



# The Marital Attitudes Among Chinese Females in Emerging Adulthood: The Role of Differentiation of Self and Relationship Self-Efficacy

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**Abstract.** Existing literature has extensively examined the socioeconomic factors leading to a declined marriage rate and an increased average age of first marriage in China. However, there is a paucity of research investigating the impact of individual psychological factors on marital attitudes. The concept of differentiation of self has been found crucial in shaping marital experiences and attitudes among married people, while its influence on the marital attitudes of unmarried individuals has received little attention. Differentiation of self may affect interpersonal experiences and consequently affect individuals' self-efficacy in maintaining relationships. In an era when romantic love in marriage is increasingly valued by young adults, their self-efficacy in managing romantic partnerships may be another pivotal factor in understanding their marital attitudes. Considering that unmarried females are under great pressure from late marriage, the study mainly focused on the marital attitudes of emerging adult females. It was hypothesized that relationship self-efficacy would mediate the association between self-differentiation level and marital attitudes. Data were collected through WeChat and Credamo platform and 168 never-married participants aged 19-29 who had been in at least one romantic relationship were invited to complete the Chinese version of the differentiation of self-inventory scale (C-DSI), Relationship Self-Efficacy Scale (RSES), and the Marital Attitude Scale (MAS). The results revealed that young females' marital attitudes were positively associated with their self-differentiation level and relationship self-efficacy, while the mediating role of relationship self-efficacy between self-differentiation and marital attitudes was insignificant when controlling for participants' relationship status. This study indicated that the young women's negative marital attitudes may partly stem from a perceived inability or lack of confidence in maintaining romantic intimacy in future marriage. Hence, it could be beneficial to offer educational initiatives aimed at empowering young women with skills to develop comfortable romantic relationships, thereby eliminating maladaptive beliefs about marriage.

**Keywords:** Differentiation of self; Relationship self-efficacy; Marital attitudes; Emerging adulthood

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## 1 Introduction

In East Asian countries, marriage is considered one of the most significant social institutions [1]. Nevertheless, the wave of singleness and delayed marriage has now swept several East Asian societies [2] and even in China. In 2021, the marriage rate in China was 5.4‰, which had declined from 9.9‰ since 2013 [3]. The number of marriages fell by 5.83 million from 2013 to 2021 and the average age at first marriage in China was delayed from 24.21 in 2000 to 28.67 in 2020, of which the figure for females rose from 23.28 to 27.95 [4-5]. These figures suggested that an increasing number of females tend to stay single and postpone the age to enter marriage.

The postponement of first marriage among Chinese females seems largely attributed to socioeconomic development, including increased economic independence of women, increased educational opportunities and educational time, rising career ambitions, and heavy financial pressures such as high housing costs and living expenses [7-8]. In addition to these external reasons, young females' negative attitudes towards marriage may be also partly responsible for the delay of marriage, because the likelihood of entering a marriage in young adulthood could be significantly predicted by marital attitudes [6]. Braaten & Rosén [9] defined marital attitudes as an individual's subjective views on the institution of heterosexual marriage, consisting of both their general perception of marriage and their personal evaluations or expectations regarding their own marriages. Due to the significant socioeconomic transformations, the Chinese youth's attitudes towards marriage have undergone significant changes [8] and seem to have become more pessimistic. According to a recent study, only 33.7% of people embraced marriage as a source of security and well-being, while 54.2% maintained a neutral stance and approximately 14.9% were fear of marriage [10]. Notably, women tend to have a more negative view of marriage than men [10-11].

Despite a trend of seemingly negative marital attitudes among Chinese youth, Blair and Madigan [12] suggested that Chinese young females still keep a strong desire to enter marriage at a certain stage in their lives. A significant portion of young people may still anticipate romantic love, as evidence showed that more than 50% of single people expressed a desire for a romantic relationship and over 70% of people hope to find a lifelong romantic partnership [10]. Individuals have also prioritized intimacy and romantic love in marriage over traditional standards of marital union in modern society, with over 75% of people concurring that "marriage must be based on love" [13]. Although the age of first marriage is increasing, marriage remains the gold form for a long-term relationship in China, with a majority of people ultimately entering marriage [14]. Therefore, discussing marriage within the context of romantic and intimate relationships is still necessary.

