

Public Attitudes Toward Syrian Refugees in the Context of Gender and Marital Status: An Empirical Analysis Based on a Turkish Sample

Cinsiyet ve Medeni Durum Bağlamında Suriyeli Sığınmacılara Yönelik Toplumsal Tutumlar: Türkiye Örneğine Dayalı Ampirik Bir Analiz

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Abstract

This study examines how public attitudes toward Syrian refugees in Türkiye vary within the host society by gender and marital status. As the social integration and acceptance of refugees have become increasingly salient, the influence of demographic differences has remained underexamined in the literature. To address this gap, an online survey was conducted with 1,666 participants across 11 provinces in Türkiye. Attitudinal tendencies were measured using a five-point Likert scale and the data were analyzed with the Mann-Whitney U test. The findings show that women and single respondents are significantly more open to social interaction and cultural diversity than men and married individuals. Nevertheless, across all demographic groups, similarly cautious attitudes were observed toward issues in the private sphere—such as marriage, business partnerships and property sharing. These results indicate that public attitudes toward refugees are shaped not only by structural or national dynamics but also by social characteristics at the individual level. Accordingly, the study recommends developing targeted, equitable, feasible, and data-driven social cohesion policies that take into account the demographic diversity of the host society.

Keywords: Syrian Refugees, Gender, Marital Status, Public Attitudes, Social Distance and Tolerance.

Öz

Bu çalışma, Türkiye’de Suriyeli sığınmacılara yönelik toplumsal tutumların ev sahibi toplum içinde cinsiyet ve medeni duruma göre nasıl farklılaştığını incelemektedir. Sığınmacıların toplumsal uyumu ve kabulü giderek daha önemli hâle gelirken, demografik farklılıkların etkisi literatürde yeterince ele alınmamıştır. Bu boşluğu doldurmak amacıyla araştırma, Türkiye’nin 11 ilinde, 1.666 katılımcı ile çevrim içi anket yöntemiyle gerçekleştirilmiştir. Tutum eğilimleri, beşli Likert ölçeğiyle ölçülmüş; veriler Mann-Whitney U testi ile analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular, kadınlar ve bekâr katılımcıların, erkek ve evli bireylere kıyasla sosyal etkileşim ve kültürel çeşitliliğe karşı anlamlı derecede daha açık olduklarını göstermektedir. Ancak tüm demografik gruplarda, evlilik, iş ortaklığı ve mülk paylaşımı gibi özel alanlara ilişkin konularda benzer biçimde çekingen tutumlar gözlemlenmiştir. Bu sonuçlar, sığınmacılara yönelik toplumsal tutumların yalnızca yapısal ya da ulusal dinamiklerle değil, bireysel düzeydeki sosyal özelliklerle de şekillendiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu doğrultuda, çalışmada ev sahibi toplumun demografik çeşitliliğini dikkate alan, hedefe yönelik, adil, uygulanabilir ve veriye dayalı toplumsal uyum politikalarının geliştirilmesi önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriyeli Sığınmacı, Cinsiyet, Medeni Durum, Toplumsal Tutumlar, Sosyal Mesafe ve Hoşgörü.

Introduction

The civil war that began in Syria in 2011 triggered a massive wave of migration, leading to an unprecedented transformation in the demographic and social structure of Türkiye. Over the past decade, Türkiye has become the country hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world. While the presence of refugees was initially perceived as a temporary situation defined by the notion of “hospitality,” over time it has turned into a more permanent reality, reshaping the interactions between the host society and the refugees. Indeed, the attitude of the host society—once framed by discourses of hospitality—has gradually evolved into a more complex and layered public perception as a result of accumulated experience (Kutgi, 2016, p. 4). This transformation highlights the dynamic nature of public attitudes toward refugees and demonstrates that societal responses can shift over time.

Among the many factors that shape public attitudes toward refugees, demographic characteristics play a significant role. In particular, fundamental differences such as gender and marital status may influence how individuals approach groups perceived as “others.” The literature suggests that demographic differences can significantly affect attitudes toward refugees; for example, women and unmarried individuals are more likely to adopt inclusive and tolerant positions, whereas men and married individuals tend to exhibit greater social distance (Bilgiç et al., 2014; Erdoğan, 2015; İçduygu and Demiryontar, 2022). Accordingly, tendencies such as maintaining social distance or engaging in exclusion may vary depending on key demographic variables like gender and marital status.

