

The Influence of Education-based Hypergamy on Social Interaction among Unmarried Women in China: The Mediating Roles of Work Motivation and Job Satisfaction

Abstract

This study examines the relationships between education-based hypergamy and social interaction among unmarried women in China, with a focus on the mediating roles of work motivation and job satisfaction. Grounded in the context of shifting gender norms and rising educational attainment among women, this research investigates a critical tension between traditional marital expectations and modern aspirations. Using a quantitative approach, a sample of 458 participants completed validated measurement scales, and Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were conducted. The results revealed that education-based hypergamy was variable most strongly associated with of reduced social interaction. Conversely, work motivation was positively correlated with social interaction, suggesting that women who prioritize their professional goals are more likely to experience increased social engagement. These findings highlight the intricate interplay between marital expectations, individual aspirations, and job satisfaction. Policymakers and social institutions are encouraged to consider these dynamics when developing strategies to address declining social engagement and mental well-being.

Keywords

Education-based hypergamy, social interaction, work motivation, job satisfaction, Chinese women

Introduction

Social interaction (SI) is the reciprocal process through which two or more people communicate, respond to one another, and influence each other's thoughts, emotions, attitudes, or behaviors (Hagen et al. 2024). It occurs through verbal communication (such as conversation), nonverbal cues (such as facial expressions and gestures), and mediated forms of communication (such as social-media or gaming-platform interactions). SI remains a pivotal component of mental health and wellbeing, and China is no exception. However, recent shifts in societal norms and marital expectations have led to significant changes in social engagement patterns, particularly among unmarried women (Yeung and Hu 2016). In contemporary China, the increased focus on educational attainment and hypergamous marital expectations has reshaped traditional social behaviors, resulting in a growing number of women experiencing reduced SI (P. Wu et al. 2025). This trend reflects broader patterns where women, especially in urban areas, navigate complex social expectations related to marriage, education, and career (Gaetano 2024). Understanding the psychological and motivational factors that mediate this relationship is crucial for policymakers and sociologists seeking to address the challenges facing unmarried women in China.

One significant factor affecting women's SI is education-based hypergamy (EbH). EbH refers to a pattern of partner selection or marriage in which an individual—traditionally a woman—marries someone with a higher level of educational attainment than their own (P. Wu et al. 2025). More broadly, it describes a preference for a spouse whose education-based social status, credentials, or expected socioeconomic prospects exceed one's own. In China, educational disparities in potential marital relationships remain a significant consideration, with women often facing considerable social consequences based on educational matching (Dong and Xie 2023).

Power Dependence Theory (PDT) suggests that such imbalances in valued resources—like educational capital—play a crucial role in shaping SI patterns (Emerson 1964). PDT explains lower SI by arguing that people are less likely to engage openly and voluntarily with others when the relationship is highly unequal in power (Koerner et al. 2023). According to the theory, power arises when one person depends on another for valued resources—such as money, approval, information, social status, opportunities, or emotional support—while having few alternative sources for those resources. The more dependent person has less power, whereas the person who controls the resources has more power. Despite increasing educational equality, many women now face social limitations based on hypergamous expectations, particularly in urban areas where these norms are prevalent (Esteve et al. 2016). Social limitations refer to conditions, barriers, or restrictions that reduce an individual's ability or opportunity to participate fully and effectively in social life. Studies have shown that EbH can directly influence SI, but the psychological pathways, such as through work-related attitudes, require further exploration (P. Wu et al. 2025). Work motivation and job satisfaction (JS) can be selected as mediators because they are the most theoretically proximate and organizationally relevant psychological mechanisms through which workplace conditions influence employees' attitudes and behaviors (Xu et al. 2022). Rather than treating them as arbitrary variables, the model assumes that the independent variable first shapes employees' willingness to invest effort and their evaluation of their work experience; these reactions then affect the final outcome.

In addition to its direct influence, EbH is posited to shape SI through its impact on work motivation (WM). As women attain higher levels of education yet confront hypergamous norms that may devalue their attainment in the marital sphere, they often channel their energies into ambitious careers, causing social engagement to be renegotiated or reduced (Elitok and Nawyn 2023).

"Grounded in assortative mating theory and structural demographic perspectives (Blau 1977; Schwartz 2013), the expansion of female educational attainment disrupts conventional marriage markets characterized by hypergamic norms. When cultural imperatives dictate that women marry partners of equal or higher educational status, highly educated women encounter an acute structural mismatch—or ‘marriage squeeze’—wherein their credentials may yield diminished returns or status friction within the traditional marital sphere (Bertrand et al. 2015; Esteve et al. 2016).