The concept of differentiation of self may contribute to understanding young women's attitudes towards romantic intimate relationships and marriage. In emerging adulthood (18-29 years old), a developmental period between late adolescence and early adulthood, romantic relationships become a focal point that individuals may explore and seek answers [15]. The delay of marriage and the somewhat negative attitudes toward marriage might reflect women's desire for independence or fear of marital constraints. The anticipation of romantic love, on the other hand, may suggest their need

for intimacy. This aligns with the critical task of differentiation of self in emerging adulthood, where individuals learn to balance independence and intimacy [16]. Jenkins et al. [17]'s study found that individuals' self-differentiation level could significantly predict their psychosocial intimacy resolution. Therefore, the differentiation of self might be an important factor in understanding the marital attitudes of unmarried people.

Self-efficacy in forming and maintaining intimate relationships may be also a critical factor when young adults explore romantic relationships in their emerging adulthood, which may influence their marital attitudes. Evidence showed that only 30% of young people had confidence in their ability to sustain a long-lasting relationship. Less than half believed they could find true love, and more than 20% of people doubted their suitability to enter romantic relationships [10]. The data indicate that young people might lack 'can-do' beliefs in maintaining romantic and intimate relationships, and this incapable belief may affect their expectations for future marriage, where a range of intimacy issues are expected to be encountered. Individuals who hold negative marital attitudes might be reluctant to enter marriage at an early age. However, unmarried females are particularly vulnerable to the societal pressures of late marriage [18]. This vulnerability stems from cultural expectations for Chinese women to marry at a young age when they are most fertile and physically attractive [19]. This cultural expectation makes unmarried women prone to being labeled as 'leftover' in the matrimonial market as they age [18]. In contrast, societal timelines are more lenient for men, who are encouraged to marry later after achieving financial stability [19]. Given this backdrop, it would be meaningful to investigate the factors that may influence the marital attitudes of emerging adult females in the current context of China. Most existing literature has examined the association between differentiation of self and marital satisfaction and quality in marital groups, while there is limited investigation into how differentiation of self correlates with the marital attitudes of unmarried emerging adults. Self-differentiation might be associated with individuals' efficacy beliefs in future intimate relationships, with a lack of confidence in managing such relationships potentially fostering negative attitudes toward marriage. This study aims to fill the gap by delving into the relationship between self-differentiation and marital attitudes, shedding light on how self-differentiation may influence premarital romantic experiences and, in turn, marital attitudes.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Marital attitudes and differentiation of self**

Literature has examined the impacts of macro socioeconomic transformations on individuals' marital attitudes and marital preferences. With socioeconomic growth and social liberalization, Chinese society is likely to undergo a process of individualization, where the pursuit of individual freedom and independence is profoundly reflected in marriage and shapes the marital attitudes of young people [13]. Other external factors, including education attainment, financial burdens related to marriage, and family labor division, may also influence people's marital attitudes and decisions [8, 20]. From a meso perspective, studies revealed that parental attributes, such as their educational

background and marital status, along with overall family function, could exert influence on the marital attitudes of their offspring [8]. Shurts and Myers [21] also suggested that marital messages received from family, friends, and other organizations could affect university students' attitudes toward marriage. However, studies attempting to reveal the influence of individual traits on marital attitudes seem to be insufficient. It has been found that the Chinese young generation attaches more importance to the emotional and love function in marriage [13]. However, while longing for love, they are anxious and confused about marriage and fear that the breakdown of the relationship will bring harm to them. Youth's ambivalent attitudes towards love and marriage seem to be explained by the theory of differentiation of self.

According to Bowen's family system theory, differentiation is a process in which individuals gradually develop a clear self and separate themselves from their origin family without distancing from family members [22-23]. According to Bowen, there are two interrelated processes of differentiation of self, including intrapsychic differentiation and interpersonal differentiation. Intrapsychic differentiation means that individuals are capable of distinguishing feelings from intellectual thinking and this capability can be regarded as emotional maturity; interpersonal differentiation refers to an ability to maintain individual independence meanwhile to experience intimacy and this ability represents relational maturity [22-23]. Skowron and Friedlander [24] identified four key elements of differentiation of self, including emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others. Emotional reactivity refers to the way a person reacts to external stimuli, including emotional instability and flooding, or hypersensitivity. The I-position means individuals have a clear sense of self and can assert personal beliefs even under pressure. The emotional cutoff suggests individuals may behave defensively in relations or isolate themselves from others when they feel threatened by closeness. The fusion with others describes individuals' emotional overinvolvement with others and their loss of the clearly defined self. Emotional reactivity and I-position are linked with the intrapersonal dimension of differentiation of self, and the emotional cutoff and fusion with others are two elements related to the interpersonal dimension of differentiation of self [25].

