



Hypergamy Tendencies in Mate Selection: An Outdated Norm or A Persisting Dynamic in Today's Turkish Marriage Market?

Eş Seçiminde Hipergami Eğilimleri: Günümüz Türkiye Evlilik Piyasasında Eskimiş Bir Norm mu, Devam Eden Bir Dinamik mi?

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Abstract*

This study investigates the continued relevance of hypergamy—women's inclination to seek partners with higher socio-economic standing—in spite of contemporary shifts in gender norms, labor participation, and family structures. Based on survey data from 740 university students in Sakarya University, the research examines how expectations concerning income, property ownership, career prestige, and cultural adequacy differ by gender and shape partner preferences. The results reveal perceived gendered patterns: women are significantly more likely than men to prioritize financial security, cultural refinement, and professional success in prospective partners. These preferences suggest that marriage is still perceived as a pathway to upward social mobility, particularly among women. The study interprets these findings through the lens of social structures that value different forms of capital—economic, cultural, and symbolic—within the marriage market. These forms of capital not only influence desirability but also serve as tools for negotiating better life opportunities through romantic unions. Rather than viewing hypergamy as an outdated remnant, the study frames it as a pragmatic response to the demands of modern life, where socio-economic pressures and gendered expectations persist despite formal strides toward equality. By situating these dynamics within Turkish context balancing traditional values and modern aspirations, the article highlights how partner selection continues to reflect deeper social hierarchies and structural constraints in family formation.

Keywords: Hypergamy, Mate selection, Marriage market, Social mobility, Gender roles

Paper Type: Research

Öz

Bu çalışma, toplumsal cinsiyet normlarındaki, işgücüne katılımdaki ve aile yapılarındaki çağdaş değişimlere rağmen kadınların daha yüksek sosyo-ekonomik statüye sahip eş arayışına yönelik eğilimlerini ifade eden hipergaminin güncelliğini incelemektedir. Sakarya Üniversitesi'nden 740 üniversite öğrencisiyle yürütülen anket verilerine dayanan araştırma, gelir, mülk sahibi olma, kariyer prestiji ve kültürel yeterlilik beklentilerinin cinsiyete göre nasıl farklılaştığını ve eş seçiminde bu beklentilerin nasıl rol oynadığını analiz etmektedir. Bulgular, algılanan toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı kalıpları ortaya koymaktadır: Kadınlar, potansiyel eşlerinde mali güvenlik, kültürel incelik ve mesleki başarıya erkeklere kıyasla anlamlı derecede daha fazla önem vermektedir. Bu tercihler, evliliğin özellikle kadınlar açısından hâlen yukarı doğru toplumsal hareketliliğe giden bir yol olarak görüldüğünü göstermektedir. Çalışma, bu bulguları, evlilik piyasasında ekonomik, kültürel ve sembolik sermaye gibi farklı sermaye türlerini değerli kılan toplumsal yapılar çerçevesinde yorumlamaktadır. Bu sermaye biçimleri yalnızca çekiciliği şekillendirmekle kalmamakta, aynı zamanda romantik birliktelikler aracılığıyla daha iyi yaşam fırsatları elde etmede birer araç işlevi görmektedir. Hipergami, modası geçmiş bir kalıntı olarak değerlendirilmek yerine, modern yaşamın taleplerine yönelik pragmatik bir yanıt olarak ele alınmakta; eşitliğe yönelik ilerlemelere rağmen sosyo-ekonomik baskıların ve toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı beklentilerin devam ettiğine

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işaret edilmektedir. Türkiye bağlamında, geleneksel değerler ile modern beklentiler arasında kurulan denge üzerinden, eş seçiminin hala derin toplumsal hiyerarşileri, aile oluşumundaki yapısal sınırlılıkları yansıttığı vurgulanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hipergami, Eş seçimi, Evlilik piyasası, Sosyal hareketlilik, Toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri

Makale Türü: Araştırma

Introduction

In traditional agricultural societies, the extended family structure was functional due to the necessity of having numerous members to participate in agricultural labor. Especially in the post-World War II era, the functionality of the nuclear family structure became more prominent in modern societies centered around industrial production. Since the 1980s, under the influence of globalization and significant technological transformations, production-oriented and planned economic policies were abandoned in favor of a consumption-oriented, neoliberal free-market economy. This transition introduced uncertainty regarding the future form of the family unit.

