of Marriage Anxiety among Urban Single Young People

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of continuously delayed age at first marriage and first childbirth among Chinese youth, alongside rising willingness to remain unmarried and childfree, this paper distinguishes the concept of "marital anxiety" from existing research on fertility and marriage intentions, and employs the term "narrative tension" to denote the discrepancy between idealized fertility and marriage scenarios and their practical feasibility. Grounded in narrative theory and a gender perspective, this paper focuses on urban single youth and analyzes the mechanisms underlying marital anxiety at three levels of analysis: macro-level institutional contradictions, meso-level transmission by online media, and micro-level internalization of individual experience, based on available survey data and existing literature. The findings reveal that marital anxiety among urban single youth arises from the convergence of three factors: the failure of marriage and fertility support systems, the amplification of risk narratives online, and accumulated defensive pessimism among individuals. Accordingly, this paper proposes corresponding practical mitigation pathways from multiple stakeholders and multiple dimensions.

Keywords: Marital anxiety, Urban single young people, Narrative tension, Gender perspective

1. Introduction

In the first half of 2026, the number of marriage registrations nationwide was only 3.275 million, a decrease of 264,000 pairs compared to the same period in 2025, representing a year-on-year decline of approximately 7.5%. This marks the lowest level since comparable data became available in 2014, and it is far from reaching the marriage ratio of 42.2% [1, 2]. Although these data reflect the overall situation nationwide, the groups most affected by delayed marriage and anxiety about marriage and fertility are urban youth, especially the highly educated. Their average age of first marriage has significantly exceeded the national average, and their negative attitudes towards marriage are more prominent [3]. The Blue Book of the "China National Mental Health Development Report (2023-2024)" published in 2025 shows that among college students, the proportion of those who believe "having a marriage is not important" is 51.8%, and the proportion of

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those who believe "having children is not important" is 59.4%; there is also a significant gender difference in how respondents view the importance of marriage and children, with women more likely to downplay it [4]. Academic research indicates that there are new characteristics in the marriage behavior of young people in China, such as the continuous postponement of the time of first marriage and first childbirth, an increase in pre-marriage cohabitation, and an increase in the willingness to avoid marriage and childbearing and have fewer children [5]. A growing number of young people are experiencing anxiety and even resistance toward marriage and childbearing, and studying the marital issues facing contemporary youth has become an increasingly important public topic.

The current research mainly focuses on clarifying concepts and identifying influencing factors, but there are still deficiencies: marital anxiety is often discussed in the context of marital and reproductive intentions, and the generation process lacks systematic analysis; the pressure transmission mechanism at the macro and micro levels is unclear; the narrative theory is mostly used as a background framework, without systematically explaining the generation of anxiety.

To address these gaps, this paper attempts to construct an explanatory framework for analyzing the generation mechanism of marital anxiety, specifically concentrating on three aspects. First, it distinguishes marital anxiety among urban single youth from marriage and childbearing intentions, treating it as an independent object of study and no longer equating it with byproducts of remaining unmarried or delayed marriage. Second, it introduces the narrative theory and operationalizes it, proposing the concept of "narrative tension" - referring to the tense state experienced by individuals in the continuous gap between the ideal marital picture and the actual marital possibility. Third, it attempts to connect the transmission chains between the macro, meso, and micro levels, explaining how institutional delays, organizational cost shifts, and individual risk avoidance layer upon each other to ultimately form an anxiety experience.

2. Causes of marital anxiety

To improve the current marital situation, clarifying the causes of marital anxiety is of paramount importance. Sha Yong suggests that the phenomenon of not getting married or having children is caused by the failure of the multi-dimensional marriage and childbearing support system provided by society, the economy, and culture. The core issue lies in the structural mismatch between the traditional marriage support system and the modern individual development needs [6]. Based on a systematic perspective that integrates the macro, meso, and micro levels, this article proceeds with the following discussion.

2.1. Macro-level

Conflict between the labor market and the reproductive cycle. In job interviews, women are often asked "How do you balance career and family? " and their marital, reproductive and parenting arrangements are often used as the criteria for the interview. Men are asked such questions less frequently. This is not only influenced by traditional attitudes toward marriage and childbearing and by gender inequality, but more importantly, because employers have shifted social responsibilities onto individuals. When enterprises implement "maternity leave" and "parental leave", they will suffer economic losses due to this, which leads enterprises to simply reduce the proportion of female employees during the recruitment stage, resulting in so-called "invisible workplace discrimination", which is indirectly linked to the "motherhood penalty" and "childbirth-related disadvantage." This is partly due to the "one-size-fits-all" inaction and responsibility transfer by some enterprises, but it is

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also a consequence of rational cost-benefit analysis. At its core, there is a lack of a corresponding guarantee policy system and market supervision, and no practical measures have been taken to reduce this phenomenon.