The existing research has found a positive correlation between the differentiation of self and marital satisfaction and the level of intimacy experienced in marital relations [26-28]. Although these studies are not directly related to the marital attitudes of unmarried individuals, it can be inferred that self-differentiation could ultimately contribute to marital attitudes by influencing individuals' intimate relationship experiences, which in turn, may impact people's expectations of their future marriage. Specifically, from the perspective of emotional maturity, people with a low degree of differentiation of self tend to react emotionally with difficulties to balance feelings and thinking, which produces challenges in keeping great interpersonal relationships [29]. From the perspective of relational maturity, the level of differentiation of self can impact the extent to which individuals desire intimacy and independence [28]. Individuals with highly differentiated self could experience a wide variety of emotional closeness in relationships without sacrificing self-boundaries [22], which might explain the reason for the well-differentiated persons' positive attitudes towards their relationships [27]. In con-

trast, fear of feeling abandoned and smothered may cause individuals to hesitate to engage in long-run committed relationships. Individuals' low levels of emotional maturity and relational maturity would cause fundamental challenges to their relationships at the time of marriage [28]. The difficulties to experience intimate relationships may lead to a relatively negative attitude toward marriage.

In a study based on 759 university students in South Korea [29], attitudes toward marriage were found positively correlated with self-differentiation ( $r = .079, p = .030$ ), with higher scores on attitudes toward marriage implying higher self-differentiation levels. Similarly, a study by Najarpourian et al. [30], based on 220 female university students, also found that female students' differentiation level was significantly positively related to marriage attitudes ( $\beta = .23, p < .01$ ), indicating who is better differentiated had more positive attitudes towards their marriage. Research on how the differentiation of self could influence the marital attitudes of unmarried youth remains limited in China.

## 2.2 Differentiation of self and the relationship self-efficacy

Individuals' differentiation of self seems a key source of their relationship self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to the individuals' can-do beliefs in their capabilities of attaining given goals [31], which could largely influence individuals' motivation, perseverance, and willingness to exert efforts. General self-efficacy is found positively correlated with factors such as psychological wellbeing, interpersonal competence, sense of control, and the capacity to cope with stressful situations [31]. Beyond the general concept of self-efficacy, efficacy beliefs are gained increasing attention in context of intimate relationships [32]. These beliefs are considered able to affect the development, goal attainment, and outcomes of romantic relationships [21].

Lopez et al. [33]'s study conceptualized three key components related to relationship self-efficacy, including mutuality, emotional control, and differentiation. Emotional control means individuals can properly adjust negative emotions such as disappointment, upset, and anger toward romantic partners. This component may relate to the emotional maturity in differentiation of self, in which people with greater self-differentiated levels may have a better understanding of the source of their emotions, and more possible to regulate their emotions. Mutuality refers to the capabilities of giving and receiving support and care from a relationship. Differentiation refers to abilities to comfortably express the need for personal space and separateness, and decisively keep clear boundaries with romantic partners [33]. These two components seem related to the relational maturity in the differentiation of self, where people could balance intimacy and autonomy in relationships. It is possible that the higher self-differentiation level could contribute to individuals' relationship self-efficacy.

## 2.3 Relationship self-efficacy and marital attitudes

Understanding relationship self-efficacy may offer valuable insights into the younger generation's marital attitudes. Despite a growing trend towards delayed first marriage due to factors such as increased economic independence, prolonged higher education,

changed labor division in gender, and high marriage cost [8], marriage continues to hold a place of central importance in China and a majority of people will eventually get married at some point in their lives [14]. Moreover, studies suggest that with the influence of individualism, contemporary notions of love and romance have been increasingly embraced in Chinese dating culture and the importance of romantic love in marriage was also elevated [13, 34]. As a core element in sustaining romantic love, relationship self-efficacy may be able to influence young people's relationship experiences and expectations regarding married lives, which in turn can shape their marital attitudes.

Studies found that higher efficacy expectations in relationships are associated with more favorable partner behavior attributions and long-term marital satisfaction [35]. Believing a relationship as an attainable goal, individuals with high self-efficacy in romantic relationships are more inclined to confront the difficulties in their relationship, more willing to resolve relational conflicts and commit to maintaining and investing in the relationship [31, 36]. This relationship self-efficacy is linked with fewer conflicts in romantic relationships and is positively associated with high relationship quality such as feeling warm, pleasure, and satisfaction [37]. Efficacy belief in romantic relationships seems a vital contributor to the formation and maintenance of successful romantic partnerships and marriage, while lower relational self-efficacy might adversely affect the establishment and longevity of a relationship such as marriage [21]. Studies have found that individuals with higher self-efficacy in romantic relationships report greater levels of expectation of relationship success [32] and Shurts & Myers [21] found that relationship self-efficacy was significantly positively related to marital attitudes. The relationship self-efficacy of romantic relationships may be a critical factor to understand Chinese young people's ambivalence toward love and marriage, and their postponement of marriage.