For instance, consider the cultural evolution of the telephone. In the 1980s, public phone booths were commonplace and posed minimal economic burden for families. In the 1990s, the spread of landline telephones added a new item to household expenses, alongside water, electricity, and heating. With the proliferation of mobile phones in the early 2000s, the number of bills per household increased in proportion to the number of individuals. Today, the household economy continues to expand with additional items such as mobile phones and digital platform subscriptions. This reflects a broader reality: we live in a time when it has become nearly impossible for a family to make ends meet on a single income, typically from the father. In this context, it is no coincidence that the increase in consumption expenses has coincided with the rise of female participation in the workforce. Since men have historically worked outside the home, the term “working spouse” implicitly refers to women (Goldin, 2023) As women pursue careers and gain economic independence, traditional gender roles are being increasingly challenged. Consequently, families already struggling economically now face a new cultural dilemma.

Under these social conditions, the process of partner selection has inevitably gained greater importance. While the wealthy seek prenuptial agreements, young people increasingly consider the possibility of divorce even before getting married. In an era when marriages are becoming shorter in duration, the question “Whom should one marry?” has become more difficult than ever to answer. Is possessing the basic survival skills from Maslow’s hierarchy of needs sufficient to start a family in today’s world of elevated expectations? Undoubtedly, everyone wants a good life—but material needs are endless. In an era where means and ends, values and interests, are often interchanged, partner selection has become one of the few most critical decisions in a person’s life. Perhaps these subtle calculations partly explain the recent decline in marriage rates. The increasing role of hypergamy in partner selection raises a critical question: Does marriage remain a useful instrument for upward social mobility? This study aims to explore this question and to provide insights into the future of the family institution.

1. On Marriage Market

Pierre Bourdieu conceptualizes the marriage market as a structured social space in which matrimonial exchanges occur under constraints imposed by both economic necessity and symbolic hierarchies. Far from being a free and open marketplace, Bourdieu’s marriage market is governed by rigid norms, particularly in traditional peasant societies like Béarn, where the continuity of the family lineage and preservation of the patrimony are paramount. Marriages are transactions negotiated between families, not individuals, with dowries serving as both economic and symbolic capital. These exchanges are conditioned by one’s position within the social structure—especially birth order, gender, and the relative status of the household. Eldest sons are expected to marry down economically to bring in dowries, while younger sons must either

emigrate, remain bachelors, or strategically marry heiresses. As Bourdieu argues, the "unification of the matrimonial market"—the collapse of local, family-controlled match-making systems under the pressures of national and cultural homogenization—results in the exclusion of those unable to adapt to shifting criteria of desirability, such as economic mobility or urban cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2008, pp. 11-27, 131-134, 180-182). In this way, Bourdieu's marriage market operates as a microcosm of broader social reproduction, making visible the intersection of economic and symbolic domination.

In *A Treatise on the Family*, Gary Becker describes the marriage market as a social and economic system in which individuals search for and choose marriage partners in ways similar to how buyers and sellers interact in traditional markets. Each person enters the market with certain traits—such as income, education, or physical attractiveness—and seeks a partner who offers the greatest personal benefit or "utility." Matches are formed when both individuals believe they will be better off together than apart. Although there are no formal prices, people effectively "trade" characteristics, and more desirable traits make a person more competitive in the market. Becker also explains that people often marry those who are similar to them, a pattern known as assortative mating, because similar traits can create better outcomes within the household. The marriage market is influenced by broader social and economic factors, such as laws, income differences, and gender roles, which affect both the incentives to marry and the types of matches that occur. By applying economic reasoning to marriage, Becker offers a clear and structured way to understand how people form partnerships and how these relationships respond to changing conditions (Becker, 1991).

Consequently, within the marriage market, both genders are drawn to one another for various reasons, each offering distinct and valuable traits. These may include physical strength and attractiveness, emotional stability, and the potential to accumulate social, cultural, or economic capital. Nevertheless, the power dynamics inherent in this market often give rise to markedly asymmetrical romantic relationships. This structural imbalance leads us to the concept of hypergamy.