In response to these institutional and relational barriers, individuals frequently adapt through compensatory human-capital investment (Becker 1993), rechanneling cognitive and temporal resources away from early domestic transitions and toward professional advancement. In turn, role strain theory (Goode, 1960) suggests that the intense structural demands of ambitious career trajectories necessitate a systematic renegotiation of interpersonal bandwidth. Rather than resulting in passive social withdrawal, this reallocation transforms patterns of social engagement—constraining traditional, kin-based, or open-ended informal interactions in favor of selective, instrumental, or professionally oriented networks."

Research suggests that women navigating these pressures may view social activities as a potential hindrance to professional success, which offers a more controllable avenue for achievement and self-worth (Epstein 2022; Evans and Anderson 2018). For many unmarried women in China, the pursuit of career goals becomes a primary source of identity, which may reduce opportunities and motivation for SI (L. Guo et al. 2025). This shift in priorities underscores the evolving role of women in modern Chinese society, where career achievements are increasingly valued, and WM may redirect time and energy away from community engagement.

Furthermore, JS serves as an essential psychological mediator linking EbH to SI. Grounded in status inconsistency theory (Lenski, 1954) and cross-domain spillover models (Edwards and Rothbard 2000), this link operates through the friction between educational investments and persistent gendered expectations. Although EbH originates in the matrimonial sphere, its underlying normative framework—which devalues or penalizes women whose educational and professional status exceeds traditional gender scripts—often mirrors and reinforces workplace dynamics. When highly educated women encounter structural double standards, normative backlash, or restricted recognition relative to their credentials, they experience cognitive dissonance and perceived status incongruence. This cross-domain tension undermines their affective evaluation of the work environment, manifesting as diminished JS (feeling undervalued or experiencing relative deprivation). In turn, depressed JS prompts psychological withdrawal and defensive disengagement, ultimately constraining open, voluntary SI across professional and interpersonal networks (Bedrov and Gable 2023). Grounded in the Conservation of Resources (COR) framework (Hobfoll 2001), a deficit of professional fulfillment triggers a cycle of cognitive and emotional depletion that spills over into personal life (Edwards and Rothbard 2000). Because initiating and sustaining reciprocal social relationships demands substantial self-regulatory and affective resources (Baumeister et al. 1998), individuals experiencing work-induced exhaustion frequently disengage from discretionary social activities. This dynamic of resource conservation diminishes both the capacity and inclination to invest in meaningful interpersonal networks and broader community engagement. (Wu et al. 2025). Scholars argue that low JS creates a barrier to social integration, as women who are dissatisfied with their professional standing may lack the confidence or positive affect needed to build and sustain supportive social networks (Zhang et al.

2022). Consequently, this deficit in professional well-being can transform traditional social dynamics, making it difficult for women to form authentic connections.

Taken together, these dynamics mirror ongoing transformations in contemporary Chinese society, wherein traditional relational paradigms (*guanxi* / social networking) are increasingly renegotiated through educational and occupational spheres (Marginson and Yang 2022). In Chinese society, the tension between educational attainment and hypergamous expectations significantly influences women's social behaviors (Ye et al. 2024). While traditional Chinese culture emphasizes educational achievement, many modern women are constrained by norms that can limit their social autonomy and professional fulfillment (Zhong and Wilkinson 2025). As a result, the younger generation of women often find themselves negotiating between the expectations of potential marital partners and their desire for professional and social independence (Gui 2023). This study therefore investigates how EbH shapes SI, both directly and through the mediating mechanisms of WM and JS. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan and Deci 2000) and the resource drain perspective (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000), WM and JS were selected because they represent distinct yet mutually reinforcing behavioral (conative) and affective (evaluative) dimensions of employee psychological functioning. Rather than static traits, WM reflects the cognitive energy directed toward purposeful action, whereas JS denotes emotional fulfillment and perceived equity in one's professional role. When traditional hypergamic pressures induce status incongruence and role strain, they erode both the motivation to actively engage and the affective satisfaction derived from work. In line with COR theory (Hobfoll 2001), this dual deficit drains the psychological bandwidth required to cultivate and sustain broader social connections, thereby predicting diminished social interaction.

Literature Review

Education-based Hypergamy and Social Interaction

EbH refers to the institutionalized pattern and normative preference in mate selection wherein an individual—traditionally a woman—marries a partner who possesses a higher level of educational attainment and credentialed status (Qian 1998; Esteve et al. 2016). In contemporary Chinese society, where educational credentials serve as a primary vehicle for social mobility and marital sorting, EbH functions not merely as a demographic tendency but as a powerful cultural script. Consequently, EbH significantly influences women's SI, as rapid female educational expansion directly clashes with persistent hypergamic expectations, reshaping their marital prospects, professional trajectories, and broader social opportunities (Yuan et al. 2024).