To sum up, individuals with higher self-differentiation level could have larger opportunities to have satisfied experiences in intimate relationships before marriage, which could equip them with greater relationship self-efficacy to manage the intimate relationships in future marriage. This 'can-do' belief could increase their confidence in future marriage and hence enable them to develop more positive marital attitudes. Therefore, this study hypothesized that:

*H1: Chinese females in emerging adulthood with a higher level of differentiation of self may have more positive marital attitudes.*

*H2: Chinese females in emerging adulthood with a higher level of differentiation of self may have a higher level of relationship self-efficacy.*

*H3: Chinese females in emerging adulthood with higher relationship self-efficacy may report more positive marital attitudes.*

*H4: The relationship self-efficacy could mediate the relationship between differentiation of self and marital attitudes.*

*H5: The above relationships will continue to be significant even after controlling for age, study-work status, and relationship status.*

### 3 Method

#### 3.1 Participants and procedures

Participants in this study were recruited from a university located in Guiyang - a provincial capital city in China – as well as from online platforms including WeChat and Credamo. All the participants were required to be never married females aged between 19-29 and had been in romantic relationships at least once. The rationale for the inclusion criteria of having had a romantic relationship experience was that it would enable participants to better place themselves in the context of the questions designed to assess their relationship self-efficacy, and thus provide authentic and reliable responses. Conversely, those who have never had a relationship experience may find certain questions too abstract to answer, potentially leading to bias.

The data was collected from self-reported surveys disseminated via online platforms, with the consent of the participants. The platforms included WeChat, a popular social media app in China, and Credamo, a reliable research platform that allowed researchers to send and collect surveys. Initially, survey links were shared on WeChat, inviting interested participants to complete the questionnaire. Additionally, students from a university interested in this study were also encouraged to participate. On the Credamo platform, a brief pre-screening questionnaire was first posted to screen participants who met the inclusion criteria into the author's sample database. Within a week, the full questionnaire was sent to the people in the database. For data quality control, the questionnaires completed in less than 120 seconds were excluded, as it is unlikely to finish the entire survey within such a short timeframe. Furthermore, if there were inconsistencies in the basic information such as age, relationship status, and work-and-study status between the pre-screening questionnaire and the full questionnaire, then the questionnaire was suspected of not being answered seriously, and thus that questionnaire was eliminated.

Ultimately, a total of 168 valid questionnaires were received. The participants' age ranged from 19 to 29 years old with an average age of 23.68 ( $SD = 2.56$ ), of which 50% were single and 50% were in a romantic relationship. With regards to current study and work status, 40.5% of participants were undergraduate students, 13.7% were graduate students, and 42.9% were currently in the workplace.

#### 3.2 Measurements

##### **Differentiation of self.**

Differentiation of self was measured by the Chinese version of differentiation of self-inventory (C-DSI) modified by [38]. This measurement contained 40 items and could be divided into 5 subscales, including *I-Position*, *Emotional Reactivity*, *Emotional Cutoff*, *Fusion with Others*, and *Fusion with Family*. The *Fusion with Family* was divided from the *Fusion with Others* based on the principal-components analysis. Given the profound influence of family values in shaping the behaviors of Chinese individuals, *fusion with family* seems a distinct subscale from the *fusion with others*, highlighting the disparity between Chinese and Western culture [38]. Each item could be responded

to within a 6-point Likert scale (ranging from '*strongly disagree*' to '*strongly agree*'). Sample items included, 'I tend to remain pretty calm even under stress' and 'I'm often uncomfortable when people get too close to me', with higher scores indicating higher self-differentiation level. The Cronbach's alpha of the C-DSI was 0.87 with the test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.78 in the original sample [38]. The Cronbach's alpha of the C-DSI in this study was 0.93.

