

From Status to Soul: Gendered Ideals and Quests for Compatibility in Contemporary Relationships

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Abstract: The individualization of personal life has spurred a shift in relationship ideals, from instrumental, role-based marital arrangements to partnerships emphasizing autonomy, emotional fulfillment, and mutual compatibility. However, this process unfolds differently for women and men. This study examines gendered ideals and quests for compatibility in contemporary relationships across key sociodemographic and ideational attributes. Drawing on data from a factorial survey experiment conducted among 1,225 never-married adults in China's largest metropolises, the results reveal that women hold more progressive ideals than men, prioritizing not only a partner's socioeconomic status but also egalitarian traits, such as the willingness to share housework. Unlike men, who show strong aversion to childfree partners, women are generally neutral toward a partner's fertility intentions. Furthermore, while men apply ideational standards in a more rigid and absolute manner, women display greater flexibility, seeking alignment between their own and their potential partner's ideational traits, especially for marriage. These findings underscore the persistent gender asymmetries underlying the transition toward individualized forms of partnership.

Keywords: marriage, romantic relationship, assortative mating, gender, China

Introduction

Across much of the industrialized world, personal life has become increasingly individualized (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Cherlin, 2004, 2020; Ni, 2025; Ochiai & Hosoya, 2014; Yan, 2010). The rigid, gendered norms and traditions that once governed individuals' behaviors as spouses, partners, and parents are yielding to a "do-it-yourself biography" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 3). Among younger generations, both women and men are now "leading their own way" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2004, p. 46). They postpone marriage, try out cohabitation, opt out of parenthood, and, above all, seek partnerships that maximize not only social and financial security but also autonomy, emotional fulfillment, and self-actualization (Cherlin, 2004, 2020; Lesthaeghe, 2014; Mu et al., 2025; Ni, 2025; Raymo et al., 2015; Thornton, 2001; Wang et al., 2024; Yu & Xie, 2021, 2022). In accordance with the deinstitutionalization of marriage (Cherlin, 2004), these evolving partnership ideals reflect a broader shift toward individual fulfillment in intimate life. These changes have far-reaching implications not only for family formation patterns, but also for gender equality and emancipation (Bornatici & Zinn, 2025; Cherlin, 2004; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Gerson, 2011; Goldscheider et al., 2015).

This transition is not gender-neutral; rather, it unfolds against the backdrop of an uneven, stalled gender revolution (England, 2010). Women have historically sacrificed their personal and career aspirations to fulfill societal expectations as dutiful wives and mothers, whereas men have disproportionately benefited from institutionalized gender roles (Correll et al., 2007; Hays, 1996; Mu & Tian, 2022). Despite progress toward gender equality in the public sphere, women continue to shoulder the majority of household responsibilities in the form of chores, childcare, and emotional labor within relationships (Bianchi et al., 2000, 2012; England, 2010; Gerson,

2011; Goldscheider et al., 2015; Hochschild & Machung, 2012; Kan et al., 2022; Mu & Tian, 2022). Beneath the surface of apparent gender parity, persistent and often insidious inequalities endure, particularly in gendered expectations surrounding intimate relationships (Cherlin, 2004; Ji et al., 2017; Tsz Ting Ip, 2025). Highly educated women, in particular, tend to espouse more progressive gender values than their male counterparts and increasingly reject traditional marriage in favor of modern, egalitarian partnerships (Blair & Madigan, 2024; Gui, 2020; Hu & Sun, 2023; Lee et al., 2025; Shu, 2004).

At the heart of these gendered currents lie two empirical questions: first, *what* attributes make a partner attractive in contemporary relationships, and second, *who* perceives them as such? The first question concerns partnership ideals—the absolute value placed on specific attributes of a partner. In the context of increasing individualization, these ideals have expanded beyond conventional markers to include ideational traits, most notably those associated with egalitarianism, particularly from women’s perspectives (Cherlin, 2004; Scarborough et al., 2019; Thornton, 2001). The second question pertains to the quest for compatibility—an individualized, relational assessment of how well a potential partner aligns with oneself not only in objective status but, more importantly, in values and life goals (Cherlin, 2004; Giddens, 1992). These emerging evaluative logics remain underexamined in the existing scholarship, which has predominantly centered on spousal selection among married individuals, treating marriage as the primary relational form and emphasizing demographic and structural characteristics over ideational and relational considerations. Non-institutionalized relationships such as dating have received little analytical attention.

In this article, we examine gendered ideals and the pursuit of compatibility in contemporary relationships using a factorial survey experiment. This method is particularly well-suited to

capturing norms and ideals, addressing limitations associated with traditional survey and ethnographic approaches (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015; Jasso, 1980, 2006; Kornrich, 2025; Rossi & Nock, 1982). Specifically, we asked participants to evaluate the attractiveness of fictional opposite-sex individuals as potential partners in *both* marriage and dating contexts. Each vignette was systematically varied across nine dimensions, encompassing both sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., age, education, income) and ideational traits (e.g., attitudes toward housework, interpersonal support, fertility intentions). To examine the quest for compatibility, we also collected data on each respondent's corresponding characteristics across these dimensions. The experiment was fielded between April and May 2025 with a population-based sample of 1,225 never-married, heterosexual individuals residing in four of China's largest metropolises: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. As hubs of economic growth, migration, and demographic transitions, these cities represent the vanguard of social change in China, where entrenched patriarchal norms clash with emerging feminist ideas (Gui, 2020; Ji, 2015; Qian et al., 2020; Tsz Ting Ip, 2025).

The results reveal marked gender asymmetries in partnership ideals and the quest for compatibility. Women exhibit more progressive preferences than men, valuing ideational traits indicative of gender egalitarianism—such as the rejection of the traditional division of housework—alongside a potential partner's socioeconomic status. Notably, women demonstrate neutrality toward a partner's preference for remaining childfree, in stark contrast to men's strong aversion. Moreover, the quest for compatibility differs by gender. Men tend to apply absolute standards to ideational attributes, while women exhibit a more relational and flexible approach, actively seeking alignment between their own values and those of their potential partner,

especially in the context of marriage. These findings underscore that the transition toward individualized relationships in China remains deeply gendered and uneven.

Building on this growing body of research, our study contributes to a rich and vibrant literature on marriage and family formation in East Asia and beyond (Hara & Yu, 2025; Liu et al., 2024; Raymo et al., 2015; Yu et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2023). First, this study advances the understanding of contemporary relationship ideals by empirically assessing the causal impact of both sociodemographic and ideational partner attributes on perceived attractiveness. Notably, ideational attributes, such as attitudes toward domestic labor and emotional support, are difficult to measure with traditional survey items due to issues of recall bias, social desirability bias, and confounding variables. Second, this study shifts the focus from married couples to never-married individuals—an increasingly significant yet understudied population whose preferences are arguably more consequential for shaping emerging patterns of family formation (Yu et al., 2025). Third, we explicitly distinguish between marriage and dating, providing novel evidence that highlights how partner preferences vary across relationship types. Our findings show that institutionalized relationships, such as marriage, place greater emphasis on fertility intention and, specifically for women, on mutual compatibility in ideational traits. Finally, our study contributes to theorizing individualization by demonstrating that this process is not uniform but stratified along gendered lines, reflecting the reality of the stalled gender revolution. We argue that the pronounced divergence in partnership preferences represents a clash between two factions in China: women are increasingly enacting the “do-it-yourself biography” characteristic of individualization, while men continue to rely on the “standard biography” supported by the traditions.

Theoretical Framework

Status and Soul: Evolving Partnership Ideals Amid Individualization

Amid the individualization of personal life, the meaning and expectations surrounding marriage and intimate relationships have changed substantially. Whereas traditional unions were centered on fulfilling institutional roles as loyal spouses and parents, contemporary relationships increasingly prioritize emotional intimacy, personal fulfillment, and the expression of individuality through egalitarian partnerships (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, 2004; Bellah, 2002; Cherlin, 2004). These evolving ideals reflect historical and ongoing movements toward gender equality within both the public and private spheres, albeit at an uneven pace (England, 2010; Goldscheider et al., 2015; Scarborough et al., 2019).