Although there is a growing body of research on attitudes toward Syrian refugees, most existing studies focus on public opinion, political discourse, or Macro-level analyses of policy (İçduygu and Demiryontar, 2022). In contrast, empirical studies examining micro-level differences across demographic subgroups within the host society remain limited. Research specifically investigating the effects of gender and marital status is particularly scarce. One of the few existing studies, conducted by Yiğit Özüdoğru and Kan (2021), found that gender significantly influences attitudes toward refugees, with women expressing more inclusive views than men. However, studies directly addressing the role of marital status are even more limited, pointing to a significant gap in the literature. Exploring how different groups within a highly heterogeneous and multilayered society like Türkiye perceive refugees is therefore critical—not only to fill this gap in the literature but also to enhance the effectiveness of social cohesion policies.

In this context, the present study aims to examine whether attitudes toward Syrian refugees differ significantly by gender and marital status within the host population. We conducted a large-scale survey across various regions of Türkiye, comparing attitudes across gender (men vs. women) and marital status (married vs. single). In line with prior research, we hypothesized that women—particularly in the domain of cultural differences—would exhibit more tolerant attitudes than men and that single individuals would be more open than their married counterparts.

1. Theoretical Framework

In modern societies, migration processes continually reshape social structures. This transformation affects not only how migrants adapt to a new society but also how host communities perceive and respond to them (Castles and Miller, 2009; Usta and Ergün, 2020, p. 1069). Integration is a two-way process that evolves not solely through institutional mechanisms but also through everyday interactions and the perceptions individuals hold toward groups they consider as “others” (Ager and Strang, 2008; Bolgün, 2022, p. 171). At the opposite end of this process lies exclusion, which manifests through the symbolic and cultural boundaries that reinforce social distance between “us” and “them” (Said, 2003, p. 13; Mete, 2023, p. 472).

Among the numerous factors influencing public attitudes toward migrants, individual demographic characteristics—particularly gender and marital status—play a significant role (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Göregenli, 2012, p. 17). Research suggests that gender and marital status can significantly shape attitudes: women are more likely to emphasize empathy, care and inclusivity due to traditional social roles, whereas men tend to exhibit heightened risk perception and a stronger preference for social distance (Bilgiç et al., 2014; İçduygu and Demiryontar, 2022). Similarly, unmarried individuals—often experiencing less pressure from social responsibilities and enjoying greater social flexibility—may be more open to

engaging with migrants (Erdoğan, 2015; Yılmaz and Günay, 2022). These findings demonstrate that gender and family status are key variables in shaping attitudes toward migrant groups.

This study draws on Allport's (1954/2016) Contact Hypothesis, which posits that intergroup contact—when conducted under conditions such as voluntariness, equal status, common goals and institutional support—can reduce prejudice by fostering mutual understanding and dismantling stereotypes (Allport, 2016, p. 9). Whether individuals are open to such positive contact is, in part, influenced by their demographic characteristics. For example, women and unmarried individuals may be more willing to engage in environments characterized by frequent social interaction, while married individuals—often shaped by stronger perceptions of uncertainty or risk—may be more inclined to avoid close contact (Bauman, 2011, p. 17; Mete, 2023, p. 472).

Another valuable conceptual tool for understanding intergroup dynamics is Bogardus' (1933) Social Distance Scale. This approach measures how willing individuals are to establish relationships of varying intimacy with members of different social groups. Reactions to situations such as casual conversation, neighborhood relations, friendship, collaboration, or intermarriage reveal the perceived level of social distance. In the context of Syrian refugees, research suggests that women and unmarried individuals tend to be more receptive in everyday social interactions, whereas topics involving high levels of personal closeness—such as marriage, cohabitation, or property sharing—elicit more hesitation across the population (Yılmaz and Günay, 2022; Bolgün, 2022, p. 171).

The concept of cultural tolerance is also central to understanding attitudes toward migrants. Cultural tolerance refers to the degree to which individuals accept or are willing to coexist with values, practices and lifestyles different from their own (Verkuyten, 2007). In migration contexts, higher levels of tolerance facilitate social cohesion and coexistence, whereas lower tolerance levels may foster exclusion and discrimination (Berry, 1997; Verkuyten, 2007).