### **Relationship self-efficacy.**

Participants' confidence in their capability of maintaining a successful relationship was assessed by the Relationship Self-Efficacy Scale [33]. This instrument comprised 25 items with a 9-point Likert scale (ranging from '*I am not sure at all*' to '*I am completely sure*'). Sample items contained, 'Tell your partner when you would prefer to be alone' and 'Find ways to work out 'everyday' problems with your partner', in which higher scores suggest higher relationship self-efficacy. The Relationship Self-Efficacy Scale was translated into Chinese. The scale was first translated by the author and subsequently revised by a colleague majoring in English study. To ensure accuracy, the revised version was then translated back to English by software to ensure no significant discrepancies. Three Chinese-speaking women were then consulted to review the translated items to verify their comprehensibility, with adjustments made in response to any ambiguities or contentious wording. The Cronbach alphas reported originally for the subscales of mutuality, emotional control, and differentiation were 0.92, 0.83, and 0.76 respectively [33]. The Cronbach alphas in this study were 0.90, 0.78, and 0.77 respectively.

### **Marital attitudes.**

Originally developed by Braaten & Rosén [9], the Marital Attitude Scale (MAS), which was translated and revised by Yu et al. [39], was utilized to assess both married and unmarried participants' subjective views about heterosexual marriage, including both the general perception towards marriage, and persons' appraisal or expectation on their own marriages. The scale consists of 20 items with a 4-point Likert scale (ranging from '*strongly agree*' to '*strongly disagree*'), and a higher score suggests a more positive attitude toward marriage. Sample items included, 'I am fearful of marriage' and 'I will be satisfied when I get married'. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of the MAS was 0.74 in Yu et al.'s study [39] and was 0.88 in this study.

## **3.3 Data analysis**

The data was processed by the SPSS version 27.0. The study first calculated the descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation for the study variables. Subsequently, one-way ANOVA and independent sample t-test were employed to assess the relationship between study-work status and relationship status with the main study variables, respectively. Given the significant correlation between participants' age, study-work status, and relationship status with the key variables in this study, these factors were controlled for in the mediation analyses. To test the hypotheses, the mediation analyses



were conducted using the PROCESS procedure in SPSS with model 4 [40]. The data was processed and probed with a 95% confidence interval and bootstrapped with 5,000 samples.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Differences in differentiation of self, relationship self-efficacy, and marital attitudes by demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics are displayed in Table 1. As shown in Table 2, except for the dimension of Fusion with Family, the self-differentiation score and its subscales were significantly positively associated with relationship self-efficacy scores and marital attitudes scores. This dimension Fusion with Family demonstrated no significant correlation with either relationship self-efficacy or marital attitudes ( $p > .05$ ). Additionally, the self-differentiation level was positively associated with age ( $r = .22, p < .01$ ), and the level of differentiation of self increased significantly with advancing age. Age also had a significantly positive relationship with marital attitudes ( $r = .15, p < .05$ ), indicating that older women may hold more positive attitudes towards marriage. Whereas no correlation was observed between age and relationship self-efficacy.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of the sample

Variable	Description
Age	$M = 23.68,$ $SD = 2.56,$ $Range = 19 - 29$
Relationship Status	
Single	84 (50%)
In a Romantic Relationship	84 (50%)
Study and Work Status	
Undergraduate	68 (40.5%)
Graduate	23 (13.7%)
Working	72 (42.9%)
Others	5 (3.0%)

**Table 2.** Means, standard deviation, Cronbach's alpha, and intercorrelations among self-differentiation, relationship self-efficacy, marital attitudes, and age

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.5	2	3	4
1. Self-differentiation	3.55	0.70	.93	.95**	.63**	.71**	.81**	.57**	.35**	.48**	.22**
1.1. Emotional Reactivity	3.28	1.01	—	.91	.51**	.62**	.76**	.53**	.25**	.43**	.24**
1.2. 'I' Position	4.16	0.75	—	—	.83	.19**	.45**	.08	.49**	.31**	.06

1.3. Emotional Cutoff	3.72	0.93	-	-	-	.82	.43**	.34**	.33**	.57**	.18**
1.4. Fusion with Others	3.75	1.00	-	-	-	-	.75	.48**	.15*	.26**	.17*
1.5. Fusion with Family	2.50	0.80	-	-	-	-	-	.71	-0.04	.07	.19**
2. Relationship Self-efficacy	6.95	0.94	-	-	-	-	-	-	.93	.35**	0.00
3. Marital Attitude	2.69	0.52	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.88	.15*
4. Age	23.68	2.56	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Cronbach's alpha for each scale is presented on the diagonal.

\* $p < .05$  (one-tail), \*\* $p < .01$  (one-tail)

Additionally, one-way ANOVA was conducted to test the relationship between the study-work status and self-differentiation levels. Since these two variables did not pass the homogeneity test of variance ( $p < .05$ ), the Welch test was used for data analysis (*Welch's F*(3, 22.46) = 5.88,  $p < .01$ ). A significant mean difference in self-differentiation was observed exclusively between undergraduate students and those who were working (mean difference = -0.33,  $p < .05$ ). While there were no significant differences in self-differentiation level between undergraduate students and graduate students, or between graduate students and worked people. Furthermore, the study-work status did not demonstrate a significant correlation with either relationship self-efficacy or marital attitude scores.

