

Article type:
Original Research

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Article history:

Received 24 Feb 2025
Revised 18 May 2025
Accepted 28 June 2025
Published online 01 Sep 2025

How to cite this article:

Namavar Feyzabadi, Z., Nickzad, Z., Rejali, M., Behshahrion, A., & Amanat, A. (2025). Pessimism about Marriage as a Mediator Between Insecure Attachment and Marriage Age in Children of Divorced Parents: A Structural Equation Model. *International Journal of Body, Mind and Culture*, 12(6), 61-70.



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Introduction

The family plays a foundational role in shaping children's physical, emotional, and social well-being. In recent years, the global increase in divorce rates has drawn attention to the developmental challenges faced

Pessimism about Marriage as a Mediator Between Insecure Attachment and Marriage Age in Children of Divorced Parents: A Structural Equation Model

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to examine how pessimism about marriage serves as a mediator in the connection between insecure attachment and the age at which young people marry after experiencing divorce.

Methods and Materials: This study employed a descriptive-correlational research design and structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population for this study comprised all young males and females in Tehran, specifically between July and November of 2023. A sample of 252 young individuals with divorced parents was selected using purposive sampling. The instruments included the revised adult attachment scale and the optimism questionnaire developed by Shier and Carver (1985). Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27 and SmartPLS version 3 software.

Findings: The results showed pessimism about marriage has a significant impact on delaying the marriage age of young individuals ($\beta=0.318$, $p<0.001$). Similarly, avoidant attachment style also contributes to an increase in the marriage age of young people ($\beta=0.673$, $p<0.001$). Additionally, both avoidant and anxious attachments are positively associated with pessimism about marriage. Furthermore, feeling anxious about marriage due to pessimism leads to a higher marriage age among young people ($\beta=0.195$, $p<0.001$). Similarly, avoidant attachment due to pessimism about marriage also leads to a delay in the marriage age of young individuals ($\beta=0.095$, $p=0.001$).

Conclusion: It can be concluded that pessimism about marriage and a tendency to avoid attachment lead to a delay in marriage among young individuals following divorce. Additionally, both avoidant and anxious attachment styles contribute to pessimism, which in turn has a positive impact on prolonging the age at which young people get married.

Keywords: Pessimism, Marriage age, Divorce, Attachment syle.

by children from divorced families (van Berkel et al., 2024). In Iran, this trend is especially pronounced, with divorce rates rising steadily over the past two decades—an annual growth rate of 6.2% and an average marital duration of 7.7 years before separation reported in 2016 (Bagi & Hosseini, 2021). Parental divorce often exposes

children to ongoing conflict, emotional distress, and major life disruptions such as relocation, all of which can generate profound emotional responses including sadness, anger, and resentment (van der Wal et al., 2024). Longitudinal studies have demonstrated that such early adversities may negatively affect future academic performance, mental health, physical development, and socioeconomic stability (Torche et al., 2024).

One of the key psychological frameworks for understanding these long-term effects is attachment theory. Early relationships with caregivers form the basis of internal working models that guide expectations and behaviors in future close relationships (Roshan Chesli et al., 2023). Children exposed to unstable caregiving—often a byproduct of parental divorce—are more likely to develop insecure attachment styles such as anxious or avoidant attachment. These styles influence emotional regulation and relational trust, often persisting into adulthood (El Frenn et al., 2022). Securely attached individuals tend to engage comfortably in intimate relationships, while anxiously attached individuals fear rejection, and avoidantly attached individuals may suppress closeness (Yilmaz et al., 2023). These variations in attachment have been linked to differing marital attitudes (Park & Harris, 2023), and individuals with a history of parental divorce are more prone to anxious and avoidant attachment patterns (D'Rozario & Pilkington, 2022). Moreover, these insecure attachment styles are negatively associated with the likelihood and timing of entering marriage (Yacovson et al., 2022).