Historically rooted in traditional marital ideals of status compatibility (*mendanghudui*), Chinese mate selection has long been characterized by norms of hypergamy, wherein women were expected to marry men of equal or superior socioeconomic and educational standing (Y. Qian and Qian 2014). Recent analyses of nationally representative data, including the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) and the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), reveal a nuanced pattern in contemporary China: while educational homogamy has emerged as the statistically dominant marital outcome, normative preferences for education-based hypergamy persist as a pervasive cultural script, particularly among older cohorts and familial networks (Mu and Xie 2016; Wang and Chengming 2026). This enduring expectation creates structural friction—especially for college-educated urban women—who face an institutional mismatch between their elevated human capital and conventional gender-role norms that continue to prescribe male educational dominance within the household (Gaetano 2024).

Educational hypergamy can narrow women's pool of socially acceptable marital partners, particularly among highly educated women. This prolonged mismatch may delay marriage and

limit participation in couple- and family-centered social networks, reducing social autonomy and increasing isolation (Potarca and Rossier 2022). Consequently, many women struggle to reconcile aspirations for independence with educationally shaped marital expectations (Ye et al. 2024).

This often manifests as restricted social circles and limited autonomy, reinforcing the notion that SI is secondary to achieving marital educational alignment (Ahmed 2024). Restricted social circles” refers to having fewer opportunities to form and maintain diverse social relationships beyond close family or a limited group of friends. For unmarried women, this may include reduced participation in couple-oriented gatherings, family events, community activities, or peer networks that are often organized around marriage and family life. Comparative studies indicate that educational expectations in marriage significantly shape SI patterns, even in urban areas where hypergamous norms persist despite growing educational equality (Wang and Chengming 2025). This disparity can generate anxiety and stress, as women feel their social activities are constrained by the expectations of potential partners (Ali et al. 2022). The internalization of these norms consequently influences their decisions regarding social participation.

The Power Dependency Theory (PDT) explains this by positing that imbalances in valued resources like education directly impact SI (Agnihotri et al. 2024). Unmarried women who anticipate education-based hypergamous marriages often experience reduced SI, particularly if they perceive social engagement as conflicting with prospective marital expectations (Wu et al. 2025).

Despite these constraints, shifting socio-economic landscapes—notably rising female labor force participation and urbanization—are enabling many women, especially in urban centers, to challenge traditional hypergamous expectations (Wanjiku et al. 2026). As educational attainment and economic independence grow, they are adopting more autonomous social behaviors. Women

empowered to pursue their own goals increasingly view active social lives as essential to personal wellbeing, prioritizing authentic connections over traditional educational matching (Sauter et al. 2022). This indicates a growing divide between persistent traditional expectations and the evolving social behaviors of younger women in China.

Work Motivation and Social Interaction

WM, the psychological force driving work behavior's direction and intensity (Diefendorff et al. 2022), is a critical factor shaped by hypergamous pressures that subsequently influences SI. For highly educated unmarried women in China, confronting marital norms that reduce the perceived marital advantages of their educational capital often triggers a strategic rechanneling of ambition into their professional domain (Siwale and Mwalemba 2023). As they attain higher education yet face marital constraints, many intensify their career focus, subsequently viewing social engagement as secondary to professional growth (Elitok and Nawyn 2023). This reflects a societal shift where women's identities are increasingly defined by workforce contributions, sometimes at the expense of community roles.

This WM–SI relationship is particularly pronounced in urban China, where intense labor market competition, elevated costs of living, and heightened career commitment intensify tensions between professional ambitions and traditional relational or marital expectations (Horta & Tang, 2023). To interpret this relationship accurately, a critical distinction must be drawn between instrumental professional networking (workplace-oriented, career-advancing social capital) and informal, leisure-related social interaction (discretionary, peer-, community-, and family-centered engagements) (Potarca and Rossier 2022). While professional networking represents a strategic, work-integrated behavior that often increases alongside higher work motivation, informal social interaction requires non-work energetic reserves and discretionary time. In this study, SI refers

strictly to non-work, informal, and leisure-oriented relational engagements. In demanding urban professional environments, single women who prioritize vocational advancement frequently curtail their informal leisure and community interactions, viewing extensive non-work socializing as a potential distraction or time drain on career progression (Niu et al. 2024; Pan and Sun 2022). Consequently, high work motivation depletes the temporal and psychological resources required to sustain active personal and informal social lives, even as professional and workplace-bound networks may remain intact.