In addition, the independent sample t-test demonstrated that the relationship self-efficacy of participants who were currently in a romantic relationship ( $M = 7.23$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ) was significantly higher than that of single participants ( $M = 6.67$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) (Cohen's  $d = 0.63$ , 95% CI [-0.94, -0.32]). Similarly, participants who were currently in a relationship had significantly more positive marital attitudes ( $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ) than their single counterparts ( $M = 2.55$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ) (Cohen's  $d = 0.52$ , 95% CI [-0.83, -0.21]). Nevertheless, whether participants were single or currently in a relationship had no significant relationship with their self-differentiation level.

#### 4.2 The mediation analysis outcome

**Table 3.** Regression analysis of the DoS, RSE and MA when controlling the age and study-work status

Predictor Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t
Differentiation of self (DoS)	.35	6.69***	.49	4.90***	.29	5.33***
Relationship self-efficacy (RSE)					.12	2.97***

Age	.02	0.99	-.01	-0.37	.02	1.10
Study-Work Status	-.04	-0.73	-.07	-0.72	-.03	-0.58
R <sup>2</sup>	.23		.13		.27	
F	16.65***		8.13***		15.28***	

Note: Model 1: DoS predicts the marital attitudes; Model 2: DoS predicts the RSE; Model 3: DoS and RSE predict the marital attitudes (\*\*\*)*p* < .001

**Table 4.** Results of mediation analysis of DoS, RSE and MA

Model Description	Coef.	Standardized coef.	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI
<b>Direct effect</b>							
DoS --> RSE	.49	.37	0.10	4.90	.00	0.29	0.69
DoS --> MA	.29	.39	0.05	5.33	.00	0.18	0.40
RSE --> MA	.12	.21	0.04	2.97	.00	0.04	0.20
<b>Indirect effect</b>							
DoS --> RSE--> MA	.06	.08	0.04	—	—	0.02	0.16
<b>Total effect</b>	.35	.47	0.05	6.69	.00	0.25	0.45

After controlling the age and study and work status (see table 3 and 4), the outcome indicated that the direct effect of self-differentiation on marital attitude was significant at the 95% confidence interval ( $\beta = .39, t(165) = 5.33, p < .001$ ). Self-differentiation was positively correlated with mediating variable, the relationship self-efficacy ( $\beta = .37, t(166) = 4.90, p < .001$ ). When controlling for self-differentiation, relationship self-efficacy was significantly associated with marital attitudes ( $\beta = .21, t(165) = 2.97, p < .05$ ). The total effect was 0.47 with statistical significance ( $t(166) = 6.99, p < .001, 95\% CI [0.25, 0.45]$ ). In addition, the indirect effect of differentiation of self on marital attitudes via relationship self-efficacy was .08. Bootstrapping at 5,000 samples revealed that for the indirect effect, the lower limit of the confidence interval was 0.02 and the upper limit was 0.16. As the 95% confidence interval did not include the value zero, the results indicated a significant indirect mediating effect of relationship self-efficacy. The results indicated that the relationship self-efficacy could partially mediate the association between self-differentiation level and marital attitudes. However, when controlling for the relationship status, the indirect effect of differentiation of self on marital attitudes by relationship efficacy was insignificant, with the confidence interval crossing the zero ( $\beta = 0.06, SE = 0.03, 95\%CI[-0.005, 0.13]$ ).

## 5 Discussion

This study examined the role of differentiation of self and relationship self-efficacy on the marital attitudes of Chinese females in emerging adulthood. The main hypothesis

of this study was that the self-differentiation level of young Chinese females was positively correlated with their marital attitudes and this positive relationship could be mediated by the relationship self-efficacy.

Consistent with previous studies [29-30], this study supported that the path of self-differentiation to marital attitudes was statistically significant, suggesting that the higher the degree of self-differentiation of emerging adult women, the more positive their general attitudes and expectations toward marriage. Individuals with higher self-differentiation levels may have great psychological adjustment, which enables them to think calmly under stressful situations, respond less emotionally, and experience intimacy in closed relationships while maintaining a clear boundary of self without losing the self [22-24]. The enhanced self-differentiation could contribute to improving interpersonal competence and maintaining healthy interpersonal connections, as the differentiation could allow individuals to better regulate the emotional arousal that arises in challenging interpersonal situations [29, 41]. Conversely, under emotionally stressful interpersonal situations, less differentiated individuals may cope with the stress through fusions with others or emotion cutoff and may be overly emotionally reactive [42]. As marital attitudes are associated with personal relationship outcomes [43], persons with higher satisfaction about their companionship and intimacy may hold more positive marital attitudes. To sum up, with better interpersonal capabilities, well-differentiated individuals are more likely to experience satisfactory relationships, which is conducive to forming positive marital attitudes.