Children of divorced parents are therefore more vulnerable to psychological disruptions—including attachment insecurity and acute stress—that may reduce their confidence in long-term romantic commitments (Abbaspour et al., 2021). This can result in increased caution in entering romantic relationships and delay in decisions about marriage. In fact, global trends indicate that the average age of first marriage has increased, with more than half of marriages in developed countries occurring after age 30 (Gündoğdu & Bulut, 2022). Misconceptions about marriage and the fear of divorce are significant contributors to this delay (Barati, 2022). Empirical evidence shows that adolescents from separated families report higher levels of social anxiety than peers from intact families, which may affect their readiness for marriage (Obeid et al., 2021). Furthermore,

divorce may contribute to lower educational attainment, weaker peer relationships, and decreased relationship commitment, all of which compound the risk of future divorce (Damota, 2019).

In addition to attachment and developmental factors, pessimism about marriage—characterized by negative beliefs about the value, stability, and emotional payoff of marital relationships—has emerged as a relevant psychological outcome of parental divorce. Children from divorced families often experience reduced parental attention and lower satisfaction in interpersonal relationships, which can undermine their relational expectations (Roper et al., 2020). A positive attitude toward marriage reflects optimism and belief in its value, whereas a pessimistic outlook equates marriage with legal or emotional burden (Gholami et al., 2020). This pessimism has been linked to reduced marital satisfaction and lower expectations for successful relationships (Dardashti et al., 2023). Empirical research supports the connection between parental divorce and diminished belief in marriage as meaningful or lasting (Willoughby et al., 2020), and divorce-related pessimism has been found to predict relational behaviors and expectations in young adults (Arocho & Purtell, 2020).

Taken together, these findings suggest a developmental pathway in which parental divorce contributes to insecure attachment, which in turn fosters pessimism about marriage, ultimately leading to delayed marriage age. Although each component of this pathway has been explored individually, few studies have directly tested the mediating role of pessimism in the link between attachment insecurity and marriage timing. Prior research has supported the mediating influence of relational attitudes in similar associations (Park & Harris, 2023; Yacovson et al., 2022), supporting the plausibility of the proposed model. Therefore, this study aims to examine whether pessimism about marriage mediates the relationship between insecure attachment and marriage age among young adults from divorced families.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study falls within the realm of descriptive-correlational research and utilized the cross-sectional

research method along with structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population for this study was all young boys and girls in Tehran from July to November 2023. The research sample consisted of 252 young boys and girls whose parents were divorced or separated, selected through purposive sampling. The adequacy of the sample size was determined using Cohen's formula, taking into account the number of observed and latent variables in the model, the anticipated effect size, and the levels of probability and statistical power. Based on this calculation method, the sample size was estimated as follows: Predicted effect size: 0.3; Desired statistical power level: 0.8; Number of hidden variables: 4; Number of observed variables: 31 and Probability level: 0.01.

The researcher calculated that 237 individuals met the specified criteria. To account for potential attrition in the research sample, the researcher decided on a sample size of 300 individuals to prevent any loss of participants. To participate in the study, individuals needed to have a record of psychological counseling, give informed consent, answer questionnaires accurately, and possess sufficient literacy and understanding. On the other hand, individuals could be disqualified from the research if they did not wish to continue, had a physical or mental condition that impeded their ability to answer, or failed to complete more than 8 questionnaire items, leading to their removal from the study. The research methodology involved obtaining necessary permits from the university where the researchers were affiliated. Following this, they visited five counseling centers in Tehran, chosen based on their availability and willingness to cooperate. The researchers sought collaboration with the centers after making initial contact. Subsequently, an announcement about the research was posted online and on social media on behalf of the counseling centers, targeting young individuals with divorced parents and counseling records. "Participants were selected from those who replied to the first message." The process of sending messages and selecting participants occurred over five months, facing challenges in reaching the required sample size due to non-cooperation. Afterward, the young participants who agreed to participate received thorough information about the research through social media platforms. This information covered the research goals, required permits, and ethical guidelines. They were assured that