The initial phase of change in intimate relationships was marked by a growing emphasis on achieved status (e.g., educational attainment, income) over ascribed characteristics in partner selection (Blossfeld, 2009; Blossfeld & Timm, 2003; Kalmijn, 1998; Mare, 1991; Schwartz, 2013). Modernization, as a disembedding force, lifted individuals out of the confines of local and familial relations, enabling them to form broader social connections within educational and professional spaces where individual merits superseded inherited social positions (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Blossfeld, 2009; Blossfeld & Timm, 2003; Giddens, 1997). Central to this shift was mass educational expansion, which advanced women's educational attainment and overall socioeconomic roles within and beyond the household (Oppenheimer, 1988, 1997). As a result, educational credentials have become as a key marker of identity associated with a “pan-educated” class consciousness and the primary “filter” in contemporary mate selection (Hara & Yu, 2025; Kalmijn, 1998; Mare, 1991; Schwartz, 2013; Yu et al., 2025). Other achieved

characteristics, including income and occupational prestige, have similarly become central in the evaluation of potential partners (Hara & Yu, 2025; Kalmijn, 1994; Yu et al., 2025).

However, the emphasis placed on status remains highly gendered, reflecting the asymmetries of the stalled gender revolution (England, 2010; Zhou et al., 2023). Socioeconomic standing remains integral to men's marriage prospects, with those having lower education or precarious employment disproportionately squeezed out of the marriage market (Jiang et al., 2014). Previous research has documented persistent patterns of gendered status exchange, wherein women's youth and physical attractiveness are traded for men's educational attainment and financial resources (Egebark et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024; Mu & Xie, 2014; Yu Wang, 2025). These patterns intensify during times of economic uncertainty, when women exhibit stronger preferences for economically established and typically older partners (Mu & Xie, 2014). Thus, despite the deinstitutionalization of traditional marriage, the enduring expectation of the male provider role continues to shape partnership ideals.

Coexisting with—and potentially more consequential than—status-based logics are ideational attributes (Cherlin, 2020; Thornton, 2001, 2005). As traditional social and moral orders lose their normative grip, intimate relationships increasingly reflect the ideal of the “pure relationship”—a voluntary union pursued for its intrinsic emotional value, devoid of instrumental or reproductive imperatives, and sustained solely by mutual satisfaction (Giddens, 1992, p. 58). Consistent with the deinstitutionalization of traditional marriage, partner desirability is increasingly assessed through traits supporting self-actualization, such as a commitment to gender egalitarianism (Hu & Yucel, 2018; Urbina & Tisch, 2025; Wang et al., 2025), the ability to provide both emotional and professional support (Cramer, 2004; Heikkinen et al., 2014), and

alignment in long-term life goals, such as shared intentions regarding childbearing or remaining childfree (Blair & Madigan, 2024; Miu & Colleran, 2025; Mu et al., 2025).

Against the backdrop of the stalled gender revolution, this transition is not without friction, especially between genders (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2004; Cherlin, 2004; England, 2010; Goldscheider et al., 2015). Many men, as beneficiaries of gendered divisions of labor, are more likely to retain conservative values and continue to interpret relationships through the lens of hegemonic masculinity, expecting domestic care and emotional support as entitlements from female partners (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Courtenay, 2000). In contrast, women, especially the highly educated, are more critical of the social and economic penalties associated with traditional wifehood and motherhood (Tsz Ting Ip, 2025; Zhong & Wilkinson, 2025). These women are thus more inclined to embrace progressive and feminist ideas that emphasize individuality, advocating for egalitarian household arrangements, reproductive autonomy, and the redefinition of relational norms. For many women, a partner's demonstrated commitment to gender equality is now not just desirable, but has become a fundamental, non-negotiable prerequisite in partner evaluation (Blair & Madigan, 2024; Gui, 2020, 2023; Ni, 2025).

In this article, we explore contemporary partnership ideals by examining how individuals evaluate both status and ideational attributes. Status attributes refer to sociodemographic characteristics including age, nativity, and physical appearance, as well as achieved markers such as education and income. Ideational attributes encompass attitudes toward the division of household labor, a partner's capacity to provide career and emotional support, and fertility intentions. We acknowledge that our study, as a one-time snapshot, cannot trace historical shifts or life course trajectories in partnership ideals. Rather, we treat "status" and "soul" as coexisting logics that produce distinct, gendered preferences within the context of the stalled gender

revolution. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses regarding gendered partnership ideals:

Hypothesis 1. Preferences for demographic (e.g., age, appearance) and socioeconomic (e.g., education, income) attributes are gendered, with women placing greater emphasis on a partner's socioeconomic standing.

Hypothesis 2. Preferences for ideational attributes (e.g., gender role attitudes, interpersonal support, fertility intentions) are gendered, with women, in particular, prioritizing traits indicative of egalitarian and individualistic values.

Gendered Quests for Compatibility: Status Matching and Ideational Alignment

The transition toward individualized relationships entails not only evolving partnership ideals but also a heightened emphasis on mutual compatibility (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2004; Cherlin, 2004; Giddens, 1992). Whereas partnership ideals reflect broad consensus on the absolute desirability of specific traits (e.g., education, gender role attitudes), the quest for compatibility emphasizes an individualized, relational assessment of how well a potential partner aligns with one's own characteristics and values. As individualization progresses, traditional status-based assortative mating is giving way to a growing emphasis on ideational alignment, reflecting an emerging focus on value-based resonance, or the pursuit of a "soulmate."

The literature on assortative mating has extensively documented individuals' tendencies to choose partners with similar characteristics, resulting in a widespread prevalence of homogamy across contexts (Blossfeld, 2009; Blossfeld & Timm, 2003; Dong & Xie, 2023; Kalmijn, 1998; Mare, 1991; Schwartz, 2013; Yanwen Wang, 2025a). Marriages commonly occur between individuals sharing comparable ascribed characteristics such as birth cohort (Mu & Xie, 2014),

race/ethnicity (Qian & Lichter, 2007; Yanwen Wang, 2025b), and even physical appearance (Webster et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2025). Recent decades have seen increased sorting by achieved statuses, rivaling or even surpassing assortative mating by ascribed statuses. As women's socioeconomic roles within families increasingly resemble men's, partnership preferences regarding achieved statuses are converging (Oppenheimer, 1988). Men now more frequently pursue highly educated, high-earning women, mirroring the traditional preferences attributed to women (Hara & Yu, 2025; Yu et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2023). The expansion and stratification of higher education have further intensified this competition, reinforcing assortative mating among similarly educated individuals (Feng, 2022; Uchikoshi, 2022). Nevertheless, gendered patterns of status exchange persist, suggesting the endurance of deeply rooted normative frameworks in mate selection.

Equally important, if not more so, is the ideational alignment between partners within increasingly individualized relationships. Shared life goals—especially regarding childbearing intentions—constitute a crucial axis of compatibility for both genders. As the institutional link between marriage and parenthood continues to weaken (Lesthaeghe, 2014; Mu et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024), the decision to have children has shifted from a normative expectation to a deliberate, negotiated choice. In this context, diverging reproductive preferences can represent a fundamental incompatibility, potentially foreclosing the possibility of union formation.