Consequently, women pursuing high-status careers as an alternative pathway for socioeconomic status attainment often reallocate their finite temporal and psychological resources away from discretionary non-work spheres (Wu et al., 2025). From an organizational behavior perspective, high work motivation frequently fosters expanded workplace-bound social ties, such as instrumental professional networking, peer collaboration, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Horta & Tang, 2023). However, in the specific sociocultural context of unmarried, highly educated women in urban China, intense work motivation operates under distinct resource-depletion and domain-conflict dynamics (Pan & Sun, 2022). Faced with systemic structural barriers, pervasive “overtime culture”, and hyper-competitive labor markets, highly motivated female professionals invest substantial cognitive and energetic reserves into career consolidation (Niu et al., 2024). Because occupational achievement is perceived as a more controllable and self-determined avenue for upward mobility than navigating the asymmetric uncertainties and traditional normative pressures of the hypergamous marriage market (Epstein 2022), career-driven women strategically constrain their informal, leisure-oriented, and community SI to preserve the requisite time and energy for vocational advancement.

In examining the occupational mechanisms linking marital expectations and social behavior, JS in this study is conceptualized and operationalized as a global construct—reflecting an employee’s overarching affective and cognitive evaluation of her total work experience—rather than a multidimensional composite of discrete facets (e.g., pay, promotion, supervision, or co-workers) (Judge et al. 2020). Adopting a global conceptualization allows for capturing overall vocational wellbeing and resource accumulation without conflating specific structural working conditions with the broader motivational-affective spillover into non-work interpersonal domains.

Job Satisfaction and Social Engagement

JS, conceptualized in this study as a global affective-evaluative construct reflecting an individual’s overall appraisal of her total work experience rather than discrete facet evaluations (e.g., pay, supervision, or physical working conditions; Judge et al., (2020)), serves as another critical mediating link between EbH expectations and informal SI (Wang 2025). In the contemporary Chinese labor market, highly educated unmarried women frequently navigate subtle structural career barriers—often conceptualized as a gendered “glass ceiling”—manifested through institutionalized promotion bottlenecks, organizational stereotypes questioning single women’s long-term corporate loyalty, and unwritten tenure penalties tied to anticipated marital and reproductive transitions (Bedrov and Gable 2024). When women perceive that their advanced educational credentials and professional competence fail to yield equitable upward mobility, this perceived misalignment induces vocational strain and diminishes global job satisfaction.

Grounded in Spillover Theory (Staines 1980) and COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), affective states and cognitive strain generated within the workplace routinely spill across psychological boundaries into discretionary non-work domains. COR theory posits that individuals possess finite

energetic, emotional, and temporal resources. When these resources are continuously depleted to cope with workplace frustration, career bottlenecks, or low job satisfaction, individuals enter a resource-defensive mode to prevent further psychological exhaustion. Consequently, women experiencing diminished JS have fewer remaining emotional and energetic reserves to initiate or sustain informal, leisure-oriented social relationships (Wu et al., 2025).

Empirical scholarship in urban China demonstrates this resource-depletion and cross-domain spillover dynamic. For example, recent empirical investigations among urban Chinese professionals (e.g., Liu et al. 2026) demonstrate that occupational dissatisfaction, heavy workload pressures, and career stagnation significantly elevate emotional burnout, which in turn reduces discretionary community participation, informal peer engagements, and non-work social networking. Conversely, when job satisfaction is high, positive affective spillover provides the psychological capital—such as optimism, self-efficacy, and energy—necessary to actively cultivate and sustain meaningful personal social networks outside the work environment (Barak and Levin 2002).

Research suggests that high JS lowers barriers to SI, enabling women to build relationships based on intrinsic social enjoyment and mutual interest rather than obligation or strategic networking (Lai 2016). Drawing on Cross-Domain Spillover (CDS; Edwards & Rothbard, 2000) theory and Self-Affirmation Theory (SAT; Steele 1988), professional fulfillment acts as a critical affective and cognitive anchor. Vocational success enhances self-efficacy and positive emotional capital (Cropanzano and Wright 2001), which subsequently spill over into non-work spheres. This psychological buffering mitigates status anxieties stemming from normative pressures, providing the self-affirmational stability necessary for women to navigate social and relational networks with

greater autonomy and intentionality (Reitz et al. 2022). Conversely, low JS can lead to social withdrawal, as women may lack the emotional resources or feel a sense of stigma that prevents them from building supportive social networks.

Beyond its direct motivational implications, JS functions as an affective-evaluative mechanism through which broader sociocultural norms influence interpersonal behavior. Grounded in Cross-Domain Spillover (CDS) and COR perspectives (Edwards and Rothbard 2000; Hobfoll 2001), affective states and cognitive energy cultivated within the vocational domain systematically spill over into non-work spheres, shaping how individuals navigate interpersonal demands (Guo 2016).