2. Hypergamy: A Persistent Strategy For Female Mate Selection?

Hypergamy denotes a female mating strategy characterized by the selection of a male partner with superior socio-economic status, often driven by adaptive considerations such as physical protection, access to resources that support successful reproduction, and optimal conditions for both the woman and her offspring (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). As such, marrying 'up' as a strategy in family formation is neither novel nor anomalous. For instance, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, in his final book *The Bachelors' Ball: The Crisis of Peasant Society in Béarn* (2008), analyzes how marriage functions in a traditional rural society in southwestern France. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in the region, Bourdieu demonstrates that partner selection is shaped less by romantic love and more by family interests—particularly the desire to preserve property, social status, and family reputation. He highlights the gendered expectations within this marriage market: men are generally expected to marry women of lower social standing to maintain control over the household, while women are often encouraged to marry wealthier or more powerful men. In the final part of his account, Bourdieu associates this landscape with his concept of habitus, which allows him to present that these asymmetric marriage strategies, in fact, reflect the consequences of predispositions individuals acquire through life experiences, including gender, economic and cultural norms, as well as the power relations inherent to the social structure of this region.

In traditional-agrarian societies with patriarchal characteristics, women encountered obstacles to upward social mobility due to structural factors such as father-to-son inheritance of social status by ties of consanguinity, dignity identified with male heroism, and the restricted and gendered distribution of wealth among social classes. Hypergamy might hastily be viewed as a reasonable survival strategy for women in mate selection within pre-modern contexts. Even today,

there is some evidence supporting this assumption. For instance, a recently conducted study including 16 Latin American countries argues that hypergamy remains persistent and has even shown a rise despite women's increasing levels of education (Urbina et al., 2024). Building on this, some may argue that hypergamy is an archaic phenomenon primarily confined to pre-modern or agrarian societies. However, it also continues to persist even in highly developed countries such as Norway, which ranks second among 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2023 in terms of gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2023). Supporting this view, Almås et al. (2019) show that hypergamy remains a salient feature of partner selection in Norway. Drawing on comprehensive administrative register data and a carefully designed vignette experiment, the authors provide robust empirical evidence that men with higher earnings potential are significantly more likely to find a partner, to remarry, and to have higher socioeconomic status than their female partners. These findings align with theoretical models that attribute hypergamy to both biological factors (such as differing fertility spans between men and women) and gender-specific mate preferences, particularly women's tendency to prioritize a partner's earnings potential. Thus, even in societies with minimal gender gaps in labor market participation, entrenched social and economic dynamics continue to shape partner selection in gender-asymmetric ways.

So, how can we explain the continued presence of hypergamous tendencies in modern democratic societies—those grounded in human rights, gender equality, and equal access to education, employment, and income, and which reward achievement through meritocratic systems? Considering the complexity of modern social structures, biological survival instincts offer an overly simplistic explanation. Modern societies have, to a large extent, resolved the basic challenges of survival in the face of nature and are now distinguished from traditional structures by the promise of improved living conditions in response to new social needs and expectations. Nevertheless, modern society does not represent a flawlessly functioning social system. Despite having equal legal rights with men, women continue to experience exclusion, underrepresentation, and violence, and are often burdened with excessive responsibilities such as managing domestic duties, childcare, and professional work simultaneously. (Chung, 2022)

For instance, in *Smart Girls Marry Money* (2009), Elizabeth Ford and Daniela Drake present a strong critique of modern society and contemporary feminist discourses by challenging the romanticism that often influences women's mate selection in the pursuit of an ideal marriage. The authors assert that, despite advances in gender equality, women continue to face economic vulnerabilities, exacerbated by modern myths about romantic love and self-sufficiency. They claim that feminism has, in many respects, failed to fulfill its promises, placing excessive burdens on women both at work and at home, while still expecting them to uphold traditional gender roles. Throughout the book, Ford and Drake attempt to reclaim the stigmatized concept of hypergamy, defending and presenting the practice of marrying up as a rational strategy for women seeking long-term financial stability and sustainable relationships. Their approach to hypergamy might easily be dismissed as a provocative discourse, but it can also be seen as an opportunity to revisit the concept as a sociological phenomenon—inviting new debates on gender, power, and competition in the marriage market.