In other ideational domains, particularly those pertaining to egalitarian values and interpersonal support, compatibility is likely experienced in gendered terms, with women placing greater emphasis on ideational alignment. Socialized into roles as “kin keepers,” women disproportionately bear the burden of both domestic responsibilities and emotional labor within relationships (Bianchi et al., 2012; Hochschild & Machung, 2012; Kan et al., 2022). As a result,

ideational misalignment—such as disagreements over housework arrangements or asymmetrical emotional investment—can exacerbate relationship strain. Importantly, ideational compatibility is not limited to egalitarian orientations. Women who endorse more traditional gender roles or invest less in emotional labor may similarly expect less from their partners. As such, women’s preferences tend to be adaptive, flexible, and internally heterogeneous: faced with higher structural constraints and costs for mismatch, they strategically calibrate their expectations in line with their own capacity, value orientation, and life goals—whether traditional or progressive.

By contrast, men’s preferences are likely guided by relatively fixed, absolute standards (Egebark et al., 2021), reflecting the stalled gender revolution that supports traditional gender ideologies and normalizes male entitlement to women’s domestic and emotional labor (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Gerson, 2011). Unlike women, men generally face fewer structural penalties for ideational misalignment in the domestic sphere, allowing their preferences to remain more rigid. Within this framework, partner traits—such as a willingness to assume the majority of household responsibilities or provide sustained interpersonal support—are construed as inherently feminine virtues—qualities to be sought but not necessarily reciprocated. As such, men’s evaluation of a partner’s ideational attributes resembles a “checklist” of desirable qualities rather than a reflexive negotiation of mutual compatibility.

Building on these rationales, we propose the following hypotheses on gendered quests for compatibility:

Hypotheses 3. Individuals seek compatibility with potential partners in both sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., education, income, appearance) and life goals (e.g., fertility intentions).

Hypothesis 4. Women actively seek compatibility between their own and their potential partners' ideational attributes, whereas men's preferences for such attributes tend to be absolute and less contingent on their own characteristics.

Relationship Context: Marriage Versus Dating

Individuals' partnership preferences are deeply contingent upon the relationship context. While marriage has become deinstitutionalized to varying degrees across societies, it continues to hold symbolic and practical significance (Cherlin, 2004, 2020). Marriage remains a crucial pathway to status attainment and a salient marker of enduring commitment. This is especially evident in East Asian societies, where marriage retains a strong association with parenthood, and individuals continue to face substantial normative pressures to marry (Gui, 2017, 2023; Raymo et al., 2015; Wang & Mu, 2025; Yu & Xie, 2021, 2022). The high stakes of marriage are further compounded by the enduring stigma attached to divorce, which persists despite increasing divorce rates (He, 2021). In contrast, dating occupies a more exploratory relational space characterized by lower levels of commitment and minimal social sanction upon dissolution.

Given the different stakes of marriage and dating, we expect that individuals evaluate potential partners through context-specific lenses. In the context of marriage, the long-term nature of the commitment and its enduring social and economic implications are likely to elevate the salience of a partner's socioeconomic prospects, fertility intentions, as well as mutual compatibility in both status and ideational attributes. By contrast, dating, which is characterized by lower level of commitment and fewer structural consequences, may privilege more immediately salient attributes such as physical appearance. We thus propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 5. In the context of marriage, socioeconomic attributes and fertility intentions are more important than in dating, whereas physical appearance is more influential in the latter.

Hypothesis 6. The quest for compatibility is more important for marriage than for dating.

Marriage and Romantic Relationships in Contemporary China

Urban China provides a compelling context for examining contemporary relationship ideals amid individualization. The past decade has witnessed an accelerated retreat from marriage (Raymo et al., 2015; Yu & Xie, 2021, 2022). Registered marriages plummeted from a peak of 13.47 million in 2013 to a historic low of 6.1 million in 2024 (Master, 2025). Between 2010 and 2020, the average age at first marriage rose significantly—by 3.63 years for men and 3.95 years for women (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Concurrently, union stability has eroded: by 2019, the ratio of divorces to registered marriages surpassed 50%, prompting the state to implement a mandatory cooling-off period prior to divorce finalization. These demographic shifts are particularly pronounced in China’s major metropolises—Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen—where marriage is increasingly eschewed by younger cohorts, suggesting the declining centrality of marriage and the growing salience of individualized relationship preferences in these metropolitan contexts (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

Nevertheless, marriage retains profound practical and symbolic significance. Contrary to predictions derived from the Second Demographic Transition framework, the connection between marriage and childbearing has strengthened (Van Winkle & Wen, 2023; Wang & Mu, 2025). Because non-marital childbirth remains both rare and socially stigmatized, marriage remains the only socially accepted pathway to parenthood. Moreover, long-term cohabitation has

yet to emerge as a widely accepted alternative (Yu & Xie, 2015). Consequently, young adults, particularly women, continue to face intense parental and societal pressure to marry. This dynamic is illustrated by the prevalence of “matchmaking corners,” where parents advertise their children’s profiles, often reducing women to metrics such as age and physical appearance, thereby devaluing their individual agency (Gui, 2017, 2023). The tension between these socially prescribed expectations and the individualized ideals espoused by younger generations renders partner selection in contemporary China a fraught and consequential process.

This paradox is rooted in an incomplete and gendered process of individualization. On the one hand, market-oriented reforms since the 1980s have dismantled the socialist-era “cradle-to-tomb” work unit system, eroding the institutional structures that had previously organized personal lives around collective socialist missions (Yan, 2003, 2010, 2020). In their place, individuals were thrust into a private sphere shaped by market logics. This shift has given rise to what Yan (2003) termed the “desiring self”—a subjectivity oriented toward emotional expression, intimacy, and the pursuit of a fulfilling private life. For the first time in China’s modern history, these personal aspirations gained legitimacy as central life goals. It is upon this ideological foundation that contemporary relationships have come to privilege self-determination and self-actualization.

On the other hand, China’s path toward individualization has been neither linear nor gender neutral (Yan, 2010, 2020; Zhong & Wilkinson, 2025). Following the collapse of socialist work units, women were disproportionately laid-off. Simultaneously, state-supported provisions for childcare and eldercare were retrenched, shifting the burden of care to families (Ji et al., 2017). Female labor force participation—once among the highest globally—has substantially declined (Wu & Zhou, 2015). Meanwhile, rising living and housing costs have intensified socioeconomic

pressure on families. These transitions have fueled a resurgence of patriarchal norms, albeit cloaked in a neoliberal discourse of personal choice (Fincher, 2014; Ji et al., 2017; Xie & Zhou, 2014). Women are thus caught in a contradictory position: encouraged to achieve socioeconomic competence yet expected to fulfill conventional roles as wives and mothers.

These intersecting forces have rendered marriage and intimate relationships an ideologically contested field. For men and women alike, modern partnership ideals that prize autonomy and egalitarianism collide with enduring material demands. For women in particular, these tensions are exacerbated by the resurgent patriarchal demands of traditional wifehood. The gendered ideals and quests for compatibility examined in this study are therefore emblematic of the broader contours of China's uneven and incomplete individualization.

Methods

Experimental Design

To explore gendered ideals in contemporary relationships, we employed a factorial survey experiment—an approach that has gained increasing prominence in recent studies on family-related norms and ideals (Aassve et al., 2024; Ishizuka, 2019; Karabchuk et al., 2022; Kornrich, 2025; Robbins et al., 2022; Thébaud et al., 2021; Urbina & Tisch, 2025; Yu et al., 2025).

Specifically, respondents were asked to evaluate the attractiveness of fictional opposite-sex romantic partners whose attributes were experimentally manipulated, for both marriage and dating. We then analyzed how characteristics of both the respondents and the fictional partners influenced attractiveness ratings. The experimental approach is particularly well-suited to our research objectives because the attributes of interest are often highly correlated, subject to social

desirability bias, and prone to inaccuracies in retrospective recall of traits at the time of union formation (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015; Jasso, 1980, 2006; Rossi & Nock, 1982).