their personal information would remain confidential in the research documents, and they had the option to withdraw from the research at any point. A total of 281 individuals were purposefully selected, falling short of the desired sample size of 300 due to difficulties in cooperation. The process of filling out the questionnaire was carried out online to cater to the needs of all participants. The analysis included a total of 252 out of 281 completed questionnaires. The remaining 29 questionnaires were not considered due to incomplete responses or intentional errors. The study assessed variables such as age, pessimism about marriage, avoidant attachment, and anxious attachment among the online participants. On average, it took 20 minutes for each individual to finish the questionnaires during the five-month research period. To follow ethical guidelines, participants had to give online consent before starting the questionnaires. Participation in the research was voluntary, and individuals had the right to withdraw at any point. They were given reassurance that the tests did not include any personal details.

Instruments

Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS): Collins developed an 18-item questionnaire in 1990 to assess an individual's intimate communication skills and style using a Likert scale (Collins, 1996). The questionnaire uses a rating scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing strong disagreement and 5 representing strong agreement for each question. It groups attachment styles into secure, avoidant, and anxious, assigning specific questions to each style. Test results determine the attachment type based on the scores obtained, with higher scores indicating stronger attachment. A study in Iran found Cronbach's alpha values for secure, avoidant, and anxious attachment in students to be 0.81, 0.78, and 0.85, respectively (Seyed Hashemi et al., 2022). In the current study, the researcher obtained Cronbach's alpha values of 0.912 for avoidant attachment and 0.981 for anxious attachment.

Scheier and Carver's Optimism Questionnaire (1985): The optimism questionnaire, also known as the life orientation test, was created by Scheier and Carver in 1985 as a self-report tool to measure levels of optimism and pessimism in individuals. Originally consisting of 12 questions, the test was later revised in 1994 to a 6-item format with two dimensions: optimism and pessimism.

This modified version was named the modified life orientation test. Scores on this scale range from 0 to 4, with three questions dedicated to optimism and three to pessimism, resulting in a total score range of 0 to 24. Only the negative outlook questions from this survey were used in the present research (Mousavinasab & Taghavi, 2007). In Iran, the scale demonstrated a retest reliability of 0.7, whereas the Cronbach's alpha calculated by the investigators was 0.793.

Data Analysis

The information collected from the study was analyzed utilizing SPSS version 27 software and SmartPLS software version 3, employing the structural equation model approach. Statistical results were deemed significant at the 0.05 level of significance. The investigator utilized SPSS software to verify the descriptive statistics for this study. Simultaneously, the structural equation model approach with the partial least squares method was applied to analyze the path coefficients and mediating variables. Additionally, the researcher employed the bootstrap method to assess the

significance of the model. The Sobel test was used to assess the importance of mediating variables.

Findings and Results

Initially, the researcher examined the descriptive statistics related to the research variables. The participants were categorized into four groups based on their age: 1 to 5 years (17.5%), 5 to 10 years (2.8%), 10 to 15 years (21.0%), and 15 to 20 years (58.7%). The participants were also divided into two groups by gender, with boys making up 64.3% and girls 35.7%. When considering the type of guardian responsible for them during their parents' divorce, the participants were divided into four categories: under the father's supervision (25.4%), under the mother's supervision (17.9%), under the supervision of young relatives and family members (35.7%), and under the care of an orphaned children's care center (21.0%). Furthermore, the participants were divided into two categories based on the marital status of their parents: those whose parents were married (50.4%) and those whose parents were unmarried (49.6%), depending on whether their parents had remarried (Table 1).