Hypergamy has frequently been discussed in relation to women's partner selection. In this context, Catherine Hakim, in her Preference Theory, classifies women into three groups based on their lifestyle orientations: home-centered, adaptive, and work-centered. Home-centered women (approximately 10–30%) prioritize family life over employment and are most inclined to pursue hypergamy, viewing the marriage market as their primary route to upward social and economic mobility. Adaptive women (the largest group, ranging from 40–80%) seek to balance work and family responsibilities and may also engage in hypergamous partnerships to enhance household stability while maintaining partial participation in the labor market. In contrast, work-centered women (10–30%) are career-focused, often child-free, and less likely to pursue hypergamous relationships, instead favoring egalitarian partnerships grounded in mutual

professional commitment. Thus, hypergamy is most prevalent among home-centered and adaptive women, for whom the marriage market serves as a complement or alternative to the labor market in achieving life goals (Hakim, 2000).

The capitalist structure of modern societies is founded on an economy that heavily relies on consumption and emerging advertising, aimed at seducing individuals in order to maximize profits. In the mid-20th century, Marcuse (2002, p. 7) revealed how capitalism produces fake needs and substitutes them for genuine ones for the sake of industrial efficiency, instilling conformist expectations of leisure, happiness, love, and hate, while, in reality, perpetuating labor exploitation, poverty, and misery. By appealing to individual purchasing incentives, these market-constructed needs often disregard the actual economic priorities and constraints of households. Moreover, as late capitalist economies are inherently more fragile, individuals in today's modern societies may find that their educational qualifications are undervalued during times of national economic hardship. They may face long-term unemployment or be compelled to work in jobs they do not enjoy. Additionally, as the contemporary capitalist economies of the globalized world are more than ever driven by consumption, aggressive advertising in the service of the market has amplified societal exposure to goods and services that symbolize a desirable lifestyle and social status. This dynamic can lure individual aspirations and escalate expectations. Consequently, the dream of a wealthy lifestyle amid a reality of economic hardship may lead some women to view hypergamy as a shortcut to achieving the life they aspire to. However, Lara Stevens, in her book *Hypergamy* (2021), points out several important social consequences of hypergamy that go beyond individual relationships and contribute to systemic challenges within modern societies. She argues that hypergamous tendencies—particularly women's preference for higher-status partners—reinforce social stratification by marginalizing lower-status men, leading to increased rates of male depression, suicide, and social alienation. This can be detrimental to family stability, as it is associated with higher divorce rates, single parenthood, and reduced relationship longevity. Stevens contends that hypergamy perpetuates social inequality by directing women's interests toward the wealth and resources of elite men. Furthermore, she suggests that a perception of exaggerated hypergamy can foster exploitative behaviors, such as "mate poaching" (like gold-digging) through manipulative romantic strategies, while also exerting psychological pressure on both genders—on women, through constant upward comparison, and on men, through concerns about paternity and social adequacy.

Recent research by Lichter, Price, and Swigert (2020) highlights how persistent patterns of hypergamy in the U.S. marriage market may contribute to declining marriage rates among women. Their study uses synthetic matching techniques to compare the characteristics of unmarried women's ideal spouses with the actual pool of unmarried men. The findings reveal a significant mismatch: while many women seek partners with higher income and education levels, there is a shortage of such men and an excess of men with lower socioeconomic status. This structural imbalance disproportionately affects highly educated and high-earning women, limiting their chances of finding compatible partners. These results suggest that hypergamous preferences, when combined with shifting economic demographics, can exacerbate social inequality and increase the likelihood of prolonged singlehood among certain groups of women.

Additionally, the hypergamous perspective traditionally assumes that men hold advantages in terms of status and resources. However, as Reeves (2022) argues, this assumption is increasingly challenged by recent social trends in the United States, where men have experienced a marked decline in education, employment, and family roles. Women, by contrast, have surpassed men in academic attainment and are making significant inroads into many professional fields. This shift has begun to erode the traditional asymmetry in partner selection dynamics. The growing population of economically and socially "redundant" men poses not only a challenge for the labor market, but also for the marriage market, with broader implications for social cohesion and family formation.