[Insert Table 1 here]

The vignettes varied across nine dimensions: age, education, income/career prospects, migration background, physical appearance, gender role attitudes, career support, emotional support, and fertility intention (see Table 1). This results in a vignette universe of 13,122 unique combinations. To simulate the typical order of trait disclosure in real-life romantic encounters, ideational attributes were positioned later in the vignette sequence. Following best practices recommended by Auspurg and Hinz (2015), we assigned six randomly assigned vignettes to each respondent to mitigate cognitive overload.

Survey and Sample

We commissioned SurveyPlus, a leading survey company in China, to conduct an online survey from April to May 2025 across four first-tier cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. These cities were purposively selected for their highly developed economies, dramatic demographic changes, heterogeneous populations, and relatively progressive gender values, representing the vanguard of social change in China (Gui, 2020; Ji, 2015; Qian et al., 2020; Tsz Ting Ip, 2025). SurveyPlus maintains a national respondent pool of approximately one million individuals, roughly 60,000 of whom reside in the four selected cities. This proportion closely aligns with the cities' share of the national population (5.88 percent) as reported in the 2020 census. To ensure broad representation, the company implements multiple recruitment strategies, including opt-in emails, e-newsletters, social media outreach, and affiliate networks.

Participation was incentivized through a points-based reward system, where accumulated points can be converted into cash and withdrawn at the user's discretion.

Our sampling strategies targeted heterosexual, never-married individuals aged 25–34. We designed quotas to achieve an even gender distribution (50 percent men and 50 percent women) and diverse educational representation (20 percent secondary, 30 percent some college, 30 percent bachelor's, and 20 percent graduate or higher). To ensure data quality, we implemented various quality-control measures, including attention-check questions, screening for duplicate IP addresses, and flagging unusually fast responses.

Following data collection, we excluded 18 respondents for poor data quality, specifically due to implausibly fast response times or straight-lining (i.e., identical ratings across all vignettes). The final analytic sample comprises 1,225 respondents who evaluated a total of 7,350 vignettes. Although this represents a subset of the full factorial universe (13,112 combinations), the random assignment of attribute levels ensures orthogonality across vignette dimensions. Given the sample size, this design provides sufficient statistical power to produce unbiased estimates of both the main effects and the hypothesized interactions between vignette attributes and respondent characteristics (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015).

Measures

Dependent Variables. The dependent variables are attractiveness ratings assigned to fictional partners for marriage and dating. Respondents rated each partner on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (*extremely unattractive*) to 10 (*extremely attractive*) in response to the question “Considering the information provided above, how attractive is this person to you as a

marriage/dating partner?” The 0–10 scale was chosen to reflect popular online discourses, where a score of 10 often signifies perfection.

Independent Variables. In addition to the nine vignette dimensions detailed in Table 1, our analyses include the following corresponding respondent characteristics: age (continuous), education (*secondary, some college, bachelor's, graduate*), monthly income from all sources in yuan (≤ 5000 , $5001-8000$, $8001-15000$, >15000), migration (1 = *migrant*, 0 = *local*), self-rated appearance (*below average, average, above average*), attitudes toward the division of housework (*egalitarian, women do more, men do more*), career support (*low, moderate, strong*), emotional support (*low, moderate, strong*), and fertility intention (*uncertain, yes, no*).

Attitudes toward the division of housework were measured on a seven-point scale (1 = *none*, 7 = *all*) in response to the question “If you live with a partner, how much of the housework are you willing to take on?” We categorized these responses to reflect gendered expectations. For male respondents, scores of 1–3 were coded as “*women do more*,” 4 as “*egalitarian*,” and 5–7 as “*men do more*.” For female respondents, the coding was reversed: scores of 1–3 were coded as “*men do more*,” 4 as “*egalitarian*,” and 5–7 as “*women do more*.”

Career and emotional support were measured by respondents’ level of agreement from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*) with two statements: “I support my partner’s career, even if it requires adjustments in family life,” and “I am good at perceiving and responding to my partner’s emotional needs,” respectively. We converted these responses into categorical variables: scores of 1–4 were coded as *low*, 5 as *moderate*, and 6–7 as *strong*.

Control Variables. We included several control variables: location (*Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen*), relationship experience (*never, previously in a relationship, currently in a relationship*), cohabitation history (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*), ideal age at first marriage (<28, 28–30, 31–35, >35, *against marriage*), household registration (*hukou*) type at age 12 (1 = *non-agricultural*, 0 = *agricultural*), highest parental education (*middle school or below, secondary, some college, bachelor's or higher*), employment status (1 = *full-time*, 0 = *not full-time or other*), and sibship size (0, 1, >1). Additionally, we controlled for the presentation order of each vignette.

Analytical Strategy

Since each respondent rated multiple vignettes, we employed multilevel regressions to account for the hierarchical data structure (Hox, 2010). The baseline model is specified as follows:

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta V_{ij} + \gamma R_i + u_i + \epsilon_{ij} \quad (1)$$

where Y_{ij} denotes the attractiveness rating for marriage or dating assigned by respondent i to vignette j ; β_0 is the intercept; V_{ij} is a vector of vignette-level attributes; R_i is a vector of respondent-level characteristics; and β and γ are vectors of coefficients associated with vignette and respondent attributes. The term u_i represents the random intercept for respondent i , capturing unobserved heterogeneity across individuals, and ϵ_{ij} is the residual error term at the vignette level.

To test our hypotheses about gendered quests for compatibility, we interacted each vignette dimension with its corresponding respondent characteristic in subsequent models. For example, regarding education, the equation extends to:

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 V_{ij} Educ_i + \beta V_{ij} + \gamma R_i + u_i + \epsilon_{ij} \quad (2)$$

Our analysis unfolds in three stages. First, we present descriptive statistics for overall attractiveness ratings and respondent characteristics. Second, to explore gendered ideals, we examine the causal impact of vignette dimensions on attractiveness ratings, separately by gender and by relationship context. Third, we investigate gendered preferences for compatibility using models with interaction between each vignette dimension and the corresponding respondent characteristics.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

[Insert Table 2 here]

As detailed in Table 2, our sample achieved balanced representation by gender (50.04 percent women, 49.96 percent men), educational attainment (19.43 percent secondary, 29.80 percent some college, 31.59 percent bachelor's, 19.18 percent graduate), and geographic location (29.88 percent Beijing, 20.08 percent Shanghai, 23.84 percent Guangzhou, 26.20 percent Shenzhen). On average, men were 28.60 years old ($SD = 2.61$), slightly older than women ($M = 28.00$, $SD = 2.49$). Over half of respondents were migrants to their city of residence, with women (58.73 percent) more likely than men (44.12 percent) to be migrants. Most respondents (87.83 percent) reported being currently or previously involved in a relationship, and fewer than half (43.27 percent) had ever cohabited with a partner. Marriage continued to hold symbolic and practical importance: nearly half (48.24 percent) considered ages 28–30 as the ideal window for first marriage, and an additional 34.35 percent preferred ages 31–35. Only a small proportion (3.35 percent) reported no plans to marry.

Regarding socioeconomic status and family background, women in our sample had higher educational attainment than men; 66.56 percent of women had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 34.97 percent of men. A greater proportion of women (81.89 percent) than men (76.63 percent) were employed full-time. Approximately two-thirds of respondents (68.32 percent) reported monthly incomes within the 5001 to 15000 yuan range. Nearly half of respondents (46.94 percent) had agricultural *hukou* status at age 12, and being an only child was more common among men (49.51 percent) than women (41.60 percent). Parental education was notably lower than that of the respondents, with only 32.57 percent having attended at least some college.