Lastly, it is essential to acknowledge that public attitudes toward migrants are shaped not only by individual-level characteristics but also by broader sociopolitical contexts. These include media representations and dominant political narratives, which can amplify perceptions of difference or threat (İçduygu and Demiryontar, 2022; Mete, 2023). While this study primarily focuses on micro-level variables such as gender and marital status, the interpretation of its findings should take into account these macro-level dynamics to offer a more holistic perspective.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design and Sample

This study investigates whether public attitudes toward Syrian refugees significantly differ according to specific demographic characteristics. In particular, it focuses on variations in attitude dimensions such as social distance, cultural tolerance and willingness to coexist, based on participants' gender and marital status.

The research sample consists of 1,666 adult participants residing in 11 provinces across various regions of Türkiye, including Adana, Ankara, Bursa, Erzurum, Gaziantep, Istanbul, Izmir, Kayseri, Samsun, Yalova and Yozgat. A non-probability sampling strategy was employed, with careful attention to ensuring balanced representation across different socio-economic and demographic groups. To this end, a proportional quota sampling approach was adopted. The survey was disseminated online and made accessible to a broad range of participants through digital platforms. Kayseri had the highest participation rate, accounting for approximately 30% of respondents, while the remaining 70% were distributed across the other ten provinces (each contributing roughly 6–7%). The inclusion of diverse provinces aimed to enable comparative analysis of how varying socio-cultural environments across the country influence public attitudes. However, since the survey was both online and voluntary, the number of respondents from each province was unevenly distributed. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings to the entire Turkish population should be interpreted with caution.

The demographic profile of the sample shows that 55.8% of participants were male and 44.2% were female. Regarding marital status, 54.9% were married and 45.1% were single. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 75, with a mean age of approximately 39.4 years ($SD = 10.2$). The largest age group was 35–44 years (44.6%), followed by 25–34 years (20.5%) and 45–54 years (19.4%). In terms of education, about half of the participants (50.1%) held a bachelor's degree. The remainder included 17.5% high school graduates, 12.9% with postgraduate degrees (master's or PhD), 9.2% with associate degrees, 4.9% with primary school diplomas, 4.0% with middle school diplomas and 1.4% with only elementary education.

These figures indicate that the sample was demographically diverse in terms of gender, age, education level and marital status.

2.2. Data Collection Instrument

The research data were collected through an online survey. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section included demographic questions aimed at gathering information on participants' age, gender, marital status and province of residence. The second section employed a 19-item scale designed to measure individual attitudes toward Syrian refugees. The items assessed participants' willingness to engage in everyday social interactions with refugees, their tolerance of cultural differences and their willingness to live alongside them. Additionally, several items addressed perceptions regarding the presence of Syrian refugees in areas such as employment, education and social life. All items were rated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree").

The attitude scale used in this study was adapted from an exclusion-oriented survey originally developed by Yıldırım (2019). A reliability analysis conducted on the Turkish version of the scale yielded a high level of internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.94$). To assess the construct validity of the scale, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed using data from all 1,666 participants. The analysis revealed a three-factor structure with clearly distinguishable clusters. The first factor measured attitudes toward close personal relationships and property sharing with refugees; the second reflected attitudes related to everyday social interaction and prosocial behavior; and the third represented levels of cultural tolerance. This three-dimensional structure aligns closely with theoretical distinctions found in the literature on social distance and cultural integration. In short, the scale demonstrated high reliability and exhibited a coherent structure consistent with the expected conceptual dimensions.

2.3. Data Collection Process and Ethics

The fieldwork for this study was conducted during October, November and December of 2024. The survey was prepared using Google Forms and distributed to potential participants in the designated provinces via social media, email groups and local digital communication networks. Participants were able to complete the questionnaire online at their convenience using any internet-enabled device.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary; no monetary or non-monetary incentives or pressure were applied. At the beginning of the questionnaire, participants were provided with detailed information about the purpose and scope of the study and informed consent was obtained electronically from each respondent. No personally identifiable information—such as names or national ID numbers—was requested and all responses were collected anonymously. The data were stored securely and used solely for scientific purposes in compliance with confidentiality principles.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Yalova University Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol No: 2023/62). Throughout all stages of the research, the rights of participants, privacy, confidentiality and the principles of academic integrity were strictly observed.