Building on these insights, the following empirical section explores how similar dynamics are reflected among university students in Turkey. Accordingly, the reader will see that our findings on hypergamy gain greater significance when interpreted through the lens of Bourdieu's forms of capital.

3. Research Methodology

This article draws on data obtained from a doctoral research project conducted in 2024, which aimed to explore the intimacy-building strategies employed in premarital romantic relationships among students at Sakarya University (Kaya, 2024). The study population comprised 45,683 students, with a gender distribution of 51% female and 49% male. A stratified sampling method was employed to select 820 participants, taking into account considerations of time, cost, and representativeness. This approach was specifically chosen to allow for meaningful comparisons across faculty and gender. To ensure alignment between the population and sample distributions in terms of these variables, raw data were filtered, yielding a final analytic sample of 740 participants. Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Version 26. Throughout this process, a margin of error of 0.3 and a confidence level of 90% were maintained to ensure the sample's representativeness. This article specifically focuses on the chi-square analyses conducted to examine gender-based differences in the data derived from the mate selection section of the questionnaire used in the study.

3.1. Data Collection

First, ethical approval for the study was obtained from the university's ethics committee. The research was conducted with students enrolled at the university during the 2023–2024 academic year. Since a stratified sampling technique was employed, data were collected from students in seven faculties selected with input from subject-matter experts. A comprehensive and anonymous questionnaire, consisting of 6-point and 4-point Likert-type items and taking approximately 10–12 minutes to complete, was administered face-to-face in classroom settings. Prior to administration, students were provided with both written and verbal information about the study's purpose, ethical approval, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Additionally, they were informed that married students and international students were excluded from the scope of the research.

3.2. Demographic Profile

A majority of the participants in the study (66.1%) were from the Marmara Region. The remaining participants were distributed as follows: 12.2% from the Black Sea Region, 5% from the Aegean Region, 8.8% from Central Anatolia, 2.4% from the Mediterranean Region, 2% from the Eastern Anatolia Region, and 3.5% from the Southeastern Anatolia Region. These figures indicate that the sample is largely composed of individuals from the Marmara Region. Reflecting a postmodern synthesis of traditional agricultural characteristics of the East and industrial features of the West, the Marmara Region may be seen as a microcosm of Turkey as a whole.

Regarding the participants' upbringing, 37.3% reported having grown up in a metropolitan area, 44.3% in a city center, and 18.4% in a rural area. These data suggest that the majority of participants were raised in environments influenced predominantly by urban lifestyles.

In terms of self-identified social class, 0.4% of the participants identified as upper class, 13.8% as upper-middle class, 73.9% as middle class, 10.8% as lower-middle class, and 1.1% as lower class. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the majority of participants perceive themselves as belonging to the middle class.

4. Findings

Scholars examining hypergamy in an international context often arrive at two rather different conclusions. One argument, commonly described as the “end of hypergamy,” suggests

that as women in many countries have, on average, achieved higher educational levels than men, the share of marriages where husbands hold more schooling has dropped, while the reverse pattern—wives being more educated—has grown (Esteve et al., 2016; Erát, 2021). Analyses supporting this claim typically focus on newly formed unions or compare different birth cohorts, pointing to changes in the educational makeup of the marriage market as the main driver. In contrast, other studies dispute this narrative. When researchers include all existing marriages, not just recent ones, and consider the fall in educational homogamy, they find that hypergamy remains widespread and, in many cases, has even become more common despite women’s overall educational advantage (Urbina et al., 2024). From this angle, what looks like a decline may simply be the outcome of how the data are sampled. The results that will be shown below seem to support this latter view.

4.1. Financial Superiority Expectations

Table 1. "The person I marry should be in a better financial situation than I am."

Response	Female (%)	Male (%)	
Strongly Disagree	1.9	14.5	X² = 153,422 d. f. : 5 P = 0,000
Disagree	14.1	32.5	
Somewhat Disagree	9.8	22	
Slightly Agree	28.5	16.7	
Agree	30.4	8.3	
Strongly Agree	15.2	5.9	

Table 1 shows that 74.1% of females expect financial superiority from their partner, whereas this expectation is reported by only 30.9% of males. This serves as a strong indicator of a classic aspect of economic hypergamy. A significant number of women appear to expect to marry someone from a higher social class, whereas men are more inclined to adopt the opposite perspective. This clear gender-based difference suggests that, compared to men, women are more inclined to view marriage as an opportunity to achieve upward social mobility.