In terms of ideational attributes, among female respondents, 48.12 percent preferred an egalitarian division of housework, and 34.26 percent favored men taking on a larger share. Notably, while 35.62 percent of men supported an egalitarian division, over half (57.03 percent) expressed a willingness to undertake a greater share themselves. Men also rated their ability to provide interpersonal support more highly than women did. For instance, 43.63 percent of men, compared to 32.63 percent of women, felt capable of offering strong career support, and 51.44 percent of men, versus 40.29 percent of women, believed they could provide strong emotional support. Men also expressed stronger fertility intentions: 58.99 percent explicitly desired children, compared to 35.89 percent of women, and only 3.92 percent of men, versus 12.72 percent of women, reported not wanting children. Additionally, over 80 percent of respondents rated their appearance as average, with no significant gender differences observed.

Overall, respondents assigned significantly lower attractiveness ratings to partners in a marital context compared to a dating one, suggesting higher standards for marriage. Women were more selective, assigning lower average attractiveness ratings than men did.

Gendered Ideals in Contemporary Relationships

Next, we estimated multilevel models to predict attractiveness ratings, incorporating both vignette- and respondent-level factors. Figure 1 presents the main effects of each vignette dimension, with coefficients representing the average change in perceived partner attractiveness associated with different attribute levels, relative to the reference category for each dimension. Full model results are available in Supplementary Table 1.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

For several attributes, men's and women's ideals were largely aligned. Both genders exhibited aversion to age hypogamy (i.e., where the woman was older than her partner): women perceived younger partners as less attractive ($B = -0.27^{***}$) compared to similarly aged partners in marriage, whereas men rated older partners as less attractive in both marital ($B = -0.57^{***}$) and dating ($B = -0.65^{***}$) contexts. Physical attractiveness was positively associated with partner evaluations for both genders, particularly in dating contexts. Local residents were preferred over migrants, with no significant gender differences observed. Furthermore, partners who offered strong interpersonal support—both in terms of career and emotion—were consistently rated as more attractive by both genders, with emotional support carrying slightly greater weight.

Gender differences emerged more prominently in the evaluation of socioeconomic status. Women placed greater emphasis on educational attainment, strongly preferring partners with a bachelor's degree over those with only secondary education ($B = 1.25^{***}$ for marriage; $B = 1.10^{***}$ for dating), and rating those with a graduate degree even more favorably ($B = 1.64^{***}$ for marriage; $B = 1.49^{***}$ for dating). While men also preferred better-educated partners, they made little distinction between bachelor's and graduate degrees. Income and career prospects similarly

mattered for both genders, though women exhibited stronger aversion to partners with below-average income and career prospects than men did.

The most pronounced gender divergence concerned the division of housework. Compared to an egalitarian division, the traditional arrangement, wherein the woman assumed a larger share, was the strongest deterrent to partner attractiveness from women's perspective ($B = -1.34^{***}$ for marriage, $B = -1.00^{***}$ for dating), while it had no significant effect on men's assessments ($B = 0.14$ for marriage, $B = 0.05$ for dating). Conversely, a non-conventional division where men took on more housework was positively evaluated by women ($B = 0.56^{***}$ for marriage, $B = 0.49^{***}$ for dating) but negatively by men ($B = -0.73^{***}$ for marriage, $B = -0.50^{***}$ for dating).

Fertility intention was another area of pronounced gender divergence. In the context of marriage, men rated partners who expressed no intention to have children significantly less favorably than those who were uncertain ($B = -1.21^{***}$), whereas women's evaluations of childfree partners were essentially neutral ($B = -0.02$). Men also showed a significantly stronger preference for partners desiring children ($B = 0.67^{***}$) compared to women ($B = 0.18^*$). These patterns of preference persisted in dating contexts for men but did not significantly affect women's ratings.

These findings partially support Hypothesis 1, indicating that women placed greater emphasis on a partner's socioeconomic standing than men did, though their preferences for age and physical appearance were similar. Hypothesis 2 is also supported. Ideational attributes that indicate egalitarian and individualistic values were viewed positively by women but often negatively by men.

Gendered Quest for Compatibility

To assess whether respondents' own characteristics shaped their relationship ideals in ways consistent with the quest for compatibility, we fitted models that included interaction terms between each vignette dimension and the corresponding respondent characteristic. Age was excluded from the interaction terms, as the vignette description already captured the age difference between respondents and potential partners. Table 3 summarizes the results.

[Insert Table 3 here]

In both marital and dating contexts, we observed strong evidence of educational assortative mating for both genders. While all respondents preferred highly educated partners, those with higher education exhibited a significantly stronger preference for similarly educated partners compared to their less-educated peers. This pattern was particularly pronounced among graduate degree holders, who rated partners with equivalent credentials substantially more favorably (e.g., interaction term for marriage: $B = 1.18^{***}$ for women; $B = 1.15^{***}$ for men) than did respondents with less education.

Compatibility in physical appearance was also highly desired, though with nuanced gender differences. In both marriage and dating, women who perceived their own appearance as above average expressed a stronger preference for similarly attractive partners. In dating contexts, women who viewed their own appearance as below average tended to rate highly attractive partners less favorably than did other women. Men's preferences, on the other hand, displayed diverging patterns: self-perceived attractiveness did not increase preference for similarly attractive partners but did heighten aversion to unattractiveness. Thus, for physical appearance, the quest for compatibility, especially in marriage, manifests as a pursuit of beauty among

women but as an aversion to unattractiveness, especially among men who perceived themselves as attractive.

In contrast, we found no significant evidence of assortative mating with respect to income or nativity, suggesting that preferences for these attributes were broadly absolute rather than shaped by respondents' own standing.

More striking gender differences emerged in the quest for ideational compatibility, particularly in the context of marriage. Among women, preferences regarding housework division were flexible and conditioned by their own stance. Specifically, women who endorsed traditional (or male-led) arrangements were more accepting of, or attracted to, partners holding similar views. A pattern of reciprocal evaluation also characterized women's preference for interpersonal support: women who perceived themselves as providing minimal career support rated partners offering similarly low career support less negatively, while those who self-identified as highly emotional supportive showed heightened attraction to emotionally reciprocal partners. However, these preferences for ideational compatibility weakened in dating contexts. For instance, compatibility effects for housework and career support were no longer significant, and even women who themselves provided little emotional support demonstrated a shared preference for emotionally supportive partners.

In stark contrast, men's preferences for ideational traits were largely non-relational and uniform. Their aversion to non-conventional housework arrangement and their desire for interpersonal career and emotional support were consistent and absolute, unaffected by their own self-reported attributes in these domains. Men's standards are, therefore, not based on a quest for reciprocal compatibility, but on a set of fixed expectations for a female partner.

Lastly, compatibility in fertility intentions, reflecting alignment in long-term life goals, was highly valued by both genders, especially in the context of marriage. Respondents who desired children preferred partners who shared this goal and penalized those who indicated disinterest in childbearing. Notably, a unique pattern emerged among women in both relationship contexts: those who did not wish to have children expressed a strong preference for partners who similarly rejected parenthood, awarding them significantly higher attractiveness rating. This preference for matching on the desire to be childfree, evidently only among women, highlights a gendered dimension of ideational compatibility that was absent in men's evaluations.

Discussion

Against the backdrop of China's incomplete and gendered individualization, this study explored contemporary partner selection, drawing on a factorial survey experiment with never-married heterosexual individuals in China's largest metropolises: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. We examined both partnership ideals—the absolute value placed on a potential partner's attributes—and the quest for compatibility—the individualized, relational assessment of how well a partner's attributes align with one's own. These assessments spanned a comprehensive array of factors, including ascribed sociodemographic characteristics, achieved socioeconomic status, and, notably, ideational attributes. This experimental design allowed us to disentangle the independent causal effects of each attribute while mitigating limitations inherent in observational studies, such as social desirability bias, retrospective rationalization, and multicollinearity (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015).