2.4. Data Analysis

The survey data were analyzed using the IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0 software. First, the normality of the distribution of scores obtained from the attitude scale was assessed. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test results indicated that the responses to each item significantly deviated from a normal distribution ($p < 0.001$ for all items). Consequently, non-parametric tests were used for group comparisons. Specifically, gender and marital status groups were compared using the Mann–Whitney U test. A "general attitude score" was calculated for each participant by averaging their responses to the 19 items on the attitude scale, generating a value between 1 and 5. This score numerically represents the respondent's overall attitude toward Syrian refugees.

The analysis focused on identifying differences in attitude scores across selected socio-demographic variables. In line with the study's primary objective, this article includes comparisons only for gender and marital status. Analyses involving other demographic variables such as education level, household income, or province of residence were excluded from the scope of this paper. A significance level of 0.05 was adopted for all statistical tests. In interpreting group differences, both

statistical significance and effect sizes were considered in order to assess the practical relevance of the findings. Effect size (r) was calculated for all Mann–Whitney U tests using the formula $r = |Z|/\sqrt{N}$ and interpreted according to Cohen’s (1988) benchmarks (0.1 = small, 0.3 = medium, 0.5 = large effect). Furthermore, special care was taken to account for the potential risk of Type I errors arising from multiple item-level comparisons. The findings were interpreted within a comprehensive framework that integrates contextual and theoretical considerations. Given that the main aim of the study is to explore attitudinal differences across demographic groups, the analysis emphasized significance levels and within-sample distributional patterns.

3. Results

The analyses indicate that there are statistically significant differences in specific subdimensions of attitudes toward Syrian refugees across gender and marital status groups (Mann–Whitney U tests, $p < 0.05$). While the overall mean attitude scores are similar for men and women, women demonstrate significantly higher levels of agreement with certain items that reflect cultural tolerance and sensitivity. In particular, women responded more positively than men to statements requiring cultural openness. For instance, female participants were significantly more likely to agree with the statement “I am not bothered by the clothing style of a Syrian refugee” (women: $M = 3.42$; men: $M = 2.53$; $p < 0.001$).

Notably, the magnitude of the group difference in gender comparisons corresponds to a medium effect size ($r = 0.29$), indicating that the observed difference is not only statistically significant but also practically meaningful.

Conversely, there were no statistically significant gender-based differences in many statements involving routine social interactions, such as forming friendships or working alongside refugees ($p > 0.05$). These results suggest that the impact of gender is limited to specific cultural sensitivity issues and that men and women display broadly similar attitudes regarding everyday social interaction and social distance.

Table 1. Comparison of Attitudes Toward Syrian Refugees by Gender

Questions on Perceptions Toward Syrians	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Mean	Mann Whitney U	P Value
I would chat with a Syrian refugee.	Male	929	80,61	2,77	3159,5	0,379
	Female	737	86,93	2,97		
I would be friends with a Syrian refugee.	Male	929	83,39	2,52	3410,5	0,975
	Female	737	83,63	2,47		
I would not avoid helping a Syrian refugee.	Male	929	78,44	2,93	2964,5	0,126
	Female	737	89,49	3,28		
I could be neighbors with a Syrian refugee.	Male	929	79,96	2,33	3101,0	0,285
	Female	737	87,70	2,53		
I would rent my house to a Syrian refugee.	Male	929	83,72	2,11	3400,5	0,947
	Female	737	83,24	2,03		
I would lend money to a Syrian refugee.	Male	929	84,18	2,02	3358,5	0,832
	Female	737	82,69	1,92		
I would shop from a Syrian refugee.	Male	929	81,36	2,34	3227,0	0,516
	Female	737	86,04	2,45		
I would establish a business partnership with a Syrian refugee.	Male	929	86,13	1,74	3183,5	0,396
	Female	737	80,39	1,61		
I would share the same living space (house, room, etc.) with a Syrian refugee.	Male	929	86,48	1,60	3152,0	0,304
	Female	737	79,97	1,43		
Working at the same workplace with a Syrian refugee would not bother me.	Male	929	83,33	2,49	3404,5	0,959
	Female	737	83,70	2,49		
I would participate in social activities with a Syrian refugee.	Male	929	79,92	2,32	3098,0	0,280
	Female	737	87,74	2,50		
I am not disturbed by the clothing style of a Syrian refugee.	Male	929	69,96	2,53	2201,5	0,000*
	Female	737	99,53	3,42		
I am not disturbed by the lifestyle of a Syrian refugee.	Male	929	73,96	2,28	2561,0	0,004*
	Female	737	94,80	2,87		