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of demographic variables

Variables	Groups	Frequency	Percent	N	Middle
When the parents divorced	1 to 5 years old	44	17.5	252	4
	5 to 10 years old	7	2.8		
	10 to 15 years	53	21.0		
	15 to 20 years	148	58.7		
Gender	Boy	162	64.3	252	1
	Girl	90	35.7		
Main supervisor	Father	64	25.4	252	3
	Mother	45	17.9		
	Relatives	90	35.7		
	Care center for orphaned children	53	21.0		
Remarriage of parents	Yes	127	50.4	252	1
	No	125	49.6		

Table 2 shows the average scores of marriage age, avoidant attachment, anxious attachment, and pessimism about marriage respectively.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics of research variables

Variables	N	SD mean±	MIN	MAX
Marriage age	252	23.36± 3.33	18	30

Avoidant attachment	252	14.48± 5.63	7	27
Anxious attachment	252	15.19± 5.9	7	27
Pessimism about marriage	252	7.85± 2.44	3	12

The researcher then analyzed the assumptions of the test. The normality of the distribution of the research variables was checked using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The results showed that the research variables did not have a normal distribution, leading to the decision to use SmartPLS software for the structural equation model. The random sampling method used by the

researcher was appropriate, respecting the assumption of random sampling. The sample size of 252 people was deemed sufficient for running the structural equation model using the partial least squares method. Next, the researcher examined the correlation matrix of the identified research variables.

Table 3

Correlation matrix between research variables

Row	Variables	1	2	3	4	p-value
1	Marriage age	-				p< .001
2	Avoidant attachment	.767	-			p< .001
3	Anxious attachment	.704	.704	-		p< .001
4	Pessimism about marriage	.717	.656	.786	-	p< .001

Table 3 indicates a significant relationship between the research variables (p<0.001). As per the Pearson correlation coefficient, there was a strong positive relationship between the Marriage age variable and the variables of avoidant attachment, anxious attachment, and pessimism about marriage (p<0.001). Similarly,

there was a significant positive relationship between pessimism about marriage and anxious attachment, as well as avoidant attachment variables (p<0.001). **Table 4** displays the path and significance coefficients of the realization model.