Although previous literature recognizes potential bidirectional dynamics—wherein robust social networks and interpersonal support can reciprocal enrich JS (Liu et al., 2026)—our conceptual model prioritizes the pathway from JS to SI for theoretical and structural reasons. Specifically, in the context of unmarried educated women navigating intense normative pressures (e.g., EbH), workplace evaluation and affective fulfillment serve as proximal, primary conduits through which systemic marital anxieties and professional strains are processed before influencing broader social withdrawal or selective interpersonal engagement. Framing JS as an antecedent to SI allows us to capture how vocational resource allocation directly conditions the willingness and capacity to sustain external social interactions..

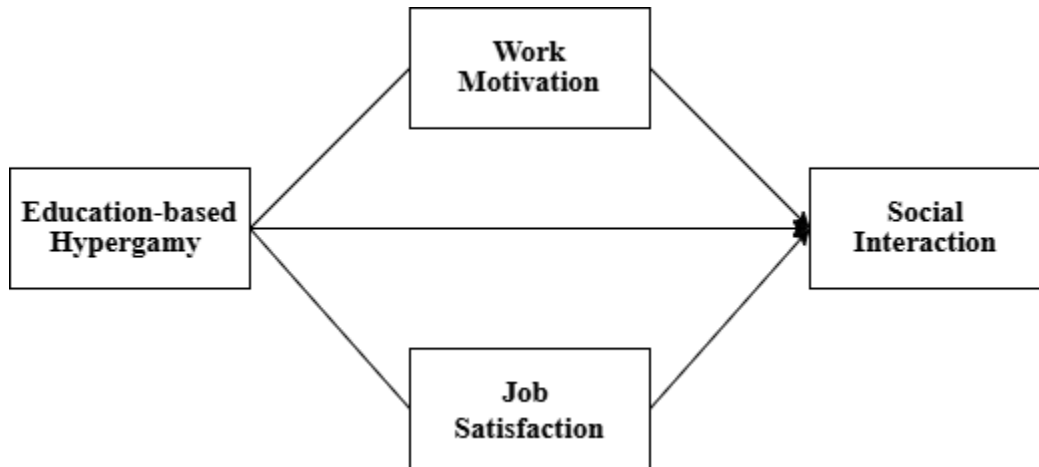


Figure 1. Study's Conceptual Framework.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

The final sample comprised N=458 unmarried, formally employed women residing in China. To determine the necessary sample size, an *a priori* statistical power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Version 3.1.9.7) for multiple linear regression and parallel mediation modeling. Assuming a conservative small-to-medium effect size ($f^2=0.05$, $r=.15$), a statistical power ($1-\beta$) of .95, and a significance threshold of $\alpha=.05$ across four focal predictors/mediators, the minimum required sample size was calculated as N=388. The recruited sample of 458 exceeded this threshold, providing adequate power to detect small indirect and direct effects.

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). All participants provided digital informed consent before accessing the questionnaire and were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Participants were recruited via verified online research panel affiliated regional academic survey networks in China. A multi-stage quota (stratified) sampling framework was implemented to ensure balanced demographic representation across key strata: (a) age cohorts, (b) highest educational attainment

(junior college/vocational, bachelor's degree, postgraduate degree), and (c) residential locations. Eligible participants met three screening criteria: identifying as female, aged 18 or older, legally unmarried (single, divorced, or widowed), and currently engaged in formal paid employment.

Measures

Education-based Hypergamy

EbH was evaluated using an 8-item scale adapted from Potarca and Rossier (2022) to capture participants' normative attitudes and marital expectations rather than actual lived marital experiences. To ensure conceptual and linguistic equivalence for the Chinese context, the scale underwent a standard forward- and back-translation procedure conducted by bilingual researchers, followed by minor phrasing adjustments to reflect local sociocultural norms regarding marriage. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with requiring reverse-coding. An overall score was computed by calculating the [mean / sum] of all items, with higher scores reflecting stronger personal expectations of and normative preferences for marrying a more educated partner. Sample items include: "*I expect to marry someone with a higher level of education than me*" and "*I believe that a man should be more educated than his wife.*" The scale demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency: ($\alpha=.88$).