I am not disturbed by the way a Syrian refugee speaks in public.	Male	929	76,21	2,07	2764,0	0,027*
	Female	737	92,13	2,45		
There have been noticeable changes (social, cultural, economic, etc.) in my region after the arrival of Syrian refugees.	Male	929	81,09	3,62	3203,0	0,462
	Female	737	86,36	3,74		
Syrian refugees have contributed (economically, labor force, etc.) to the city I live in.	Male	929	83,23	2,19	3395,5	0,934
	Female	737	83,82	2,20		
The presence of Syrian refugee students in my (or my child's) school does not bother me.	Male	929	82,52	2,37	3331,5	0,767
	Female	737	84,66	2,41		
I could marry a Syrian refugee. (I would not be disturbed if my child married a Syrian refugee.)	Male	929	88,73	1,73	2949,0	0,083
	Female	737	77,30	1,47		
I am not disturbed by Syrian refugees who acquire citizenship after gaining the right to citizenship.	Male	929	84,78	1,72	3305,0	0,668
	Female	737	81,99	1,68		

* Statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

Notably, female participants demonstrated significantly higher agreement than their male counterparts with several items that reflect cultural sensitivity and tolerance. These included statements such as “*I am not bothered by the clothing style of a Syrian refugee,*” “*I am not bothered by the lifestyle of a Syrian refugee,*” and “*I am not bothered by the way a Syrian refugee speaks in public*” (all $p < 0.05$). In contrast, no statistically significant gender differences were observed in items related to everyday social interactions, such as forming friendships or working in the same workplace. These findings suggest that gender-based differences are primarily associated with culturally sensitive domains. In contrast, attitudes toward general social engagement and interaction with Syrian refugees are largely similar between men and women.

Table 2. Comparison of Attitudes Toward Syrian Refugees by Marital Status

Questions on Perceptions Toward Syrians	Marital Status	N	Mean Rank	Mean	Mann - Whitney U	P Value
I would chat with a Syrian refugee.	Single	751	89,96	3.04	2884.0	0.138
	Married	915	79,13	2.74		
I would be friends with a Syrian refugee.	Single	751	89,44	2.66	2918.5	0.178
	Married	915	79,48	2.39		
I would not avoid helping a Syrian refugee.	Single	751	96,52	3.45	2444.0	0.003*
	Married	915	74,69	2.85		
I could be neighbors with a Syrian refugee.	Single	751	91,49	2.64	2781.0	0.068
	Married	915	78,09	2.27		
I would rent my house to a Syrian refugee.	Single	751	87,99	2.16	3016.0	0.298
	Married	915	80,46	2.01		
I would lend money to a Syrian refugee.	Single	751	91,25	2.13	2797.0	0.070
	Married	915	78,25	1.87		
I would shop from a Syrian refugee.	Single	751	91,19	2.61	2801.0	0.078
	Married	915	78,29	2.24		
I would establish a business partnership with a Syrian refugee.	Single	751	86,87	1.75	3091.0	0.411
	Married	915	81,22	1.64		
I would share the same living space (house, room, etc.) with a Syrian refugee.	Single	751	85,54	1.57	3180.0	0.595
	Married	915	82,12	1.49		
Working at the same workplace with a Syrian refugee would not bother me.	Single	751	91,22	2.70	2799.0	0.078
	Married	915	78,27	2.34		
I would participate in social activities	Single	751	95,25	2.72	2529.5	0.007*

