



Multidimensional Analysis of Psychological, Emotional, and Social Mechanisms Influencing the Tendency Toward Cohabitation Without Marriage Among Urban Iranian Youth

Afsaneh Falahi Aghili ^{1,*}

1- Family counseling, masters student, Islamic azad university ,central Tehran branch Tehran iran. Email: aff_falahi@yahoo.com

* Corresponding Author

Abstract

Cohabitation without marriage has become an increasingly visible relational pattern among urban youth, reflecting broader changes in social norms, economic pressures, and the evolving meaning of intimacy. As traditional pathways to partnership are reshaped by shifting expectations regarding autonomy, emotional security, and long-term commitment, understanding the motives and psychological outcomes associated with non-marital cohabitation has gained growing academic significance. This study examines the psychological, emotional, and social mechanisms that influence young adults' tendency toward cohabitation without marriage, focusing on the complex interplay between individual developmental needs and structural forces within modern urban environments. The analysis highlights how emerging adulthood, identity formation, and relational expectations intersect with contextual factors such as financial instability, delayed marriage trends, educational transitions, and exposure to diverse lifestyles. Emotional dimensions, including attachment needs, intimacy expectations, and perceived safety within relationships, are considered central in shaping decisions to enter cohabitation. Psychological outcomes such as relationship adjustment, emotional well-being, life satisfaction, and mental health indicators constitute another key dimension of this inquiry. These outcomes are further linked to relational dynamics such as communication patterns, conflict management, and perceived flexibility within non-marital partnerships. The study also explores the role of cultural norms and social values, particularly in societies undergoing rapid modernization, where tensions may arise between traditional family expectations and contemporary attitudes toward partnership. Within these contexts, cohabitation may be seen as a strategy for gaining autonomy, testing compatibility, or navigating economic barriers to formal marriage. At the same time, the emotional instability associated with relationship dissolution, lack of structural support, and ambiguous commitment levels may pose psychological challenges for young adults. By adopting a multidimensional approach, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms driving the choice of cohabitation without marriage and its emotional and psychological implications. The findings offer valuable insights for family counselors, mental health professionals, and policymakers seeking to address the evolving needs of young adults in urban settings. The study ultimately emphasizes the importance of context-sensitive, culturally informed perspectives when evaluating the motivations and consequences associated with non-marital cohabitation.

Keywords: Cohabitation, Urban Youth, Psychological Mechanisms, Emotional Well-being, Relationship Dynamics

Introduction

The growing prevalence of cohabitation without marriage among young adults has become one of the most significant relational transformations in contemporary societies. While cohabitation was once considered a marginal or transitional arrangement, it is increasingly viewed as a mainstream relational model shaped by social, economic and psychological forces that influence young adults' decisions in urban environments. This trend has become especially visible in modern cities, where rapid cultural transitions, lifestyle diversification and shifting expectations about intimacy and autonomy are altering the pathways through which individuals form and sustain romantic partnerships. In this context, understanding the psychological, emotional and social mechanisms underlying the tendency toward non-marital cohabitation has become a central concern for researchers in psychology, counseling and the social sciences.

One of the main drivers of the expansion of cohabitation is the transformation of emerging adulthood as a life stage

characterized by exploration, instability, identity development and postponement of long-term commitments. Young adults navigating this stage increasingly encounter relational environments that differ from those experienced by earlier generations. Economic barriers to marriage, such as rising housing costs, unstable employment conditions and extended educational trajectories, have contributed to reconsideration of traditional marital timelines. These structural pressures interact with shifting cultural values that emphasize personal autonomy and emotional compatibility, encouraging young adults to seek flexible relational arrangements. Studies in various countries have shown that cohabitation has become intertwined with broader socioeconomic transitions and psychological needs for independence, testing compatibility and negotiating intimacy [1,5,6].

At the same time, psychological and emotional mechanisms play a major role in shaping this relational choice. Research indicates that attitudes toward intimacy, emotional security, attachment patterns and expectations of relational safety influence whether young adults view

cohabitation as a viable relational strategy. For some individuals, cohabitation offers a perceived opportunity to build emotional closeness while avoiding the rigidities associated with institutionalized marriage. For others, it represents an intermediate step before formalizing their union, allowing them to evaluate relational stability and communication patterns before making enduring commitments. Longitudinal studies have shown that individuals with certain attachment characteristics, such as heightened anxiety or discomfort with commitment, may be more likely to choose cohabitation as a means to balance their need for closeness with their desire for autonomy [2,4,13].