4.2. Material Assets

Table 2. "If I don't have a house or a car, my partner should."

Response	Female (%)	Male (%)	
Strongly Disagree	6.3	19.1	X² = 146,053 d. f. : 5 P = 0,000
Disagree	11.4	33.1	
Somewhat Disagree	10.6	19.1	
Slightly Agree	29.9	15.3	
Agree	31	8.1	
Strongly Agree	10.9	5.4	

Table 2 addresses the importance participants attach to material assets. According to the findings, there is a clear gender difference: 71.8% of females expect their partner to own property if they themselves do not, compared to only 28.1% of males. This gendered expectation suggests that women are significantly more likely to prefer partners who are capable of providing material resources.

4.3. Overall Financial Expectations

Table 3. "Financial Expectations from a Possible Spouse (income, house, car, assets, etc.)"

Response	Female (%)	Male (%)	
Not Important at All	0.8	1.9	X² = 83,900 d. f. : 3 P = 0,000
Not Important	22.6	54	

Important	38.3	25.3
Very Important	38.3	18.8

The data in Table 3 confirms the presence of gendered economic expectations in partner selection. Men's financial resources appear to be significantly more important to women, reflecting an aspiration to achieve upward social mobility through marriage.

4.4. Cultural Capital Preferences

Table 4. "The person I marry should be more cultured than me."

Response	Female (%)	Male (%)	
Strongly Disagree	1.6	5.1	X² = 55,368 d. f. : 5 P = 0,000
Disagree	8.4	16.4	
Somewhat Disagree	10.1	22.6	
Slightly Agree	33.7	29	
Agree	31	19.9	
Strongly Agree	15.2	7	

According to the data in Table 4, slightly more than half of the men (55.9%) expect their partners to be culturally well-equipped, whereas 76.6% of women rated it as important. This suggests a pattern of cultural hypergamy, indicating that women place greater importance than men on having a partner with substantial cultural capital.

4.5. Status Superiority

Table 5. "The person I marry should have a better career than I do."

Response	Female (%)	Male (%)	
Strongly Disagree	3	14	X² = 72,964 d. f. : 5 P = 0,000
Disagree	14.1	23.1	
Somewhat Disagree	14.7	21.8	
Slightly Agree	25.5	21.8	
Agree	32.3	14.8	
Strongly Agree	10.3	4.6	

Table 5 reveals a significant gender difference regarding social status: 68.1% of females expect their partner to have a better career, compared to 41.2% of males. This indicates that women are more likely to prefer men with higher career status, once again reflecting a traditional model in which women seek to secure their social and economic well-being by "marrying up."

4.6. Marriage as Upward Mobility

Table 6. "Marriage should improve my standard of living (shopping, entertainment, vacations, etc.)"

Response	Female (%)	Male (%)	
Strongly Disagree	6.5	11.8	X² = 21,691 d. f. : 5 P = 0,001
Disagree	13.3	18.3	
Somewhat Disagree	15.5	18.3	
Slightly Agree	20.9	22.8	
Agree	31.3	19.4	
Strongly Agree	12.5	9.4	

Table 6 illustrates that 64.7% of females believe marriage should improve their living standards, compared to 51.6% of males. Although the gender difference appears moderate and marriage is viewed by both genders as a means to attain a better quality of life, women still exhibit a slightly greater inclination than men.

4.7. Avoiding Downward Mobility

Table 7. "I'm used to a certain standard of living, and I'd be unhappy if I had to lower it after getting married."

Response	Female (%)	Male (%)	
Strongly Disagree	3.8	10.5	X² = 38,076 d. f. : 5 P = 0,000
Disagree	12	15.6	
Somewhat Disagree	8.4	17.2	
Slightly Agree	22.3	20.4	
Agree	28.5	21.5	
Strongly Agree	25	14.8	

Table 7 reflects a defensive attitude toward hypergamy, indicating that 75.8% of females are reluctant to marry into lower living standards, compared to 56.7% of males. A potential husband is expected to elevate—or at the very least maintain—the standard of living that a woman is accustomed to in her parental home.