In line with the hypothesis, relationship self-efficacy was found to have a significant positive correlation with marital attitudes, which supported the previous findings that individuals' romantic relationship self-efficacy was positively associated with their marital attitudes [21], and the perceptions of owning a successful and satisfying marriage were related to higher perceptions of relational capacity [44]. Additionally, the relationship self-efficacy displayed a significantly positive correlation with the levels of self-differentiation. A high self-differentiation level may bolster the efficacy beliefs in managing relationship issues. As previously stated, differentiation of self could lead to emotional maturity and relational maturity [24, 45], which played an essential role in maintaining interpersonal relationships such as romantic relationships. Individuals with high self-differentiation may be more likely to experience successful relationships. One factor that contributes to self-efficacy is the mastery experience in the task [46], which means that experiencing comfortable and satisfactory relationships may enhance relationship self-efficacy. Another factor that could influence self-efficacy is the emotional reactions to situations, which suggests that the emotional state may affect how people judge their capabilities [46]. As emotional control could also be a product of differentiation of self, people with lower differentiation levels may be less capable of regulating their emotions and the negative emotional states may undermine their self-efficacy in romantic relationships.

However, the indirect effect of relationship self-efficacy on the association between differentiation of self and marital attitudes was insignificant when controlling participants' relationship status. According to the results from the independent sample t-tests, individuals in a committed relationship had significantly higher scores in both relationship self-efficacy and marital attitudes than their single counterparts. The pronounced

influence of relationship status on these two variables might obscure the mediating effect. Another potential explanation for the lack of significance in the mediation model could be that the sample size was still not large enough and the relationship self-efficacy scales may be more applicable for those who were currently in a romantic relationship.

Nevertheless, this finding may still contribute to understanding Chinese females' marital attitudes. This study was aligned with Wang and Yang [47]'s finding, which observed that the marriage attitude score of non-single Chinese graduate students was significantly higher than that of single graduate students. Although the traditional Chinese family-centered values and marriage institutions have been weakened due to the modernization, urbanization, globalization, and individualization process in China, forming a family and entering marriage remains a pervasive value [20, 48]. Statistically, more than 80% of Chinese people still have a willingness to get married [49]. Chinese females tend to be serious and responsible for their relationships, often dating with the purpose of selecting a marital partner [11, 50]. A significant proportion of Chinese youth, ranging from 50%-75%, reported that the purpose of dating and falling in love is to get married [48-49]. This may be influenced by the collectivist ethos of traditional Chinese culture, which emphasizes interdependence and responsibility [51]. Thus, compared to Westerners, Chinese may prefer to keep a closer relationship with their partner [52] and Chinese non-single women who are at a marriageable age may treat their intimate relationship more seriously, with a greater inclination towards planning for marriage with their partner [47]. Furthermore, young people in romantic partnerships might enjoy the stability and benefits of an intimate relationship, which can positively impact their lives and studies. Such stable experience may foster a more in-depth, rational, and objective view of the general concept of marriage [47]. Therefore, those women are likely to possess a more positive attitude toward marriage than single women.

Another explanation for the difference in marital attitudes between single and non-single individuals might be that individuals who have been single for a long time may gradually adapt to the single lifestyles, which can potentially diminish their perceived necessity for marriage [53]. Furthermore, the higher relationship self-efficacy observed in women who are in relationships may suggest that their confidence in maintaining intimate relationships may be derived from their experiences, and their abilities to navigate intimate issues are practiced through active participation in a relationship. By contrast, individuals who remain single may lack the opportunity to confront and resolve specific intimate challenges, potentially eroding their belief in their ability to manage relationship dynamics effectively. It is also plausible that those with elevated levels of relationship self-efficacy are more proactive and successful in forming relationships, and thus are more inclined to transition out of single status.