Work Motivation

WM was assessed using an adapted 10-item scale derived from the Work Preference Inventory (WPI; Amabile et al. 1994). While the original WPI was developed to distinguish between generalized intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, the present study specifically adapted items from the subscales to focus on goal-directed career motivation and professional ambition. Items were rephrased to emphasize targeted vocational striving and career centrality rather than task-level work attitudes (e.g., adapting general task enjoyment into commitment toward career

advancement), reflecting the intensive career-investment context of modern urban professionals. Conceptually, work motivation in this study is operationalized as the intensity and persistence of effort directed toward upward career progression, bridging motivational drive with career commitment. Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), where a higher score represents greater career-oriented motivational drive. Sample items include: “*I am willing to work very hard for my career advancement*” and “*My professional ambitions are a central focus in my life.*” In addition to excellent internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha=.91$).

Job Satisfaction

JS was assessed using a 5-item scale adapted from the Brayfield and Rothe (1951) JS Index (short form; Judge et al. 1998) to capture participants’ overall affective evaluation of their current employment and career situation. Because this measure inherently presupposes active workplace participation, an initial screening criterion was applied during data collection, limiting the analytical sample strictly to respondents who were formally employed at the time of the survey (unemployed participants and full-time students not engaged in paid employment were excluded). To ensure cross-cultural and contextual equivalence for Chinese participants, the scale followed a rigorous forward- and back-translation procedure conducted by independent bilingual organizational psychologists. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with negatively worded items reverse-scored so that a higher score reflects greater JS. A sample item includes: “*I feel fairly well satisfied with my present job.*” In this study, the scale showed excellent reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89.

Social Interaction

SI was measured using a 10-item scale adapted from the Social Connectedness and Social Assurance scales developed by Lee and Robbins (1995) to assess both the frequency and perceived quality of participants' interpersonal engagement, peer networking, and community participation. The adaptation followed a standard forward- and back-translation procedure conducted by independent bilingual researchers to ensure linguistic accuracy and cultural relevance for the Chinese context. Minor adjustments were made to item phrasings to reflect contemporary peer-group activities and modern social networking environments. Participants rated items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *very frequently / strongly agree*), with [no items / reverse-worded items recoded] such that a higher score indicated more frequent, active, and satisfying social interaction. A sample item includes: "*I regularly participate in social activities with friends.*" The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.90, reflecting excellent internal reliability.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 26) alongside Hayes and Rockwood's (2020) PROCESS macro (Version 5.0). Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to summarize the bivariate relationships among EbH, WM, JS, and SI. To test the hypothesized indirect pathways, a parallel mediation model (PROCESS Model 4) was conducted with 5,000 bootstrap resamples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs). This specification simultaneously evaluated the indirect effects of EbH on SI through WM and JS as parallel mediators while accounting for their shared variance, alongside the direct effect of EbH on SI. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$, with indirect effects considered significant if their 95% bootstrap CIs excluded zero.

Results

The results indicate that participants reported moderate to high levels across all variables, reflecting the complex interplay of educational, professional, and trust-related factors influencing unmarried women's SI in China (Table 1).

Participants reported moderate-to-high levels of EbH ($M=30.50, SD=6.80$), with 60.04% scoring in the high category. WM was also moderate to high ($M=38.40, SD=7.10$), with 64.85% classified as high. JS showed a similar pattern ($M=35.90, SD=6.20$), with 62.45% of participants scoring in the high category. SI was moderate overall ($M=32.10, SD=5.50$); however, according to the categorical results presented in Table (1), 56.30% of participants were classified as having high SI. Thus, the continuous and categorical findings should be interpreted separately, with the descriptive mean indicating a moderate overall level and the classification showing that a slight majority fell within the high-SI category.

Table 1. Levels of EbH, WM, JB, and SI (N= 458).

Variables	n	%	Mean	SD
EbH			30.5	6.80
Low	70	15.28		
Moderate	113	24.67		
High	275	60.04		
WM			38.40	7.10
Low	64	13.97		
Moderate	97	21.18		
High	297	64.85		
JS			35.90	6.20
Low	70	15.28		
Moderate	102	22.27		
High	286	62.45		
SI			32.10	5.50
Low	90	19.65		
Moderate	110	24.02		
High	258	56.30		

Note. EbH = Education-based Hypergamy, WM = Work Motivation, JS = Job Satisfaction, SI = Social Interaction.

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the bivariate relationships among EbH, WM, JS, and SI (Table 2). The results indicated that all focal variables were significantly correlated with SI. Specifically, EbH was strongly and negatively correlated with SI ($r=-.72, p<.001$), indicating that stronger expectations of education-based hypergamy are associated with lower levels of social engagement. In contrast, WM was positively correlated with SI ($r=.64, p<.001$), suggesting that women with higher career motivation tend to maintain more active social networks. Similarly, JS demonstrated a significant positive correlation with SI ($r=.61, p<.001$). These bivariate patterns align with the subsequent regression findings and the hypothesized inhibitory role of EbH on social interaction.