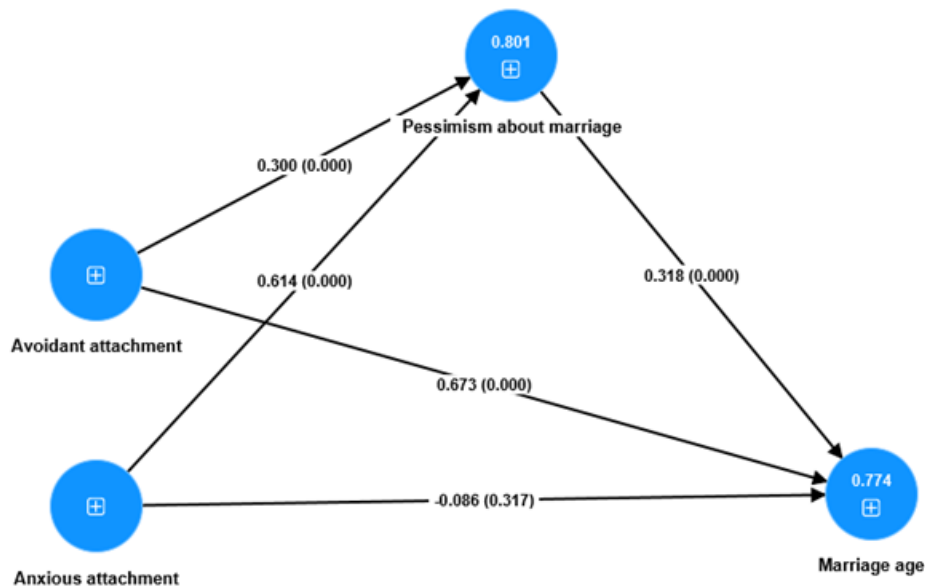
Table 4

Direct and indirect coefficients between research variables and significance

Path between variables	Path coefficients	Standard error	P-value	T-value	95% Confidence Interval		Result
					2.5%	97.5%	
Pessimism about marriage -> marriage age	0.318	0.066	p < 0.001	4.786	0.188	0.452	confirmation
Avoidant attachment -> pessimism about marriage	0.300	0.070	p < 0.001	4.301	0.161	0.436	confirmation
Avoidant attachment -> marriage age	0.673	0.068	p < 0.001	9.918	0.537	0.808	confirmation
Anxious attachment -> pessimism about marriage	0.614	0.068	p < 0.001	9.077	0.480	0.748	confirmation
Anxious attachment -> marriage age	-0.086	0.086	0.317	1.000	-0.260	0.069	rejection
Anxious attachment -> pessimism about marriage -> marriage age	0.195	0.049	p < 0.001	4.009	0.107	0.298	confirmation
Avoidant attachment -> Pessimism about marriage -> Marriage age	0.095	0.028	0.001	3.354	0.045	0.157	confirmation

Figure 1

Path coefficients between variables and significance level



According to the data presented in Table 4 and Figure 1, pessimism about marriage has a substantial and positive impact on delaying the marriage age of young individuals ($\beta=0.318$, $p<0.001$). Similarly, avoidant attachment style also plays a significant role in prolonging the age at which young people get married ($\beta=0.673$, $p<0.001$). However, anxious attachment style directly does not significantly influence the age at which young people marry ($\beta=-0.086$, $p=0.317$). On the other hand, both avoidant and anxious attachment styles have a positive and notable impact on pessimism about marriage. Additionally, the findings from the bootstrap test suggest that anxious attachment due to pessimism about marriage has a positive and increasing effect on delaying the marriage age of young individuals ($\beta=0.195$, $p<0.001$). Likewise, avoidant attachment due to pessimism about marriage also has a favorable and increasing effect on extending the marriage age of young people ($\beta=0.095$, $p=0.001$). As a result, the mediating

role of pessimism about marriage was supported by the bootstrap test. The researcher utilized the Sobel test to assess the significance of the mediating variable in the study. This test was conducted using the specified formula. In the Sobel test, if the Z value exceeds 1.96, it indicates that the mediating effect of a variable is statistically significant at a 95% confidence level.

$$Z - value = \frac{a * b}{\sqrt{(b^2 * s_a^2) + (a^2 * s_b^2) + (s_a^2 * s_b^2)}}$$

The Z score for avoidant attachment was 8.677. Based on the Sobel test results, it can be inferred that the mediator variable in the study is significant. The Z score for the path between avoidant attachment and marriage age due to pessimism about marriage was 3.2022. Similarly, for anxious attachment, it was 4.25084. As per the Sobel test results, the mediating variable in the research is deemed significant. The researcher assessed the model's reliability and validity in Table 5.

Table 5

Checking the reliability and validity of the research model

variables	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
Avoidant attachment	0.912	0.938	0.88
Anxious attachment	0.981	0.987	0.77
Pessimism about marriage	0.793	0.882	0.66

According to Table 5, the variables showed Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability exceeding 0.7. The average variance index (AVE) extracted was above 0.5, confirming the model's convergent validity. Therefore, the model's reliability and validity have been

established. Additionally, the SRMR index yielded a value of 0.034, indicating a good model fit as it was below 0.8. The researcher also utilized blindfolding to assess the model's predictive ability for the research variable, with Q² values above zero signifying a good fit. Specifically, the

Q^2 value for the Marriage age variable was 0.77, and for the pessimism about marriage variable, it was 0.795, confirming the model's fit.

Discussion and Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to examine how pessimism about marriage acts as a mediator in the relationship between insecure attachment and marriage age in young individuals following divorce. The results indicated that pessimism about marriage has a significant impact on delaying marriage age, while avoidant attachment directly contributes to later marriage age, and anxious attachment influences marriage age only indirectly via pessimism. Both avoidant and anxious attachment were connected to increased pessimism about marriage. These findings emphasize the important mediating role of pessimism in linking insecure attachment styles to marital timing.