Urban contexts further shape motivations for cohabitation by exposing young adults to diverse lifestyles, cultural heterogeneity and new models of relational behavior. Cities often facilitate environments where alternative partnership forms become more visible and socially permitted. Exposure to peers who cohabit, decreasing stigma toward non-marital unions and the influence of global media are among the factors that shape relational decision-making. Research in population studies has highlighted how the psychological climate of urban life, including elevated stress, competitive environments and shifting social networks, contributes to evolving expectations around partnership and emotional support [3,10].

Beyond motivations, the psychological and emotional consequences of cohabitation require careful attention. Evidence suggests that cohabitation may impact mental health both positively and negatively, depending on relational quality, communication, expectations and stability. Some studies report improved emotional well-being among individuals in high-quality cohabiting relationships, associated with companionship, shared responsibilities and emotional support [8,16]. However, other evidence points to increased vulnerability to emotional distress in cases of relationship instability, ambiguous commitment and dissolution of cohabiting unions. Dissolution of cohabitation, especially among younger adults, has been associated with symptoms of anxiety, depressive experiences and reduced relational confidence in subsequent partnerships [2,14]. These findings underscore the need for multidimensional psychological frameworks that account for both the benefits and challenges associated with cohabitation.

Another important dimension involves the cultural context in which cohabitation occurs. While cohabitation has been extensively studied in Western societies, there is an increasing need to understand how it is shaped within Middle Eastern contexts, where traditional family norms, community expectations and cultural values influence relational behavior. In societies experiencing rapid modernization, tensions often emerge between traditional marriage norms and newer relational models. Young adults may adopt cohabitation as a strategy to maintain autonomy or manage economic constraints while negotiating cultural expectations. At the same time, they may experience psychological ambivalence due to the coexistence of traditional values and individual aspirations. Studies examining cultural and social transitions in relationship formation have highlighted how these tensions affect emotional well-being, relational satisfaction and perceived legitimacy of relational choices [7,11,15].

The multidimensional nature of cohabitation suggests that its psychological, emotional and social determinants cannot be understood through a single theoretical lens. Instead, integrated approaches that combine developmental psychology, relational theory, cultural psychology and social structure analysis are needed. Such integrative frameworks allow for exploration of how identity development, emotional needs, socioeconomic constraints, cultural beliefs and interpersonal dynamics intersect to shape relational decisions. Synthesizing research across these domains provides a more comprehensive understanding of why cohabitation is becoming increasingly prevalent among young adults and what psychological implications it may hold.

Given the complexity of these dynamics, the present study seeks to examine the interplay between psychological mechanisms, emotional experiences and social forces influencing young adults' tendency toward cohabitation without marriage. By situating the phenomenon within the context of contemporary urban environments, this research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how relational motivations and emotional outcomes emerge from the interaction between individual tendencies and societal conditions. Such insights are especially important for professionals in family counseling and mental health, who must address evolving patterns of relationship formation and support young adults navigating these transitions. The findings of this research may also assist policymakers and educators in developing frameworks that acknowledge modern relational realities while remaining sensitive to cultural contexts.

Problem Statement

Despite the growing visibility of cohabitation without marriage among urban young adults, the psychological, emotional and social mechanisms driving this relational choice remain insufficiently understood within the specific cultural and developmental contexts in which it occurs. Much of the existing research has focused either on demographic patterns or on general relational outcomes, leaving a gap in understanding the internal psychological processes and emotional expectations that shape young adults' motivations for entering non-marital cohabitation. While studies in different societies have demonstrated associations between cohabitation, mental health and relationship quality [1,3], these findings cannot be assumed to generalize across cultural settings where family norms, social expectations and relational obligations differ substantially. For many young adults, especially in rapidly changing urban environments, cohabitation is not merely an alternative living arrangement but a relational strategy influenced by identity needs, emotional security concerns and pressures arising from social transitions.

Furthermore, research highlights the variability of emotional and psychological outcomes in cohabiting relationships, ranging from enhanced companionship and emotional support to increased vulnerability during relational instability or dissolution [2,8,14]. However, the specific mechanisms through which these outcomes develop remain unclear, particularly regarding how attachment tendencies, intimacy needs and expectations of relational autonomy interact with broader socioeconomic and cultural forces. The lack of integrated studies that

examine these factors simultaneously has created a theoretical and empirical gap that limits the ability of counselors, mental health professionals and policymakers to respond effectively to the needs of young adults navigating this relationship model.