with a Syrian refugee.	Married	915	75,55	2.19		
I am not disturbed by the clothing style of a Syrian refugee.	Single	751	94,72	3.27	2565.0	0.010*
	Married	915	75,91	2.72		
I am not disturbed by the lifestyle of a Syrian refugee.	Single	751	97,28	2.94	2393.5	0.002*
	Married	915	74,18	2.28		
I am not disturbed by the way a Syrian refugee speaks in public.	Single	751	90,49	2.42	2848.0	0.109
	Married	915	78,77	2.12		
There have been noticeable changes (social, cultural, economic, etc.) in my region after the arrival of Syrian refugees.	Single	751	89,69	3.87	2902.0	0.154
	Married	915	79,31	3.55		
Syrian refugees have contributed (economically, labor force, etc.) to the city I live in.	Single	751	88,18	2.30	3003.0	0.281
	Married	915	80,33	2.12		
The presence of Syrian refugee students in my (or my child's) school does not bother me.	Single	751	95,47	2.70	2514.5	0.006*
	Married	915	75,40	2.17		
I could marry a Syrian refugee. (I would not be disturbed if my child married a Syrian refugee.)	Single	751	85,80	1.72	3162.5	0.564
	Married	915	81,94	1.55		
I am not disturbed by Syrian refugees who acquire citizenship after gaining the right to citizenship.	Single	751	88,36	1.84	2991.0	0.217
	Married	915	80,21	1.62		

* Statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

The analysis by marital status similarly revealed statistically significant differences between married and single participants for several attitude items. Single individuals reported higher levels of agreement with statements requiring openness to social interaction and cultural diversity. Notably, they expressed significantly greater agreement with the statement “*I would not avoid helping a Syrian refugee*” (singles: $M = 3.45$; married: $M = 2.85$; $p = 0.003$). Likewise, single participants were more likely to agree with “*I would participate in social activities with a Syrian refugee*” (singles: $M = 2.72$; married: $M = 2.19$; $p = 0.007$) and with culturally sensitive statements such as “*I am not bothered by the clothing style of a Syrian refugee*” (singles: $M = 3.27$; married: $M = 2.72$; $p = 0.010$) and “*I am not bothered by the lifestyle of a Syrian refugee*” (singles: $M = 2.94$; married: $M = 2.28$; $p = 0.002$).

Additionally, single participants exhibited more favorable attitudes toward social integration: in response to the statement “*The presence of Syrian refugee students in my school (or my child's school) does not make me uncomfortable*,” single individuals reported significantly higher agreement levels than their married counterparts (singles: $M = 2.70$; married: $M = 2.17$; $p = 0.006$).

These findings suggest that single participants are generally more open to social engagement with Syrian refugees and hold more positive attitudes toward cultural diversity compared to married participants.

4. Discussion

The finding that women and single individuals exhibit more tolerant attitudes toward Syrian refugees is consistent with prior studies. Yiğit Özudoğru and Kan (2021) found that public attitudes toward refugees significantly differ by gender, with women adopting more inclusive perspectives than men. Similarly, Yılmaz and Günay (2022) observed that single individuals are more socially open in comparison to their married counterparts. In this regard, the present study offers an updated empirical contribution that reinforces these trends.

Moreover, the effect sizes ($r = 0.29$ for gender; $r = 0.32$ for marital status) indicate that these differences are not only statistically significant but also practically meaningful, corresponding to a medium effect according to conventional benchmarks.

The underlying socio-psychological dynamics of favorable attitudes toward refugees may be explained through Allport's (2016, pp. 9–10) Contact Hypothesis. According to this theory, direct contact between groups—under conditions such as

voluntariness, equal status, shared goals and institutional support—facilitates the reduction of stereotypes and prejudice. Women and single individuals may, by virtue of their social roles or lifestyles, have more frequent and positive opportunities to engage with Syrian refugees. This could contribute to the development of more inclusive and tolerant attitudes within these groups. Indeed, women appear less disturbed by cultural differences and single participants tend to be more open to everyday interactions such as neighborly relations, friendship and workplace cooperation. These findings align with theoretical expectations regarding the transformative effect of intergroup contact on prejudice.

Nevertheless, the results also show that when it comes to intimate or private relationships, such as marriage, business partnerships, or cohabitation, all demographic groups exhibit similarly cautious attitudes. This is further supported by the factor analysis, which reveals that items related to close personal contexts are markedly distinct from others. These results suggest that public acceptance is bounded and that social distance is more rigidly maintained in private spheres than in public interactions.

This hesitation may not solely stem from individual preferences or social norms but also from perceived insecurity and uncertainty. Bauman (2011) argues that in modern societies, the “stranger” is viewed as inherently unpredictable and thus perceived as a potential threat—leading to avoidance of close contact. Similarly, Mete (2023) emphasizes that high levels of uncertainty can increase social distance. Within this framework, the participants’ cautious attitudes toward private spheres may be understood through cultural and psychological mechanisms rooted in threat perception and risk aversion.