These results are consistent with previous research by Yasmin, Firdous, Saqib, and Khatoon (2020) and Barati (2022), which also found that pessimism about marriage is associated with delayed marriage age among young people. For instance, Yasmin et al. (2020) reported positive correlations between fear of judgment, feelings of isolation, and being single, while a positive outlook on life correlated negatively with delayed marriage (Yasmin et al., 2020). Barati (2022) identified misconceptions about marriage and fear of divorce as factors contributing to delayed marriage age (Barati, 2022). Our study extends these findings by framing pessimism within attachment theory, clarifying how early attachment insecurity may shape negative marital expectations.

Parental separation represents a tumultuous transitional period involving increased parental conflict, weakened parent-child relationships, reduced parenting quality, and financial difficulties. Limited communication following divorce can cause children to feel loss, helplessness, and inadequacy (van Berkel et al., 2024). These experiences may strongly influence young people's attitudes toward marriage and divorce by modeling unstable and conflictual relationships. Children witnessing parental conflict and divorce may develop negative perceptions of marriage, leading to increased pessimism and uncertainty about long-term commitments (Abbaspour et al., 2021).

The present study found that avoidant attachment, but not anxious attachment, directly predicted delayed marriage age. This pattern is consistent with findings by Roshan Chesli et al. (2023) and Busby, Hanna-Walker, and Yorgason (2020), who also reported a positive effect of avoidant attachment on later marriage. Additionally, research indicates that insecure attachment increases the likelihood of remaining single (Busby et al., 2020) and affects marital intentions differently depending on attachment style (Roshan Chesli et al., 2023). However, the lack of a direct effect of anxious attachment on marriage age contrasts with prior studies (Park & Harris, 2023; Yacovson et al., 2022), which found both anxious and avoidant styles negatively associated with marriage likelihood. Differences in sample characteristics, cultural context, or methodological approaches may explain these inconsistencies. Future research should explore these factors further.

The observed increase in marriage age likely reflects a decreased inclination to marry, influenced by emotional and cognitive development. Attachment styles formed in early life—secure, anxious/ambivalent, and avoidant—continue to affect individuals' relational expectations and willingness to commit. People with insecure attachment tend to delay or avoid marriage more often than securely attached individuals (Roshan Chesli et al., 2023). Insecure attachment is linked to alienation, self-doubt, resistance to acceptance, feelings of being unwanted, and fear of intimacy. Such individuals may struggle to form close relationships, prefer partners with certain traits, and exhibit patterns of avoidance or anxious reassurance-seeking. For example, avoidant individuals may fear emotional pain or rejection, leading to delayed commitment and marriage (Wharton & Marciano-Olivier, 2023).

Both anxious and avoidant attachments contributed to pessimism about marriage in this study, consistent with previous research (Damota, 2019; Sommantico et al., 2019; Yilmaz et al., 2023). Attachment styles shape individuals' expectations and trust in romantic relationships before formal commitment. Positive attitudes and fewer avoidant behaviors improve relationship quality (Sommantico et al., 2019), whereas insecure attachments correlate with negative marital attitudes.

Children's views on marriage are influenced by parental relationship quality and their own romantic

experiences. Insecure attachment, often stemming from parental rejection and lack of family support, reduces intimacy and positive outlooks toward marriage. Avoidantly attached individuals typically struggle with closeness and harbor pessimism toward marriage and cohabitation, as they feel uncomfortable with intimacy and doubt others' willingness for closeness (Dardashti et al., 2023). Conversely, individuals with insecure attachment exhibit self-doubt, mistrust, unreasonable self-expectations, and a tendency to terminate relationships abruptly. Their negative experiences may reinforce pessimistic beliefs about marriage (Hosseini et al., 2022).