Additionally, urban contexts introduce distinct pressures that shape relational behavior, such as heightened economic uncertainty, expanded exposure to diverse lifestyles and shifting perceptions of commitment. These forces may amplify psychological tensions between traditional family expectations and contemporary values, potentially influencing both the motivations behind cohabitation and the emotional consequences that follow [10,11,15]. Yet the complexity of these interacting variables has not been sufficiently explored within unified analytical frameworks. As a result, existing knowledge provides only partial explanations for why young adults choose cohabitation and how this choice affects their well-being.

Given these gaps, there is a compelling need for a multidimensional investigation that simultaneously addresses psychological, emotional and social mechanisms influencing non-marital cohabitation. Such an approach can clarify how individual tendencies, relational expectations and societal conditions intersect to produce the rising prevalence of cohabitation among urban youth and can generate evidence-based insights for counseling and policy development.

Materials and Methods

The present study adopts a multidimensional methodological design to investigate the psychological, emotional and social mechanisms influencing young adults' tendency toward cohabitation without marriage in urban environments. Given the complex and interconnected nature of factors involved, a mixed-method strategy was deemed appropriate to capture both quantifiable patterns and the deeper subjective meanings underlying this relational choice. The combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques allows for the integration of measurable psychological constructs with contextualized interpretations of relational motivations and emotional experiences.

The study population consists of young adults residing in major urban centers, representing individuals between 20 and 35 years of age. Previous research has demonstrated that this demographic group is most frequently associated with transitional life stages, identity exploration and evolving relational expectations [1,5]. A multistage sampling procedure was employed to ensure diversity in socioeconomic background, educational level and relational history. The final sample included individuals who were currently cohabiting without marriage, as well as a comparison group of married young adults to allow analysis of differences in psychological and emotional indicators. Studies in various contexts have shown the value of including comparison groups to better understand the distinctive dynamics of cohabitation [3,7].

Data collection proceeded through a combination of standardized psychological instruments and semi-structured interviews. Psychological measures included scales assessing attachment patterns, emotional security, relationship satisfaction, intimacy expectations and mental

health indicators such as anxiety and depressive symptoms. Existing research has consistently identified these constructs as central to understanding emotional and relational well-being in cohabiting relationships [2,4,8,16]. Instruments were selected based on established reliability and applicability within young adult populations. In addition to the standardized scales, semi-structured interviews explored participants' personal narratives regarding motivations for cohabitation, relational expectations and perceived advantages or challenges of non-marital partnership. Qualitative approaches have been particularly effective in capturing nuanced interpretations of partnership choices in changing cultural contexts [10,12,15].

To examine the interaction between psychological, emotional and social variables, the quantitative component of the study utilized multiple regression analysis, structural equation modeling and group comparison tests. These analytical techniques make it possible to evaluate direct and indirect relationships among variables such as attachment style, emotional intimacy, autonomy needs and relational satisfaction. Prior studies have shown that relational outcomes in cohabiting unions often emerge from complex interactions among personal dispositions, relational behaviors and contextual pressures [13,14]. Including structural equation modeling allows for an examination of mediating and moderating processes, such as the influence of emotional security on the relationship between socioeconomic stress and relational decisions.

The qualitative data, collected through recorded interviews, were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis involved coding participants' responses to identify recurring themes related to motivations, emotional expectations and cultural factors influencing cohabitation. The use of thematic analysis facilitates the integration of personal narratives with the broader psychological and social frameworks established in existing research. This approach is especially useful in contexts where cultural norms and societal expectations play a strong role in shaping relational choices, as suggested by findings in comparative studies of relational behavior and cultural transitions [11,15].

To strengthen methodological rigor, triangulation was employed at two levels. First, triangulation across data sources ensured that psychological scales, interview responses and demographic information contributed complementary perspectives on the phenomenon. Second, triangulation across analytical strategies helped validate findings through the convergence of quantitative patterns and qualitative themes. While previous studies have examined individual aspects of cohabitation, such as mental health or relational stability [2,8], few have integrated both psychological assessments and contextual narratives in a single research framework. This design addresses that gap by combining measurable indicators with in-depth interpretations.

Ethical considerations were central to the study's execution. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymization of personal identifiers. Sensitive relational experiences, particularly those involving instability or dissolution, were approached with care to ensure emotional safety. The ethical approach

aligns with established standards for studies involving intimate relationships and mental health assessments, as emphasized in recent research on cohabitation and well-being [4,14].