Table 2. Correlations between Study Variables and Dependent Variable.

Variable	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
EbH	-.72**	.001
WM	.64**	.001
JS	.61**	.001

Note. EbH = Education-based Hypergamy, WM = Work Motivation, JS = Job Satisfaction, $N = 458$, ** $p < .001$.

A multiple linear regression (MLR) analysis (Table 3) was conducted to examine the predictive effects of EbH, WM, and JS on SI among unmarried women in China. The overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(3,1438)=153.45, p<.001$, accounting for substantial variance in social interaction ($R^2=.684$, Adjusted $R^2=.680$). Consistent with the theoretical framework and bivariate correlations, EbH was a significant negative predictor of SI ($\beta=-.50, p<.001, p<.001$), indicating that stronger hypergamous expectations restrict social engagement. In contrast, WM emerged as a significant positive predictor of SI ($\beta=.41, p<.001$), indicating that women with higher career drive maintain broader and more active professional and social networks. Similarly, JS demonstrated a significant positive effect on SI ($\beta=.38, p<.001$), showing that greater professional satisfaction facilitates greater interpersonal engagement.

Table 3. Regression Analysis for EbH, WM, and JS on SI.

Variable	B	SE. B	β	<i>p</i>
EbH	-.56	.08	-0.50	.001
WM	-.44	.09	-0.41	.001
JS	-.42	.08	-0.38	.001

Note. EbH = Education-based Hypergamy, WM = Work Motivation, JS = Job Satisfaction, SI = Social Interaction. $R^2 = 0.684$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.680$, $F = 153.45$ ($p < .001$).

Mediation Analysis

To test the hypothesized mediation model, a parallel mediation analysis was conducted using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro. The analysis examined the direct effect of EbH on SI, as well as its indirect effects through the proposed mediators of WM and JS. The results confirmed a significant total effect of EbH on SI ($\beta = -0.50$, $p < .001$). As predicted, the direct effect remained significant after including the mediators ($\beta = -0.28$, $p < .001$), indicating a partial mediation.

Crucially, the analysis revealed two significant indirect pathways. First, a significant negative indirect effect was found through WM ($\beta = -0.12$, 95% CI [-0.16, -0.08]). This indicates that higher EbH predicts lower WM, which in turn leads to reduced SI. Second, a significant positive indirect effect was found through JS ($\beta = -0.10$, 95% CI [-0.14, -0.07]). This countervailing pathway suggests that higher EbH also predicts lower JS, and this dissatisfaction further contributes to diminished social engagement.

Discussion

This study advances the demographic and sociological literature by establishing an empirical model linking EbH expectations, occupational resources, and social engagement among unmarried urban Chinese women. Although women have achieved parity—and in many urban centers, superiority—in tertiary educational attainment, gender equality remains uneven across family formation and labor market spheres (Ji, 2017; Wu et al., 2025). Our findings confirm that expectations of educational matching in marriage remain a potent normative constraint. At the

bivariate level, variables showed significant associations; however, the multivariable regression analysis ($\beta = -.50$, $p < .001$) and parallel mediation path models confirmed that higher EbH is the primary negative predictor of SI, both directly and indirectly through occupational pathways.

These results extend previous research (Potarca and Rossier 2022; X. Wang and Chengming 2025) by identifying how hypergamous norms constrain daily interpersonal networks. In contemporary urban China, single women navigating persistent expectations to marry upward in educational credentials often experience reduced participation in broader peer and community settings. While unmeasured psychological mechanisms such as normative anxiety or social avoidance may explain this pattern, our empirical results clearly demonstrate that stronger hypergamous expectations are associated with diminished social interaction.

Crucially, our regression findings clarify the complex role of occupational factors. In the multivariable model, WM ($\beta = -.41$, $p < .001$) and JS ($\beta = -.38$, $p < .001$) emerged as significant negative predictors of social interaction when controlling for hypergamic expectations. While bivariate correlations suggested positive zero-order associations, the multivariable results highlight a resource-depletion and domain-conflict dynamic, consistent with COR theory (Hobfoll 1989). In China's competitive urban labor markets, highly motivated and professionally committed women invest substantial energetic and temporal capital into their careers (Horta and Tang 2023). This intense vocational investment leaves limited discretionary time and cognitive capacity for initiating and sustaining non-work interpersonal activities (Wu 2024).