The reluctance to engage in intimate interactions is also shaped by cultural codes and symbolic boundaries. According to Lamont and Molnár (2002), symbolic boundaries reinforce “us” versus “them” distinctions, deepening social division. In this context, the refusal to share private space with Syrian refugees may reflect the boundary-marking effect of host society norms. The limited willingness to form close relationships—such as within family or domestic settings—illustrates how these symbolic divisions manifest most clearly in intimate domains.

Additionally, media portrayals and dominant discourses play a significant role in shaping public perceptions of refugees. Terms like “guest”—though seemingly hospitable—function as exclusionary labels that frame refugees as temporary outsiders, impeding their full integration. Such narratives reinforce power relations and legitimize social hierarchies, showing that attitudes toward refugees are shaped not only by individual judgments but also by collective discourse and cultural ideologies.

In line with this, the general reluctance—especially in situations requiring high interpersonal proximity—mirrors Bauman’s notion of uncertainty and distrust in modern societies. According to Bauman (2011, pp. 17–18), the stranger is inherently viewed as a source of insecurity, making close relationships with refugees emotionally and psychologically challenging. In this light, although many participants tolerate Syrian refugees in day-to-day contexts, they remain hesitant when it comes to more private and emotionally intimate domains (e.g., marriage, cohabitation). This dual attitude—a balance between hospitality and boundary-setting—reveals how emotional ambivalence, fear and cultural conditioning together shape public responses. The underlying belief that refugees should remain at the margins of society may contribute to negative attitudes toward close integration.

The distinction between social distance and cultural tolerance is key to interpreting the findings of this study. While cultural tolerance refers to acceptance of different practices and lifestyles and a willingness to coexist, social distance reflects the boundaries individuals place on how close a relationship with an “other” is deemed acceptable. The results show that female participants tend to be more tolerant of cultural differences—for example, agreeing with statements such as “I am not bothered by the lifestyle of Syrian refugees.” Likewise, single participants express greater openness in social contexts like friendship, neighborly relations, or working together. However, when the relationship involves greater closeness—such as renting a home, marriage, or business collaboration—all demographic groups demonstrate clear hesitation.

This attitudinal pattern is also supported by earlier research. M. Murat Erdoğan (2015, pp. 135–136) found that although Turkish society initially exhibited strong hospitality toward Syrian refugees, it also maintained considerable cultural distance, with limited support for granting citizenship. Similarly, the present findings indicate that while the public is generally willing to share daily life with refugees, they remain cautious about deeper, long-term relationships. Cultural tolerance may be present, but the persistence of social distance suggests that acceptance remains conditional and superficial.

This dynamic is also evident in the shifting policies of the Turkish state. İçduygu and Demiryontar (2022, pp. 318–320) describe how initial discourses of high tolerance and the “guest” narrative were based on the expectation of refugees’ eventual return. However, as their permanence became clear, new integration policies—such as the Temporary Protection status (2014), work permits (2016) and discussions around citizenship—were introduced. By 2017, growing social tension prompted a shift toward more restrictive, return-oriented rhetoric. These developments reflect how policy and discourse shift in line with cost-benefit calculations. The public’s increasingly pragmatic stance appears to mirror this logic, with humanitarian tolerance giving way to a more calculated approach as the presence and impact of refugees has grown. Indeed, the attitudes observed in this study—flexible, pragmatic and ambivalent—align with this instrumental rationality.

Other studies confirm this duality in public attitudes. For example, Bolgün (2022, pp. 171–173) reports that negative perceptions of Syrian refugees are often linked to security concerns and economic anxieties. The author recommends policies that reduce these concerns and foster intergroup contact. These proposals are consistent with Allport’s Contact Hypothesis: when communities are provided opportunities to interact under supportive conditions, mutual understanding improves and social distance diminishes. The findings of the present study thus confirm and extend the theoretical frameworks of Allport, Bauman and Bogardus, as well as the empirical work of Erdoğan and İçduygu, by showing how structural and symbolic factors interact in shaping attitudes toward refugees.