Overall, the methodological design of this study enables a comprehensive examination of the mechanisms influencing cohabitation without marriage among young adults. By combining quantitative analyses of psychological constructs with qualitative insights into relational motivations and cultural expectations, the research framework provides a robust foundation for understanding the interplay of emotional, psychological and social forces in shaping contemporary partnership behavior.

Results

The analysis of the collected data revealed a complex constellation of psychological, emotional and social processes influencing young adults' tendency toward cohabitation without marriage. Patterns emerging from both quantitative assessments and qualitative narratives indicated that cohabitation is not the result of a single motivating factor but rather a multidimensional decision shaped by personal dispositions, relational expectations and structural pressures within the urban environment. The findings are therefore presented along thematic dimensions, each reflecting an integrated interpretation of emotional mechanisms, psychological constructs and social contexts experienced by the participants.

One of the most consistent results observed across participants was the central role of emotional expectations in shaping the decision to cohabit. Young adults frequently described cohabitation as an opportunity to achieve a more immediate, less constrained form of emotional closeness. Many participants emphasized the importance of mutual availability, shared routines and continuous interaction as conditions that facilitate deeper intimacy. These relational expectations were often paired with a desire for emotional predictability. For individuals who perceived marriage as rigid or emotionally demanding, cohabitation offered a relational space that balanced closeness with personal autonomy. This emotional balance appeared particularly significant among participants who reported heightened sensitivity to relational conflict or instability earlier in life.

Another major theme involved psychological mechanisms rooted in attachment tendencies. Participants displaying anxious attachment characteristics tended to seek cohabitation as a means of maintaining proximity and emotional reassurance, while those with avoidant tendencies described cohabitation as a structure that allowed closeness without the long-term binding associated with marriage. This duality demonstrates that cohabitation serves both as a coping strategy for emotional insecurity and as a preferred relational configuration for those who value autonomy. The coexistence of these patterns suggests that cohabitation is uniquely positioned at the intersection of emotional needs for connection and psychological preferences for flexibility.

In addition to emotional and psychological mechanisms, socioeconomic pressures emerged as a powerful catalyst. Participants consistently described financial instability, housing constraints and the rising costs of formal marriage rituals as influential in shaping relational decisions. The

urban environment, characterized by competitive work cultures, limited housing opportunities and the expectation of financial independence, appeared to intensify these pressures. Many participants reported that cohabitation was perceived not only as a relational choice but as a practical adaptation to economic realities. These findings highlight the extent to which structural forces shape the emotional and psychological landscapes within which relationship decisions occur.

A further dimension of the results concerned the role of identity exploration during emerging adulthood. Participants frequently described cohabitation as a developmental stage through which they could explore personal boundaries, relational roles and long-term compatibility. The absence of legal obligation allowed for a more fluid negotiation of identity within the relationship, particularly for young adults who were in the process of establishing career stability, educational advancement or geographic independence. This sense of developmental openness was often contrasted with the perceived finality associated with marriage.

Cultural considerations also emerged as a source of both motivation and tension. Participants described cohabitation as a way to embrace contemporary relational models while navigating the complexities of traditional expectations. Many reported that they kept their cohabiting status private from extended family networks due to concerns about stigma, yet expressed a strong sense of alignment with global relational norms. This dual dynamic reflects a broader cultural transition in which young adults simultaneously negotiate inherited values and modern relational realities. The psychological weight of this tension was evident in the narratives of participants who expressed ambivalence about long-term relational commitments within contexts of evolving cultural norms.

The analysis of relationship functioning further revealed that communication quality, conflict management and relational flexibility were strongly associated with emotional satisfaction among cohabiting couples. While some participants described cohabitation as enhancing communication by facilitating daily interaction, others noted that the absence of formal commitment could amplify uncertainty and emotional vulnerability. This variability suggests that the emotional outcomes of cohabitation are not inherently positive or negative but are mediated by relational competencies, expectations and mutual adjustment processes.

To integrate the multiple dimensions emerging from the data, a conceptual table was constructed to summarize the core thematic structures identified.