Discussion

A review of local literature on Turkish society over the past three decades reveals that, while numerous studies have examined mate selection, the majority have focused primarily on psychological traits. Only a limited number have indirectly addressed hypergamous tendencies. Notable exceptions—such as those by Ondaş (2007), Kaçar (2018), Bağ (2019), Güvensoy (2021), Karadaş and Keldal (2021), and Aksakal and Akkaş (2023)—offer valuable empirical insights into gendered partner preferences, particularly among young people. Consistently, these studies indicate that women place greater emphasis than men on potential partners' financial standing, cultural sophistication, and professional status. Yet, hypergamy itself has rarely been treated as a central analytical framework. This study therefore addresses a significant gap by examining hypergamy explicitly and systematically in the Turkish context.

Findings from the present research confirm the persistence of hypergamous attitudes, particularly among female university students. Across multiple indicators—financial status, asset ownership, cultural capital, career prestige, and expectations for improved living standards through marriage—female participants displayed a marked preference for partners who are socially and economically superior. The results in Table 1 align closely with Bourdieu's concept of economic capital as a determinant in the marriage market. Women's greater emphasis on a partner's financial advantage suggests an implicit strategy of capital acquisition through marital alliance. In Bourdieu's terms, marriage serves as a site of capital conversion, enabling women to exchange embodied or social capital (e.g., attractiveness, social grace, or family networks) for a partner's economic resources, thereby securing upward mobility (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 241–243). A similar trend emerges from Başyigit's (2024) systematic review of research conducted in Türkiye between 2013 and 2023, which shows that female respondents, across various samples, consistently placed higher value than men on a potential spouse's profession and income level, often interpreting these traits as markers of stability and an opportunity for upward social movement. In the same vein, Aydın and Çakır's (2025) study conducted during the 2023–2024 academic year with university students found that female participants placed significantly greater emphasis than males on economic security and occupational status when considering a potential spouse. Recent demographic statistics further contextualize these preferences. According to Turkish Statistical Institute (2024a) data, the mean age at first marriage is 28.3 for men and 25.8 for women. This age gap implies that women generally enter marriage earlier, potentially heightening the relevance of economic stability as a decisive criterion during partner selection. When read alongside the present study's findings, this continuity suggests that economic hypergamy in the Turkish marriage market is not merely a residual tradition but remains an actively reproduced preference, even in the context of rising female educational attainment and

workforce participation. The expectation shown in Table 2—that a prospective partner should own tangible assets such as a house or car—highlights the practical and symbolic value of objectified economic capital. For Bourdieu, material resources not only serve functional purposes but also confer symbolic legitimacy and security within social fields (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). Women's higher expectations in this regard suggest that marriage continues to function as a strategic pathway to forms of capital otherwise restricted by structural barriers. Table 3 further illustrates the differential valuation of economic capital in mate selection, with women's emphasis on financial strength exemplifying economic hypergamy. This pattern is consistent with Bourdieu's assertion that different types of capital can be converted to secure social advantages, particularly in gendered contexts (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 241–244).

Preferences for a culturally superior partner in Table 4 underscore the role of cultural capital, particularly in its embodied and institutionalized forms. Women's stronger inclination toward culturally accomplished partners reflects a strategy of symbolic distinction and upward positioning (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 244–247). This tendency finds resonance in the findings of Çelik, Asqarova, and Tutgun Ünal (2019) and Soner (2021), who reported that women often value traits such as general knowledge, refined manners, and cultural engagement in spouse selection. Aydın and Çakır (2025) similarly observed that cultural alignment and anticipated career trajectory weigh more heavily for women than for men in evaluating a potential spouse. National data offer further perspective: the "Family with Statistics" report (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2024b) shows that 72.6% of individuals aged 25–29 still reside with their parents. This prolonged co-residence may elevate the importance attributed to educational credentials and career prospects, as these factors are perceived to facilitate a transition to independent living—often linked to education and career prospects—remains a salient consideration in mate selection. This tendency can be interpreted through Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, where educational attainment and refined cultural practices operate as forms of symbolic power that not only enhance individual status but also increase bargaining power within the marriage market. In the Turkish context, where educational credentials and professional prestige are increasingly tied to social mobility, such preferences for culturally and professionally accomplished partners reflect adaptive strategies aimed at securing long-term socio-economic stability. Similarly, career status (Table 5) operates as both institutionalized cultural capital (e.g., academic credentials, titles) and economic capital (e.g., income). The preference for partners with higher career standing indicates the pursuit of symbolic power through alliances with dominant forms of capital, consistent with Bourdieu's analysis of how social actors navigate fields via capital conversion (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 243–245). Comparable patterns have been observed by Soner (2021), whose research with teacher education students revealed that female participants placed greater emphasis than males on a partner's professional success and future career prospects, viewing these qualities as assurances of stability and social mobility. When read in parallel, these findings reinforce the interpretation that career-oriented hypergamy in Türkiye is not merely an echo of traditional norms but an adaptive strategy within the contemporary marriage market.