Although direct empirical evidence is scarce, the study's finding that pessimism linked to attachment anxiety and avoidance delays marriage age aligns with research on attachment styles affecting relationship dynamics (Harris, 2022; Kiani Chelmari et al., 2021). Different attachment styles correspond with varying attitudes toward marriage (Harris, 2022), and avoidant attachment is negatively related to marital satisfaction (Kiani Chelmari et al., 2021).

Attachment insecurity influences marital timing by fostering pessimism and relational anxiety, encouraging later settlement and distancing from traditional marriage patterns. Insecure individuals face difficulties managing life's challenges and may develop cynical views of marriage fueled by adverse childhood experiences such as parental divorce (D'Rozario & Pilkington, 2022; El Frenn et al., 2022).

This study has several important limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, due to the cross-sectional design, it is not possible to determine causality between insecure attachment, pessimism, and delayed marriage age. Future longitudinal studies are recommended to better clarify the direction of these relationships. In this research, pessimism was measured using only the negative items from the revised Life Orientation Test (Mousavinasab & Taghavi, 2007; Scheier & Carver, 1985), which has acceptable reliability in Iran; however, this tool is not specifically designed to assess pessimism related to marriage. Future studies would benefit from using or developing measures that focus explicitly on negative beliefs about marriage. Because data were collected via self-report questionnaires, there is a possibility of bias due to social desirability or the sensitive nature of the

topic. Although participation was voluntary and confidential, some adolescents might have felt uncomfortable discussing their experiences related to parental divorce. Another limitation is that only one hypothesized model was tested, without examining alternative models. Future research should explore other potential models to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships among variables. While cultural differences between Eastern and Western societies were mentioned, these claims lacked empirical support within this study. Such cultural interpretations should be backed by context-specific data or previous research. Additionally, attitudes toward marriage and divorce may shift over time, which could limit the generalizability of findings from older studies; this study attempted to address this by using recent sources, yet changes in social values remain a possible limitation. Although gender and childhood living arrangements were reported descriptively, these factors may have influenced the observed relationships. The sample was not gender-balanced, with a higher proportion of males, which may limit the generalizability of results—especially regarding attachment styles and marital attitudes. Moreover, the psychosocial environments of participants, whether living with parents or in care centers, might have affected their emotional development in ways not directly measured here. Therefore, future studies should examine these contextual variables more explicitly, including gender differences and cultural influences on marriage perceptions. Finally, due to time and budget constraints, other important factors such as family income, emotional development, and personal beliefs were not examined, though they may also affect how attachment and pessimism relate to attitudes toward marriage. Future research could focus more closely on emotional patterns, fear of marriage, and gender differences in shaping young people's views. It is also recommended to study adolescents with chronic health conditions or those who have experienced positive role models in healthy marriages to better understand varying outcomes among children of divorced families.

The findings of this study suggest that pessimism about marriage and avoidant attachment style are associated with an increase in marriage age among young individuals with divorced parents. Furthermore, both anxious and avoidant attachment styles were

positively related to pessimism, which in turn was linked to a later age of marriage. These results support a mediated model in which pessimism about marriage statistically explains the relationship between insecure attachment and delayed marital timing. However, due to the cross-sectional nature of the data, these associations should not be interpreted as causal. The findings may have practical value for youth education and counseling services, particularly those supporting individuals affected by parental divorce. Programs that address attachment-related challenges and reduce pessimistic attitudes toward marriage—through psychoeducation, group therapy, or preventive interventions—could be beneficial. Family therapists, school counselors, and mental health professionals are encouraged to consider the impact of early attachment experiences when helping young people develop healthier expectations about long-term relationships and marital commitment. Moreover, policymakers and youth service providers should incorporate these psychological insights when designing support programs for adolescents and young adults navigating family transitions.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their gratitude and appreciation to all participants.

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. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

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 contribute to this study.

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