Our results reveal stark gender asymmetries in partnership ideals, particularly concerning the valuation of socioeconomic and ideational attributes. Consistent with persistent gendered

expectations (Ji et al., 2017), women valued a partner's socioeconomic standing—encompassing both education and income—more highly than men did. Notably, men's educational attainment was positively associated with their attractiveness as partners, whereas women's education beyond the bachelor's level offered little additional appeal to men, reflecting the persistence of the male provider role. The most striking gender divergences, however, emerged in ideational domains. A partner's endorsement of a traditional division of housework constituted the strongest deterrent to partner desirability among women, yet elicited no negative response from men. Importantly, our experimental design reveals a crucial schism between stated beliefs and underlying preferences among men. While over half of male respondents (57.03%) expressed willingness to assume a greater share of housework, these attitudinal claims did not translate into partner evaluations. On the contrary, men penalized women who expected them to undertake a greater share of housework, suggesting that professed beliefs may mask insidious gendered expectations. A similar chasm appeared in evaluations of fertility intentions. Men reacted negatively to potential partners who intended to remain childfree, whereas women's responses were largely neutral. Taken together, these findings are consistent with gendered individualization within the context of the stalled revolution. Men's partnership ideals remain more closely aligned with institutionalized norms that reinforce the traditional gendered division of labor and reproductive responsibility, whereas women appear to be at the forefront of an ideational shift toward modern, egalitarian partnerships that prioritize autonomy, emotional fulfillment, and self-actualization.

Beyond the emergence of new partnership ideals, individualization theory posits that individuals increasingly seek partners who align with their own way of life—not only in terms of status, but also in values and aspirations (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, 2004). Our results

reveal, however, that this quest for compatibility is itself gendered. Women's preferences in ideational domains were notably relational and reciprocal, exhibiting adaptive and heterogeneous strategies in response to structural constraints. Those who espoused more traditional values, provided less interpersonal support, or preferred to remain childfree were significantly more accepting of, and even attracted to, partners with similar dispositions. In contrast, men's preferences followed a rigid, less relational pattern. While men displayed homogamy-seeking tendencies regarding socioeconomic status and fertility intentions, their evaluations of ideational attributes were largely fixed and unaffected by their own orientations, especially in marital contexts. Rather than reflecting a dynamic process of mutual alignment, men's evaluations more closely resembled a "checklist" of desirable partner traits. This non-reciprocal orientation suggests that for many men, attributes such as a partner's willingness to perform domestic and emotional labor are perceived not as negotiable or relational, but as hegemonic entitlements that reinforce traditional gender hierarchies within the private sphere (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The gendered asymmetry in compatibility-seeking thus reflects the uneven individualization and the stalled gender revolution across relational spheres.

Our findings resonate with and extend recent scholarship on mate selection in East Asia and beyond (Hara & Yu, 2025; Mu et al., 2025; Yu Wang, 2025; Yu et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2023). Echoing this literature, we confirm that socioeconomic criteria remain pivotal in partner evaluation, particularly for women who continue to face high opportunity costs of marriage under persistent gendered expectations. However, by expanding the analytical lens beyond status markers to include ideational attributes, we show that the gendered divergence in contemporary China is not merely transactional but deeply ideological. While recent evidence suggests a potential convergence in preferences for status-based criteria (Yu et al., 2025), our focus on

ideational attributes uncovers a persistent schism: women's pursuit of ideational compatibility—often articulated through the quest for a “soulmate”—clashes with men's adherence to traditional scripts. We contend that the incomplete, gendered process of individualization constitutes a central tension underlying the declining appeal of marriage among younger generations in China.

This study is not without limitations. First, our experimental design presumes full transparency of partner attributes—a condition seldom met in real-world partner selection. In reality, ideational traits such as gender-role attitudes or emotional supportiveness often become discernible only after an initial selection based on more visible traits such as age and educational attainment. As such, our findings should be interpreted as reflections of ideal partner preferences under conditions of complete information, rather than as direct analogues to real-life decision-making.

Second, we excluded certain attributes known to be relevant in the Chinese context, such as parental social status and property ownership, both of which may significantly influence mate selection (Qian et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2023). While variables such as migration status may capture some aspects of socioeconomic background, their exclusion was necessary to minimize respondent fatigue and maintain statistical power with the current sample size.

Third, social desirability bias in respondents' self-reported attitudes may influence our findings on mutual compatibility, particularly for men. Notably, our findings reveal a gap between the stated willingness to share housework and the revealed preferences in the experiment among men. This same dynamic may also introduce measurement error into our interaction models. If the group of men coded as “egalitarian” or “non-conventional” includes both genuinely progressive individuals and those who merely perform egalitarianism for social approval, their opposing preferences may cancel each other out, statistically obscuring a true

compatibility effect. Consequently, our finding that men's preferences are largely "absolute" should be interpreted conservatively: it may obscure a smaller but meaningful compatibility-seeking tendency among a subset of genuinely egalitarian men. That such *performative* egalitarianism exists at all, however, underscores the deep-seated ideological misalignment between genders that is central to our argument.

Finally, due to logistical constraints, this study did not implement a D-efficiency design, which would have optimized the statistical power of the factorial experiment. Nevertheless, given our primary goal of estimating the main effects of each vignette dimension, the current design and sample size remain appropriate and robust for addressing our research questions.

Despite these limitations, our study offers important implications for research on partner selection and relationship ideals. First, we highlight the need for the literature to move beyond a reliance on fixed, time-invariant variables—an approach often necessitated by studies of existing marriages—and to incorporate ideational attributes, which have become central to contemporary evaluations of partner desirability. As our results show, values such as emotional reciprocity, gender-role attitudes, and fertility intentions now carry as much weight as, if not more than, conventional status markers. Second, we call for future research to explore these gendered ideals across diverse contexts where individualization unfolds at different paces, through different paths, and with varying consequences for gender relations. Finally, while our findings echo the "long and bitter battle" between the sexes predicted by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2004, p. 14) at the turn of the twenty-first century, they also signal the emergence of novel relational forms grounded in individual autonomy and mutual compatibility. Even amid persistent structural inequalities, younger generations are actively reimagining intimacy on their own terms.

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Tables

Table 1. Vignette Dimensions and Levels

Dimension	Level
Age	Five years older than you Around your age Five years younger than you
Education	Secondary diploma Bachelor's degree Master's degree
Income/career prospects	Below-average income, limited career prospect Average income, moderate career prospect Above-average income, strong career prospect
Migration	Born and raised locally Not born or raised locally
Appearance	Below-average appearance Average appearance Above-average appearance
Gender role attitudes	Believes housework should primarily be done by women Believes housework should be shared equally between partners Believes housework should primarily be done by men
Career support	Provides little support for partner's career goals and development Provides moderate support for partner's career goals and development Provides strong support for partner's career goals and development
Emotional support	Provides low emotional support, rarely attentive to partner's needs Provides moderate emotional support, responsive to partner's needs Provides high emotional support, actively responsive to partner's needs
Fertility intention	Does not want to have children Unsure about having children Wants and plans to have children

Notes: The vignette universe totals $3^8 \times 2 = 13,122$ combinations.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