In addition, the study results showed that although the self-differentiation level was significantly positively related to relationship self-efficacy and marital attitude, one subscale of DoS '*Fusion with Family*' showed no statistical correlation with these two scales. This might be because, unlike Western cultures which place great value on individualism and independence, Chinese traditional culture emphasizes collectivist values and family obligation and encourages individuals to live close to their parents when their parents are still alive and to take responsibility to care their elderly parents [51,

54]. The fusion with family may have different meanings in Chinese cultures and Western cultures, and the self-construction in Chinese cultural context values the continuity of family [38]. Therefore, the item fusion with family may not be interpreted as negative and may not have a specific effect on relationship self-efficacy and marital attitudes.

It is also worth noting that the older participants tend to possess a higher self-differentiation level and more positive marital attitudes than the younger participants, and the differentiation level is significantly lower in undergraduate females than those who have worked. This may reflect that differentiation is a process [22-23], and individuals gradually differentiate in emerging adulthood, during which the differentiation of self is a key task [55]. When individuals find a job, they may be greater differentiated than when they just moved into the university. Additionally, after fully exploring the self-identity and love during emerging adulthood, they may better understand what kind of people they hope to spend their life with, given what kind of people they are [56] and be better prepared to enter the marriage.

## 6 Limitations and Future Direction

Firstly, this study is a cross-sectional study and hence could not identify the causal relationship between these variables. Longitudinal research can be designed in future studies to whether differentiation of self and relationship self-efficacy could be predictive of individuals' marital attitudes. Secondly, this study heavily relied on the self-report method. Therefore, a social desirability bias may exist in which participants may overestimate their actual self-differentiation level, relationship self-efficacy, and marital attitudes. It is also likely that participants might sometimes not fully understand the items in the scale. Additionally, the scale to measure the relationship self-efficacy was translated from English to Chinese, during which some translations may not completely capture the original meanings. Whereas, the scales appear to have high reliability in this study, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha. This study did not include females who never have a romantic experience, while testing how factors influence this group's marital attitude is also of great importance.

This study aimed to comprehend how females' self-differentiation level impacts their marital attitudes. Given the significant role of individuals' family of origin in shaping their attitudes towards marriage, it may be important to investigate how individuals' self-differentiation level can mediate or moderate the impact of family dynamics on their marital attitudes and decisions. Moreover, this study uncovered a significant impact of a female's romantic relationship status on her marital attitude, highlighting the importance of premarital loving experience in shaping individuals' marital attitudes. This relationship may warrant deeper exploration in future studies.

Considering the limited effects of relationship self-efficacy to explain the link between differentiation of self and marital attitudes, future studies could explore additional potential mediators such as the psychosocial identity of females. According to Erikson's psychosocial stage model [57-58], the resolution of identity will provide an essential foundation for later psychosocial development including intimacy resolution, and the failure to fully explore and achieve a proper identity may lead to problems in

establishing and maintaining a long-term romantic and intimate relationship [59]. Emerging adulthood is believed a particularly essential period for identity development [57], in which young people have sufficient chances and incentives to consider who they hope to be and what direction they want to strive for in their future lives [56]. Empirical evidence suggested that one of the leading reasons for Chinese women to stay single was their prioritization of education and career development [60], and emerging adult females can explore personal and career identity beyond traditional roles as wives and mothers. The extension of time to achieve a stable identity might reduce their desire for marriage at an early age. Jenkins and colleagues' study [17] demonstrated that an individual's level of self-differentiation was a significant predictor of their psychosocial development: factors such as emotional reactivity, I position, emotional cutoff, and fusions with others all could significantly predict identity resolution. The less differentiated females might struggle with identity achievement, which may affect their experiences in intimate relationships. Such individuals might hesitate to engage a long-term committed relationships and have more concerns about marriage, which may reflect a less positive marital attitude. In addition to identity achievement, the impacts of women's academic and career attainments, religious belief, as well as their feminist attitudes on marital attitudes, merit further investigation. These factors could provide additional insights into the complex factors that shape young females' marital attitudes in contemporary society.

## 7 Conclusion

This study investigated the relationships among differentiation of self, relationship self-efficacy, and marital attitudes and found that young females' marital attitudes were positively associated with their self-differentiation level and relationship self-efficacy. In addition, this study shed light on the significant influence of individuals' relationship status on both their relationship self-efficacy and marital attitudes. This study implicated that young female adults' attitude toward marriage may reflect their perceptions about intimate interpersonal relationships. It proposes that increasing the level of self-differentiation of young women could enhance their relationship management abilities, thereby boosting their relationship self-efficacy and marital attitudes. Additionally, the study underscored the importance for young Chinese women to actively engage in romantic relationships during their emerging adulthood, as it is essential to practice the abilities to handle love and intimacy issues within a specific relationship, and build confidence in developing emotional and relational competencies in future marriage.

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