Viewing marriage as a means of improving living standards (Table 6) draws attention to the role of symbolic capital—capital that is misrecognized as legitimate social value. According to Bourdieu, symbolic capital conceals its material foundations and operates by being perceived as natural or deserved (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 246–247). Women's slightly higher expectations here indicate that symbolic gains through marriage remain gendered, reinforcing traditional patterns of upward mobility. Reluctance to accept a lower standard of living after marriage (Table 7) points to a defensive habitus—the internalized dispositions shaped by class origin. Cultural capital acquired during early family life establishes enduring expectations and preferences (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 244–246). In this sense, women appear to seek partners capable of maintaining or elevating their inherited lifestyle, reflecting strategies of class preservation through marital choices.

From a theoretical perspective, these preferences align closely with Bourdieu's concept of capital conversion. Gender-disaggregated results indicate that unmarried female students widely perceive marriage as a means of securing their social position and achieving upward mobility. That the participants are well-educated and identify as middle-class challenges the assumption that advances in gender equality in education and employment will necessarily eliminate hypergamous tendencies in modern societies. In fact, the structure of contemporary society often intensifies the burdens placed on women, both in ostensibly gender-neutral workplaces and in domestic spheres. In such a context, prioritizing a partner's forms of capital emerges not only as a strategy for survival but also as an appealing and relatively efficient route to improved living conditions.

The concept of habitus, as Bourdieu (2020) describes, refers to a system of enduring dispositions embedded in the body and mind through accumulated experiences, shaping perceptions, thoughts, and practices according to the implicit rules of particular social contexts. Hypergamy can thus be seen as a strategic practice informed by habitus to enhance various forms of capital within the marriage market. Women's mate-selection preferences may not always be the result of conscious calculation but may instead reflect a gendered habitus rooted in structural opportunities and constraints in Turkish society.

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that hypergamy—whether economic, cultural, or career-oriented—remains embedded in partner selection processes, even in an era of increased female educational attainment and labor market participation. Demographic patterns reinforce this interpretation. According to the Address-Based Population Registration System (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2024c), 54% of women and 64% of men aged 20–34 are unmarried. This high prevalence of singlehood among young adults indicates that partner selection takes place within a relatively constrained pool, which may further intensify strategic considerations around upward social mobility through marriage.

Conclusion

Hypergamy should not be excluded from the scope of sociological analysis as an outmoded remnant, yet it retains its strategic role and meaning embedded in the premarital relationships, which carries importance in family formation and sustainability. The intensifying competition in the marriage market to acquire various forms of capital necessary to meet increasing expectations for higher living standards may impose a cost on romantic commitment, influencing both the decision to dissolve marriages and the tendency among younger individuals to remain single.

Meanwhile, hypergamic attitudes in women's mate selection may pose challenges not only for men with limited forms of capital, but also for women themselves—particularly those who have acquired substantial capital through their independent careers—as the number of equally or more qualified men eligible for marriage declines toward the top of the social hierarchy.

The findings of this study seem to strengthen the assumption that hypergamy persistently continues to function as a cultural predisposition as well as a contemporary adaptation strategy. However, since the data were collected from students at Sakarya University, making generalizable conclusions about Turkish society as a whole may be disputable. In this regard, the findings have been interpreted to provide insight into the hypergamy literature within the context of Turkey, which blends traditional values with modern individualism. There is also a need for further comprehensive research specifically focusing on hypergamic attitudes.

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