	All	Women	Men	T/ χ^2 Test
Attractiveness ratings				
Marriage	4.55 (2.81)	3.92 (2.77)	5.17 (2.71)	***
Dating	5.11 (2.70)	4.46 (2.72)	5.76 (2.52)	***
Age, years	28.28 (2.57)	28.00 (2.49)	28.60 (2.61)	***
Education				***
Secondary	19.43%	10.60%	28.27%	
Some college	29.80%	22.84%	36.76%	
Bachelor	31.59%	43.88%	19.28%	
Graduate	19.18%	22.68%	15.69%	
Income in yuan				*
< 5000	20.33%	22.68%	17.97%	
5,000–8,000	35.59%	31.97%	39.22%	
8,001–15,000	32.73%	35.24%	30.23%	
> 15,000	11.35%	10.11%	12.58%	
Migrant status ^a	51.43%	58.73%	44.12%	***
Appearance				ns
Below average	3.18%	2.77%	3.59%	
Average	80.49%	80.75%	80.23%	
Above average	16.33%	16.48%	16.18%	
Housework				***
Egalitarian	41.88%	48.12%	35.62%	
Women do more	12.49%	17.62%	7.35%	
Men do more	45.63%	34.26%	57.03%	
Career support				***
Low	26.04%	33.44%	18.63%	
Moderate	35.84%	33.93%	37.75%	
Strong	38.12%	32.63%	43.63%	
Emotional support				***
Low	23.10%	28.22%	17.97%	
Moderate	31.18%	31.48%	30.88%	
Strong	45.71%	40.29%	51.44%	
Fertility intention				***
Yes	47.43%	35.89%	58.99%	
No	8.33%	12.72%	3.92%	
Uncertain	44.24%	51.39%	37.09%	
Location				***
Beijing	29.88%	32.79%	26.96%	
Shanghai	20.08%	19.25%	20.92%	
Guangzhou	23.84%	26.92%	20.75%	
Shenzhen	26.20%	21.04%	31.37%	
Relationship				***
Never	12.16%	11.26%	13.07%	
Single (past)	61.22%	57.26%	65.20%	

In relationship	26.61%	31.48%	21.73%	
Cohabitation ^b	43.27%	40.13%	46.41%	*
Ideal marriage age				***
≤ 27	10.69%	7.99%	13.40%	
28–30	48.24%	50.73%	45.75%	
31–35	34.45%	35.07%	33.82%	
≥ 36	3.27%	1.96%	4.58%	
Against marriage	3.35%	4.24%	2.45%	
Hukou at age 12 ^c	53.06%	52.20%	53.92%	ns
Parental education				***
Middle school or less	30.69%	34.42%	26.96%	
Secondary	36.73%	32.14%	41.34%	
Some college	15.43%	13.70%	17.16%	
Bachelor or above	17.14%	19.74%	14.54%	
Employment ^d	79.27%	81.89%	76.63%	*
Sibship size				***
Only child	45.55%	41.60%	49.51%	
One	34.78%	33.93%	35.62%	
Two or more	19.67%	24.47%	14.87%	
N	1,225	613	612	

Notes: ^aMigrant status: 0 = *local*, 1 = *migrant*. ^bCohabitation: 0 = *never cohabited before*, 1 = *cohabited*. ^cHukou status at age 12: 0 = *agricultural*, 1 = *non-agricultural*. ^dEmployment: 0 = *not full-time or other*, 1 = *full-time*. Mean (Standard Deviation) is reported for continuous variables, and percentages are reported for dummy or categorical variables. Gender differences are tested using t-tests for continuous variables and chi-squared (χ^2) tests for dummy or categorical variables. *** if $p < 0.001$, ** if $p < 0.01$, * if $p < 0.05$, “ns” if $p \geq 0.05$.

Table 3. Multilevel Models with Interaction Terms Between Vignette Dimension and Corresponding Respondent Characteristics

	Marriage		Dating	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Education				
V ref: secondary				
R ref: secondary				
V bachelor	1.03*** (0.25)	0.30 (0.16)	0.59* (0.24)	0.17 (0.15)
V graduate	1.04*** (0.24)	0.31* (0.16)	0.65** (0.24)	0.30* (0.15)
R some college	-1.38*** (0.29)	-0.70** (0.21)	-1.42*** (0.28)	-0.75*** (0.20)
R bachelor	-1.89*** (0.28)	-0.51* (0.25)	-1.83*** (0.28)	-0.61** (0.24)
R graduate	-2.69*** (0.33)	-1.58*** (0.29)	-2.39*** (0.32)	-1.82*** (0.27)
V bachelor ×	0.07 (0.30)	0.27 (0.21)	0.30 (0.29)	0.42* (0.20)
R some college				
V graduate ×	0.30 (0.30)	0.26 (0.21)	0.48 (0.29)	0.07 (0.20)
R some college				
V bachelor ×	0.17 (0.28)	0.13 (0.25)	0.64* (0.27)	0.42 (0.24)
R bachelor				
V graduate ×	0.62* (0.27)	0.47 (0.25)	0.99*** (0.26)	0.38 (0.24)
R bachelor				
V bachelor ×	0.59 (0.30)	0.67* (0.27)	0.80** (0.29)	0.88** (0.26)
R graduate				
V graduate ×	1.18*** (0.30)	1.15*** (0.26)	1.34*** (0.29)	1.20*** (0.25)
R graduate				
Income				
V ref: average				
R ref: ≤5000				
V below average	-0.53** (0.17)	-0.14 (0.20)	-0.39* (0.17)	-0.20 (0.19)
V above average	0.25 (0.17)	0.14 (0.20)	0.40* (0.17)	-0.07 (0.19)
R 5001–8000	0.09 (0.23)	-0.44 (0.24)	0.04 (0.22)	-0.61** (0.22)
R 8001–15000	-0.38 (0.25)	-0.85** (0.26)	-0.25 (0.24)	-0.74** (0.25)
R >15000	0.09 (0.35)	-0.93** (0.33)	-0.07 (0.34)	-0.97** (0.31)
V below average ×	-0.39 (0.23)	0.01 (0.24)	-0.29 (0.22)	0.16 (0.23)
R 5001–8000				
V above average ×	0.09 (0.22)	0.05 (0.24)	-0.09 (0.22)	0.29 (0.23)
R 5001–8000				
V below average ×	-0.03 (0.22)	-0.14 (0.25)	-0.34 (0.22)	0.05 (0.24)
R 8001–15000				
V above average ×	0.28 (0.22)	0.23 (0.25)	-0.16 (0.21)	0.45 (0.24)
R 8001–15000				
V below average ×	-0.14 (0.32)	-0.24 (0.31)	-0.07 (0.31)	-0.05 (0.29)
R >15000				
V above average ×	0.41 (0.30)	-0.02 (0.31)	0.03 (0.29)	0.06 (0.29)
R >15000				
Migrant				

V ref: local				
R ref: local				
V migrant	-0.28** (0.10)	-0.24** (0.09)	-0.17 (0.10)	-0.07 (0.09)
R migrant	-0.22 (0.16)	-0.57** (0.16)	-0.27 (0.15)	-0.47** (0.15)
V migrant ×	-0.01 (0.14)	0.08 (0.14)	0.01 (0.13)	-0.07 (0.13)
R migrant				
Appearance				
V ref: average				
R ref: average				
V below average	-0.57*** (0.09)	-0.50*** (0.09)	-0.91*** (0.09)	-0.78*** (0.09)
V above average	0.35*** (0.09)	0.38*** (0.09)	0.70*** (0.09)	0.70*** (0.09)
R below average	-0.41 (0.49)	0.68 (0.44)	-0.34 (0.47)	0.64 (0.41)
R above average	-0.56** (0.22)	-0.02 (0.22)	-0.61** (0.21)	-0.16 (0.21)
V below average ×	0.78 (0.50)	0.01 (0.46)	0.58 (0.49)	0.07 (0.44)
R below average				
V above average ×	-0.12 (0.52)	-0.21 (0.45)	-1.05* (0.51)	0.21 (0.42)
R below average				
V below average ×	-0.05 (0.22)	-0.57*** (0.24)	-0.17 (0.21)	-0.44* (0.22)
R above average				
V above average ×	0.58** (0.22)	0.25 (0.22)	0.85*** (0.22)	0.65*** (0.21)
R above average				
Housework				
V ref: egalitarian				
R ref: egalitarian				
V women do more	-1.40*** (0.12)	0.18 (0.14)	-0.99*** (0.12)	0.18 (0.13)
V men do more	0.47*** (0.12)	-0.88*** (0.14)	0.41*** (0.11)	-0.48*** (0.13)
R women do more	0.01 (0.22)	-0.76* (0.32)	-0.16 (0.22)	-0.75* (0.30)
R men do more	-0.73*** (0.18)	0.28 (0.18)	-0.55** (0.17)	0.36* (0.16)
V women do more ×	0.46* (0.23)	0.15 (0.33)	0.40 (0.22)	0.37 (0.32)
R women do more				
V men do more ×	-0.20 (0.23)	-0.06 (0.34)	-0.05 (0.22)	0.22 (0.33)
R women do more				
V women do more ×	-0.11 (0.19)	-0.10 (0.18)	-0.26 (0.18)	-0.29 (0.17)
R men do more				
V men do more ×	0.38* (0.18)	0.27 (0.18)	0.27 (0.18)	-0.06 (0.17)
R men do more				
Career support				
V ref: moderate				
R ref: moderate				
V low	-0.21 (0.14)	-0.15 (0.14)	-0.17 (0.14)	-0.06 (0.13)
V strong	0.50*** (0.14)	0.27* (0.14)	0.48** (0.14)	0.15 (0.13)
R low	-0.89*** (0.20)	-0.11 (0.23)	-0.73*** (0.19)	-0.15 (0.21)
R strong	0.06 (0.19)	0.16 (0.19)	0.14 (0.19)	0.33 (0.17)
V low × R low	0.48* (0.20)	-0.13 (0.24)	0.26 (0.19)	0.09 (0.23)
V strong × R low	0.03 (0.20)	-0.20 (0.24)	-0.03 (0.20)	0.15 (0.23)
V low × R strong	-0.06 (0.20)	-0.04 (0.19)	-0.08 (0.19)	-0.16 (0.18)