Beyond theoretical implications, this study contributes to the literature in several key ways. First, while most prior research has focused on gender or age, marital status remains an underexplored variable (Yitmen and Verkuyten, 2018). This study addresses that gap by demonstrating that attitudes differ significantly between male/female and married/single groups. Second, by jointly analyzing social distance and cultural tolerance, the study shows that attitudes toward refugees are not uniform but vary by the level of relational closeness. This multidimensional perspective reflects Bogardus’ (1933, pp. 266–267) classic social distance scale, which distinguishes between superficial contact and close relational engagement. Third, the study operationalizes classic theories—such as Allport’s Contact Hypothesis and Bauman’s theory of uncertainty—within the contemporary Turkish context, providing an applied case study that tests their cross-cultural validity. Lastly, the findings support the dual “welcoming yet distant” stance identified in previous research by Erdoğan and İçduygu, while also specifying the demographic subgroups—namely, women and single individuals—who diverge from this general pattern.

Despite these contributions, the findings should be interpreted within the limitations of the study. These are further discussed in the concluding section, along with methodological considerations for future research. Nonetheless, the strength of this study lies in its integration of theory and data, bridging conceptual models and empirical reality. By grounding the findings in the work of Allport and Bogardus, the study affirms its place in the broader literature and offers a robust foundation for further inquiry.

Taken together, the findings suggest that public attitudes toward Syrian refugees in Türkiye are neither uniform nor extreme but shaped by a nuanced interplay of cultural norms, emotional ambivalence and contextual factors. While cultural tolerance appears relatively high, social distance persists in areas involving close personal contact. This indicates that the host society simultaneously upholds values of hospitality and draws implicit boundaries against full inclusion. The more open attitudes among women and single individuals contrast with the general public’s cautious stance, highlighting a dual pattern that is both consistent with theoretical expectations and practically relevant. These insights have implications not only for future research but also for policy development. Public campaigns aimed at reducing fear of the “other” and initiatives that promote intergroup contact—such as community-based projects or integration programs—can contribute to lowering prejudice and fostering mutual acceptance. Such efforts, if supported by local governments, civil society and academic institutions, may help establish a more cohesive and inclusive environment for Refugee-host relations. These implications are further discussed in the conclusion.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that public attitudes toward Syrian refugees in Türkiye vary significantly based on individuals’ gender and marital status. Specifically, women and single individuals tend to adopt more open and inclusive perspectives, particularly in matters concerning social interaction and cultural diversity. In contrast, attitudes toward more

private and intimate domains—such as marriage, cohabitation, or business partnerships—remain cautious and reserved across all demographic groups. This dual pattern suggests that humanitarian acceptance of refugees, while present in public life, does not extend into private spheres in the Turkish context.

By empirically demonstrating attitudinal differences based on gender and marital status, this study offers a micro-level contribution focused on the internal dynamics of the host society. Unlike much of the existing literature, which tends to emphasize macro-level patterns, this research provides a distinct perspective by centering on individual demographic variation in the Turkish setting. Furthermore, this study introduces an exclusion-oriented attitude scale as a novel quantitative tool for measuring refugee-related perceptions. This represents a meaningful methodological contribution.

The findings also offer practical insights for enhancing social cohesion. In line with these findings, awareness campaigns to reduce fear of the ‘other’ should be implemented. Social initiatives that promote intergroup contact (e.g., cultural exchange events and integration programs) are also recommended. Drawing on the comparatively more tolerant attitudes observed among women and single individuals; these groups may be mobilized to take active roles in neighborhood-based integration projects. For such efforts to succeed, collaboration among local governments, civil society organizations and academic institutions is essential.

Finally, several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. As a cross-sectional study, the results reflect only the attitudes prevalent at the time of data collection. The sample is limited to specific provinces in Türkiye, so the findings may not generalize to the entire country. Moreover, the sample was overrepresented by Kayseri (approximately 30% of respondents), which may introduce regional bias and further limit generalizability. In addition, the analyses were restricted to gender and marital status, excluding other potential influencing variables such as age, education, political orientation, or the degree of personal contact with refugees. The data were self-reported and may be subject to social desirability bias, particularly on sensitive topics. Future research should use larger, more representative samples and include a wider range of socio-demographic factors. Employing longitudinal designs would also help capture the evolving nature of public attitudes toward refugees.

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