Contradiction between policy purpose and actual implementation effect. The "maternity leave" policy indirectly creates workplace employment discrimination in practice. Other marriage- and childbearing-related policies suffer from similar problems. Taking the "divorce cooling period" as an example, the original intention of the policy was to reduce impulsive divorces, reduce the divorce rate, and thereby increase the birth rate. However, the current divorce cooling period system solely pursues the decline of the divorce rate, failing to fairly balance the disadvantaged members who have suffered domestic violence or abuse in marriage and family. The unilateral withdrawal mechanism also conflicts to a certain extent with the modern value of freedom and privacy pursued in marriage. This may lead to the continuous decline in marriage and childbearing rates. During the actual implementation process, there have been many different opinions. Online comments such as "lenient recruitment but strict exit" have also continued to spread, having a direct impact on single young people, especially urban young people in the decision-making stage of marriage and love. Before entering marriage, they have already anticipated obstacles to withdrawal, thus raising the psychological threshold in the decision-making stage. The harmony of the policy's kindness and public perception does not match, and the purpose does not correspond to the actual implementation effect. This is one of the sources of marital anxiety.

2.2. Meso-level

Online media significantly amplify marital anxiety. The aforementioned public controversy over the "divorce cooling-off period" is merely an illustration of how online media magnifies marital anxiety. Through topic aggregation, algorithmic recommendations, and content distribution, the scattered conflicts are presented as perceivable social phenomena. Taking "maternity leave policy and employment discrimination" as an example, the individual's workplace experiences were originally isolated incidents, but through the aggregation of similar experiences on social media, they were structured into a generalized and systematic perception of injustice. At the same time, the Internet transforms risks into concrete experiences of anxiety and turns macro-level institutional contradictions into anxiety that individuals can directly perceive. For instance, content related to marital anxiety is more frequently recommended to women, and women are more aware of gender roles, the division of family labor, and childbearing risks in marriage; they can also more directly perceive the suffering of childbirth, and some images and videos of pregnancy shock viewers, triggering fear. However, exposing women's real experiences to the public has its positive significance, allowing individuals to make rational choices based on clear possibilities [7,8].

The improvement of women's consciousness and the development of gender equality consciousness have a certain impact on marital anxiety. In other words, it is the gap between marriage expectations and reality that triggers anxiety. As mentioned above, with the improvement of women's education levels and the enhancement of gender equality consciousness, more women join the workforce and workplace, hoping to break away from the traditional narrative of "men outside, women inside", but they still find that statements of women being "inside" are still common in society, exerting invisible oppression and discipline on women. The excessive gap between marital expectations and reality leads some women to prefer not to marry. In addition, some inappropriate practices that prioritize women's marital value over their own value realization have deepened marital anxiety. Taking the public coverage of the death of a certain female entrepreneur in April 2025 as an example, the attention to her family identity far exceeded the discussion of her

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social contributions. This "female achievements being covered by marital identity" public narrative makes some women perceive that marriage may lead to "self-invisibility", thereby deepening their rejection of marriage. Li Yue et al.'s survey shows that 41.67% of unmarried young people worry about losing themselves after marriage, and the proportion for women is higher, reaching 53.30%, 21.69 percentage points higher than that of men, which also verifies this view.

2.3. Micro-level

One's own income level affects marital concepts. As mentioned above, young people, especially those in urban areas, are in the early stage of their careers, and marriage comes with high costs. After weighing income and expenditure, some young people choose to maintain their quality of life; when asked about marriage and childbearing, most say, "I can't afford to raise a child. I'm worried that I can't provide a better life for my child," or "I can't even support myself, let alone support a family." Previous related studies have also shown that the cost of marriage and the competitive pressure of work are the most important obstacles hindering young people from getting married and having children [9]. Under the background of difficulty in job hunting, saturated job market, and economic downturn, the material pressure on young people has become an overlooked influencing factor of marital anxiety.

Worries about future marital life. Survey data from Li Yue et al. reveal specific concerns about future married life. Firstly, at the family relationship level, the survey shows that 45.67% of unmarried young people worry about getting along with their spouse's parents, and 45.37% worry about the integration of the two families. Women are more sensitive to this, with 54.52% of women worrying about the difficulty in handling the mother-in-law-child relationship, which is 16.51 percentage points higher than that of men, and only 6.75% of women are completely not worried. Secondly, at the career development level, 37.21% of unmarried young people worry that marriage will hinder their career development, And only 22.19% report no such concerns; this concern is more pronounced among women (47.29%), 18.9 percentage points higher than among men.The scale of cities also amplifies this anxiety - 45.95% of unmarried young people in first-tier cities worry that marriage will affect their career development, significantly higher than 35.87% in rural areas [10]. Finally, there is deep distrust of marriage: more than half of the women worry about their spouse's infidelity or being subjected to domestic violence, reflecting the dual anxieties of marital loyalty and personal safety.