V strong × R strong	-0.02 (0.20)	0.02 (0.19)	-0.15 (0.20)	0.01 (0.18)
Emotional support				
V ref: moderate				
R ref: moderate				
V low	-0.57*** (0.14)	-0.46** (0.15)	-0.57*** (0.14)	-0.55*** (0.15)
V strong	0.19 (0.15)	0.41** (0.15)	0.36* (0.14)	0.61*** (0.14)
R low	-0.29 (0.21)	-0.15 (0.24)	-0.41* (0.20)	-0.21 (0.22)
R strong	-0.23 (0.19)	0.28 (0.19)	-0.10 (0.19)	0.23 (0.18)
V low × R low	0.26 (0.22)	0.33 (0.25)	0.04 (0.21)	0.27 (0.24)
V strong × R low	0.36 (0.21)	0.24 (0.25)	0.54** (0.20)	-0.03 (0.24)
V low × R strong	-0.27 (0.20)	0.07 (0.19)	-0.25 (0.19)	0.10 (0.19)
V strong × R strong	0.42* (0.20)	0.21 (0.19)	0.54** (0.19)	-0.05 (0.18)
Fertility intention				
V ref: uncertain				
R ref: uncertain				
V yes	0.05 (0.11)	0.22 (0.14)	0.02 (0.11)	0.24 (0.13)
V no	0.15 (0.11)	-0.88*** (0.13)	0.11 (0.11)	-0.15 (0.13)
R yes	-0.15 (0.17)	-0.48** (0.17)	0.11 (0.17)	-0.05 (0.16)
R no	-0.11 (0.26)	-0.14 (0.42)	0.28 (0.25)	-0.46 (0.39)
V yes × R yes	0.44* (0.18)	0.76*** (0.18)	0.16 (0.17)	0.27 (0.17)
V no × R yes	-0.86*** (0.17)	-0.51*** (0.17)	-0.31 (0.17)	-0.26 (0.17)
V yes × R no	-0.20 (0.25)	-0.82 (0.43)	-0.15 (0.25)	0.11 (0.42)
V no × R no	1.15*** (0.25)	0.44 (0.44)	0.50* (0.25)	0.69 (0.42)

Notes: “V” denotes vignette dimensions, and “R” denotes respondent characteristics. *** if $p < 0.001$, ** if $p < 0.01$, * if $p < 0.05$, “ns” if $p \geq 0.05$.

Figures

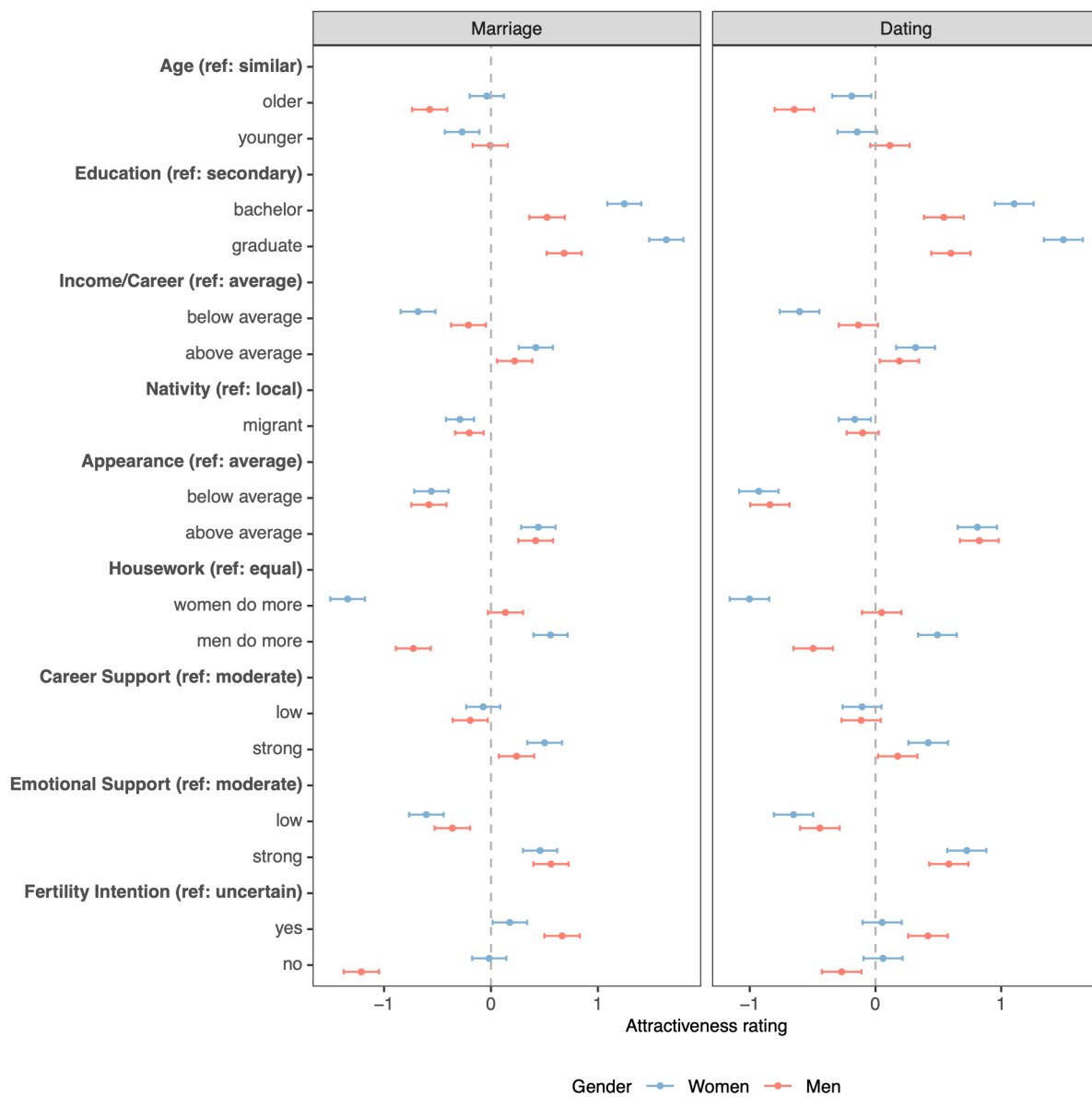


Figure 1. Gendered Ideals in Marriage and Dating