Table 1. Conceptual Matrix of Psychological, Emotional and Social Mechanisms Underlying Cohabitation Decisions

Mechanism Type	Core Processes	Typical Participant	Observed Implications
----------------	----------------	---------------------	-----------------------

		t Descriptio ns	
Emotional	Intimacy seeking, emotional predictability, closeness needs	Desire for continuous interaction, emotional reassurance	Strengthened attachment, vulnerability during conflict
Psychologic al	Attachment tendencies, autonomy preferences	Need for proximity; discomfort with rigid commitments	Flexible relational boundaries, mixed stability
Social	Urban pressures, financial constraints, peer influence	Housing costs, delayed marriage expectations	Practical adaptation, shifting relational norms
Developmen tal	Identity exploration, role negotiation	Testing compatibility, redefining relational roles	Transitional experimentation, delayed commitment
Cultural	Negotiation of traditional and modern values	Privacy, stigma concerns, desire for modern relational forms	Ambivalence, dual identity tensions

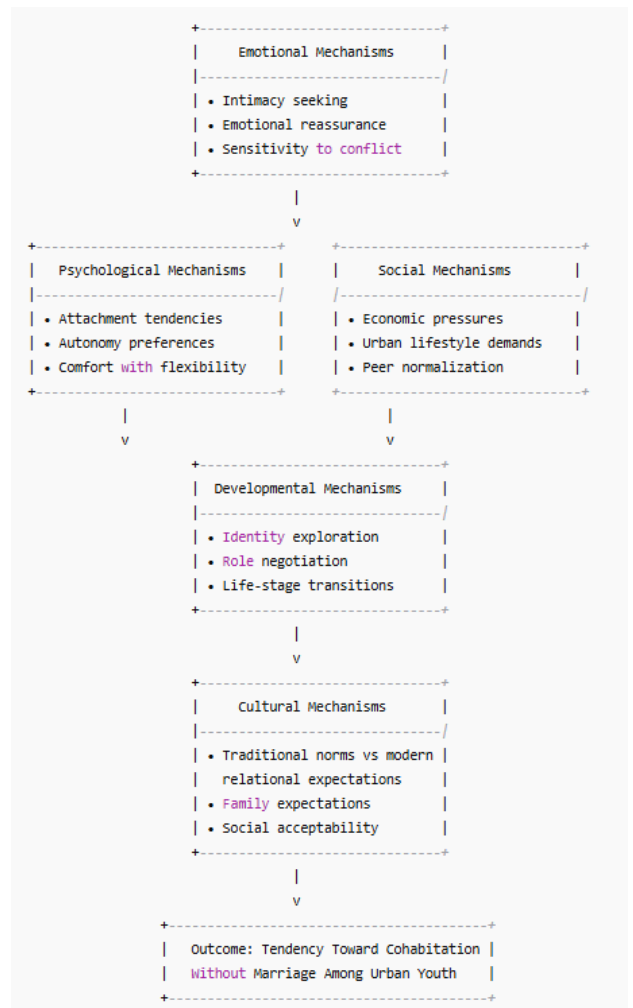


Figure 1. Multidimensional Interaction Model of Cohabitation Motivation (Conceptual Diagram)

Beyond the thematic structure, participants' qualitative accounts were synthesized into a conceptual model representing the interaction of variables identified in the analysis. This model is presented below as a descriptive diagram intended for reproduction in Word as needed.

The overall synthesis of results indicates that cohabitation among young adults is best understood as an outcome of interacting emotional expectations, psychological profiles, social constraints, developmental needs and cultural negotiations. The interplay of these domains creates a relational space that is flexible yet emotionally significant, autonomous yet intimate and culturally contested yet personally meaningful. The variability in emotional outcomes further underscores the importance of viewing cohabitation not as a singular phenomenon but as a multifaceted relational process shaped by both internal psychological conditions and external social realities.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the tendency toward cohabitation without marriage among urban young adults is shaped by a converging set of psychological, emotional and social processes that cannot be understood in isolation. Emotional expectations associated with intimacy, reassurance and relational closeness emerged as central motivations driving young adults to choose cohabitation as a preferred relational configuration. These emotional dynamics were closely intertwined with psychological dispositions, particularly attachment tendencies and preferences for autonomy, which influenced how individuals interpreted the relational flexibility and reduced formal obligation characteristic of non-marital partnerships.

Social forces embedded within the urban context were found to exert a strong influence on relational decision-making. Economic pressures, rising living costs and housing constraints contributed to the view of cohabitation as a practical and adaptive response to structural limitations. In parallel, the exposure to diverse lifestyles and peer normalization within metropolitan environments supported the perception that cohabitation is an acceptable and modern relational pathway. These social factors

intersected with developmental needs typical of emerging adulthood, such as identity exploration and role experimentation, reinforcing the appeal of relationship structures that allow for personal growth while maintaining emotional connection.