3. Practical approaches to alleviating marital anxiety

In order to address the issues of aging and low birth rates, and to fully utilize the demographic dividend of China ,it is urgent to solve the marital anxiety problems faced by young people. Based on the perspectives of both the government and individuals, this article proposes corresponding practical approaches, hoping to alleviate the phenomenon of marital anxiety.

3.1. Government

The government is the most important responsible entity for alleviating marital anxiety. It can take the following measures:

First, it is necessary to accelerate the reform of family structure, clear away social ills, and eliminate the constraints of outdated marriage and childbearing ideas on young people. It is necessary to reform social concepts, reverse traditional gender stereotypes, and let marriage return to

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its essence, free from the quagmire of stigmatization, so as to clearly define family responsibilities and make safeguarding and dedication the common responsibility of both spouses rather than a unilateral opposition.

Then, it is necessary to strengthen infrastructure construction. Sha Yong proposed specific solutions for this, including macro-institutional reform, restructuring the cost-sharing mechanism for childbearing, establishing dedicated funds, introducing relevant fiscal policies, and creating a women's development account, thereby turning women's individual reproductive costs into a shared social arrangement. Additionally, the housing system should be adapted to marriage and childbearing needs, and support should be increased. Consider the weight of marriage and childbearing in housing planning [6].

Third, it is necessary to clarify the original intention of the policies, identify the root causes of policies that deviate from the implementation effects, and propose effective improvement methods. For example, standardize the employment standards in the labor market, rectify the hidden discrimination in the workplace, provide subsidies to enterprises that meet the standards for maternity and parental leave, and implement tax and fee reductions, fundamentally reversing their cost compensation mechanism.

Finally, it is necessary to improve the law as the last line of defense. It is necessary to improve the legal definitions and sentencing for acts such as domestic violence and infidelity, as well as relevant laws and regulations on marital property disposal. As the last line of defense, the law must not have any gaps or biases. A fair and strict law has a significant positive effect on eliminating people's fear of marital risks.

It is necessary to attach importance to the role of the internet media, reduce the spread of extreme emotions on the internet, reduce information homogeneity and algorithmic deliberate promotion, and trace back and investigate the information that leads to extreme male-female opposition, prevent and rectify it, and create more positive cases to spread positive examples. It should be noted that this does not mean hiding marital risks or reproductive risks, blindly promoting happy family cases, which will only stir up stronger anxiety and resistance. Instead, it is necessary to help young people make rational decisions about marriage and childbearing, such as establishing a youth marriage and childbearing experience network exchange platform, actively guiding young people, especially urban young people, to communicate and discuss with their peers, so that marriage is no longer unknown and frightening, thereby alleviating fear and anxiety emotions and establishing a more positive attitude towards marriage and childbearing.

3.2. Individuals

Individuals need to correctly understand their own views on marriage, comprehensively and multi-dimensionally grasp the essence of marriage, avoid one-sided thinking, reduce anxiety caused by the homogeneity of information, objectively weigh their material and spiritual foundations, and make rational judgments. In addition, actively reflecting on experiences from their families of origin is also important. For young people who have distrust in marriage due to the unsatisfactory parent-child relationship in their families, a feasible way to alleviate this problem is through psychological counseling, peer support, or self-reflection, through which they can complete a "narrative reconstruction" of their family-of-origin experiences—recasting them from "universal predictions about marriage" to "case-specific parental experiences."

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4. Conclusion

The root cause of marital anxiety among urban single young people lies in the combination of three types of tensions: The system constantly emphasizes the importance of marriage, but fails to provide adequate guarantees during implementation; the network media translate the structural risks of marriage and childbearing into daily perceivable anxiety narratives; individuals internalize the anxiety through their memories of the original family, economic pressure, and specific concerns about marriage. Therefore, merely relying on marriage and childbearing publicity or advocacy will not be effective. It is necessary to correct the paradox of "emphasizing but neglecting" through institutional support, and at the same time guide young people to rationally reevaluate the risk narratives. This article is mainly based on existing literature and survey data. The operationalization measurement of narrative tension and its differences among different urban young people groups still need to be addressed through subsequent empirical research. Further research can examine differences in narrative tension across different tiers of cities and among young people with different educational backgrounds, and use in-depth interviews to track the specific pathway through which anxiety moves from structural pressure to individual experience.

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