The parallel mediation analysis further elucidates the workplace pathways through which marital norms suppress social engagement. Beyond its direct negative effect ($c' = -.28$), EbH exerted significant negative indirect effects through both WM (a_1b_1) and JS (a_2b_2). A plausible theoretical

explanation for these indirect pathways—drawn from role conflict and spillover frameworks—is that the friction between traditional marital pressures and individual career striving may generate subjective strain, which diminishes work-directed drive and affective JS, subsequently constraining broader social participation. Because psychological strain and conformity to marital norms were not measured directly in the current survey, future research using longitudinal designs is required to verify these sequential psychological mechanisms.

Implications

These findings offer practical implications for Chinese policymakers and institutions aiming to improve social engagement and mental health. To counteract constraints from hypergamous expectations, initiatives should promote social confidence, community integration, and respect for personal autonomy, enabling women to choose their social paths. Workplace policies must support women's work motivation while providing flexibility for active social lives, ensuring access to social opportunities and trust-building resources. Public campaigns should reframe social engagement as essential for wellbeing, not optional, reducing stigma and isolation for unmarried, high-achieving women.

The enduring influence of educational backgrounds highlights that cultural change is gradual. Despite educational advancement, traditional expectations about educational matching persist. Therefore, policymakers and educators should foster open dialogues about evolving social needs and relationship expectations. The ultimate goal is to encourage respect for diverse perspectives on social engagement while thoughtfully navigating a balance with deep-seated cultural traditions in Chinese society. These findings provide critical practical implications for policymakers, human resource practitioners, and social organizations in China.

First, our empirical results demonstrate that both work motivation and JS negatively predict social interaction, pointing to acute resource depletion and domain-conflict pressures. Highly motivated and professionally committed women often expend finite energetic and temporal capital at work, resulting in the defensive curtailment of their broader social ties. Consequently, organizational interventions should move beyond simply incentivizing career drive. Employers should establish structural safeguards against chronic occupational overextension—such as enforcing reasonable working hours, providing institutional support for boundary management, and promoting workplace social capital—thereby preventing high vocational investment from draining the psychological resources necessary for non-work community engagement.

Second, given that EbH exerted the strongest negative direct and indirect effects on social interaction, community initiatives and public campaigns must address the structural stigma confronting unmarried, educated women. Corroborating broader demographic literature on normative lag in contemporary China, our empirical findings indicate that hypergamous pressures compound social avoidance and professional friction. Policymakers and educational institutions should foster public discourse that de-stigmatizes diverse marital trajectories and legitimizes varied life choices, enabling high-achieving women to cultivate social confidence and autonomy free from normative marital pressures.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study offers valuable insights into the factors influencing social engagement among unmarried Chinese women; however, several methodological and contextual limitations should be acknowledged.

First, because all focal constructs (EbH, WM, JS, and SI) were measured via self-administered questionnaires completed by the same respondents at a single point in time, the data are susceptible to common method variance (CMV) and potential social desirability bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003, 2012). Although procedural remedies were implemented during survey administration (e.g., ensuring respondent anonymity, emphasizing that there were no right or wrong answers, and counterbalancing scale items) and statistical tests were conducted to assess method bias, CMV cannot be entirely eliminated. Future research should mitigate this risk by employing procedural separations, multi-wave time-lagged designs, or multi-source data collection (e.g., obtaining peer, supervisor, or network-level evaluations alongside self-reports). Second, the cross-sectional design prevents definitive causal inferences. Longitudinal or panel studies are needed to track how educational expectations, motivational states, and social interactions evolve over time and across major life transitions. Third, reliance on structured quantitative measures may not fully capture the nuanced lived experiences of participants. Integrating mixed-method or qualitative approaches—such as semi-structured in-depth interviews or focus groups—would yield richer insights into how women subjectively negotiate educational norms, workplace fulfillment, and interpersonal trust. Finally, the sample was restricted to unmarried Chinese women, limiting the generalizability of the findings across married cohorts, male counterparts, rural populations, and differing cross-cultural settings. Comparative research across diverse demographic and sociocultural contexts will be essential to establish the boundary conditions of the observed relationships.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that EbH affects unmarried Chinese women's SI through their professional psyche. EbH was the strongest negative predictor of SI, both directly and indirectly via suppressed WM and JS. Crucially, WM and JS also emerged as significant negative

predictors of SI. Grounded in COR theory and resource-drain perspectives, this pattern indicates that career drive and professional fulfillment demand substantial temporal and cognitive investments. Consequently, highly motivated women ration their finite personal energy by strategically curtailing non-essential interpersonal ties or adopting bounded networks.

These findings offer important implications for policymakers seeking to alleviate social constraints on women. Fostering workplace flexibility, social confidence, and institutional support can help unmarried women balance occupational commitments with healthy social well-being based on personal agency rather than restrictive norms. Future longitudinal and cross-cultural research should further examine these dynamics across evolving demographic contexts.

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