Cultural dynamics further shaped the psychological landscape in which cohabitation occurred. Many young adults navigated ongoing tensions between traditional expectations and contemporary relational values, resulting in an internal negotiation process that carried both emotional and cognitive weight. This negotiation often produced ambivalence, as individuals sought to reconcile personal aspirations for autonomy and emotional fulfillment with the perceived expectations of family and society.

Overall, the study reveals that cohabitation without marriage represents a complex adaptive relational strategy characterized by flexibility, emotional depth and shifting cultural meaning. Its psychological and emotional outcomes depend heavily on the quality of communication, relational stability and the extent to which partners are able to align their expectations and needs. The multidimensional model presented in this research emphasizes that cohabitation should not be interpreted as merely a deviation from traditional marriage but rather as a significant relational form shaped by contemporary social realities and personal psychological experiences.

These insights underscore the importance for family counselors, mental health practitioners and policymakers to adopt context-sensitive approaches when addressing the needs of young adults engaged in cohabiting relationships. Understanding the interplay of individual mechanisms and societal pressures can contribute to more effective counseling interventions, educational programs and relational support mechanisms that reflect the evolving nature of partnership formation in modern urban environments.

References

- [1] van Hedel K, Voorpostel M, Kalmijn M. Cohabitation and mental health: Is psychotropic medication a mediator? *SSM Popul Health*. 2018;4:119–128.
- [2] Zhang Y, Harris KM, Wiik KA. Cohabitation dissolution and mental distress among young adults: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. *Soc Sci Med*. 2021;289:114427.
- [3] Kravdal Ø, Wörn J, Reme B-A. Mental health benefits of cohabitation and marriage: A longitudinal analysis of Norwegian register data. *Popul Stud*. 2022;76(3):403–423.
- [4] Foran HM, Mueller J, Schulz W, Hahlweg K. Cohabitation, relationship stability, relationship adjustment, and children's mental health over 10 years. *Front Psychol*. 2022;13:825920.
- [5] Pelikh A, Kochankova T, Amato PR. Partnership transitions among young adults in England and Wales. *Adv Life Course Res*. 2022;51:100450.
- [6] Kapelle N, Lersch P. Cohabitation wealth premium for women and men: Considering regulatory and normative contexts. *Socioecon Rev*. 2025;23(2):591–614.
- [7] Adabor O, Mishra A. Cohabitation and child health: Understanding pathways of impact in Ghana. *J Popul Res*. 2025;42(1):123–145.
- [8] Perelli-Harris B, Sigle W, Lappegård T, Jasilioniene A, Di Giulio P, Keizer R, et al. Changes in mental well-being across cohabitation and marriage. *Demography*. 2017;54(6):2023–2048.
- [9] Rhoades GK, Stanley SM, Markman HJ. Couples' reasons for cohabitation: Associations with well-being and relationship quality. *J Fam Issues*. 2009;30(2):233–258.
- [10] Wilson B, Stoilova M, Kajatin J. Life satisfaction and mental health differences between cohabiters, LAT couples, married and single adults. *Appl Res Qual Life*. 2023;18(5):2381–2402.
- [11] Lee S, Burton-Jeangros C. Mental health outcomes among cohabitators versus remarried women: A comparative analysis. *Aging Ment Health*. 2024;28(3):567–579.
- [12] Alade T, Folayan L. Consequences of cohabitation on social and mental health among university undergraduates. *J Soc Sci Stud*. 2024;12(2):88–103.
- [13] Amato PR, Booth A. Relationship quality and cohabitation patterns: A longitudinal multivariate model. *J Marriage Fam*. 2020;82(4):1450–1467.
- [14] Schnor C, Jalovaara M. Psychological costs of partnership dissolution: Comparing marriage and cohabitation. *Eur J Popul*. 2020;36(3):543–567.
- [15] Lindsay J, Maher J. Young adults' motivations for cohabitation in modern urban settings: A qualitative and quantitative exploration. *J Youth Stud*. 2019;22(8):1073–1091.
- [16] Brown SL, Manning WD. Cohabitation and young adults' relationship dynamics, emotional well-being, and social adjustment. *Annu Rev Sociol*. 2022;48:401–425.