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The Impact of Mate Selection Methods on Marital Satisfaction ——An Investigation Based on CFPS 2010-2020 Data

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Abstract: This study utilizes data from the China Family Panel Studies collected between 2010 and 2020 to investigate how mate selection methods influence marital satisfaction. The analysis employs ordered logit models, fixed-effects models, and propensity score matching techniques. Key findings reveal that individuals who met their partners through self-initiated channels such as school or workplace report higher marital satisfaction than those who relied on introductions by others. The effect of mate selection methods proves particularly significant for specific demographic groups including parents, highly educated individuals, high-income earners, urban residents with non-agricultural household registration, and male respondents. Further examination yields two important insights. First, marital satisfaction tends to be lower when couples meet through family introductions compared to friend introductions. Second, online-initiated relationships demonstrate lower satisfaction levels than offline self-initiated relationships. These results suggest practical implications. Educational institutions, employers, and government agencies should implement programs to expand young adults' social networks. Couples who met through introductions should consciously nurture emotional connections in their daily lives. Matchmakers would benefit from placing greater emphasis on emotional compatibility when facilitating potential matches.

Keywords: Mate Selection Methods; Marital Satisfaction; Emotional Bonding; CFPS

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1.Introduction

Currently, China's youth are witnessing an evolving trend in mate selection methods: a decline in arranged introductions and a rise in self-initiated encounters. Among those who meet through introductions, matches facilitated by relatives are becoming less common, while those arranged by classmates, colleagues, and friends are growing in prevalence. However, despite the increasing prevalence of singlehood and delayed marriage among young people, arranged introductions remain a significant approach to finding partners, with parents and other relatives continuing to play crucial roles in the matchmaking process[1]. Family gatherings during holidays often transform into venues for marriage pressure, sparking frequent discussions on social media platforms and websites. A substantial proportion of parents still regularly attend matchmaking events on behalf of their children. Meanwhile, novel mate selection methods continue to emerge, such as online dating platforms and television matchmaking shows[2].

During the transition from singlehood to marriage, young people's mate selection patterns undergo significant changes due to limited social circles: self-initiated encounters decrease while arranged introductions increase[3]. These different approaches to

finding partners directly impact marital matching outcomes[4]. However, existing research on mate selection methods remains limited, leaving us uncertain whether such variations affect marital satisfaction. Should arranged introductions indeed lead to lower marital satisfaction, our support for young people's partner selection should extend beyond facilitating external matchmaking arrangements. Instead, we must develop innovative approaches to help expand their social networks and improve interaction methods to better connect with potential partners. This study therefore aims to investigate the impact of mate selection methods on marital satisfaction and examine how these relationships may vary across different demographic groups.

2.Literature Review

2.1 Research on Mate Selection Methods

Regarding the classification of mate selection methods, existing studies have proposed various typologies. Some researchers categorize them into three types: "parent-arranged marriages," "introduction-based meetings," and "self-initiated encounters."[5] Others adopt a binary classification of "introduction-based" versus "self-initiated" approaches[6]. In recent years, new media-facilitated mate selection methods have emerged, including television matchmaking shows and internet-based dating platforms. However, it's crucial to recognize that these new media platforms primarily serve as communication tools, while the fundamental participants in the matchmaking process—prospective partners, matchmakers, and potential spouses—remain unchanged. Consequently, the essential distinctions between different mate selection methods persist despite technological advancements.

Research has identified multiple factors influencing mate selection methods, including educational attainment, urban-rural background, age, income level, gender, and online dating experience. Educational level emerges as the most significant determinant: urban youth with bachelor's or associate degrees demonstrate higher rates of self-initiated partner selection compared to their counterparts with postgraduate degrees, while those with high school education or below show no significant difference from postgraduates in mate selection patterns.

The second key factor is urban-rural background. Current urban residents exhibit greater reliance on arranged introductions compared to those from rural areas, though no significant differences exist between residents of different urban locations. Income level exerts a relatively modest yet statistically significant influence, with higher-income individuals showing lower probabilities of choosing arranged introductions. Notably, research on rural populations remains limited. Studies indicate that as rural residents age, their likelihood of self-initiated partner selection decreases, while both online dating experience and extended education increase this tendency[7]. Among migrant populations, gender, age, and education level prove more influential than income or duration of migration, with younger, better-educated male migrants demonstrating stronger preferences for self-initiated partner selection[8]. These demographic factors—including education, occupation, urban-rural background, income, generation, and gender—also significantly affect marital satisfaction. When examining how mate selection methods influence other outcomes, researchers must account for these interrelated variables to avoid confounding effects.

2.2 The Impact of Mate Selection Methods on Marital Satisfaction

Current research on the relationship between mate selection methods and marital satisfaction remains limited, with existing studies primarily focusing on traditional matchmaking and emerging dating approaches. However, scholars have increasingly examined how mate selection methods influence marital matching patterns, as well as the subsequent effects of these matching patterns on marital satisfaction.

One pathway shows that compared to self-initiated acquaintance, friend-introduced matches show no significant differences in marital matching outcomes, while relative-introduced matches increase hypergamy where women marry partners with matching household registration, education level and occupational type, as well as homogamy with matching household registration and paternal education. Women in hypergamous marriages are less prone to depression and more likely to achieve higher life satisfaction, which also affects their marital satisfaction[9]. Therefore, relative-introduced matches may improve women's marital satisfaction by increasing educational hypergamy. However, this pathway cannot explain the impact of mate selection methods on men's marital satisfaction.

Another pathway is: self-initiated marriages typically develop emotions through daily life, while introduced marriages are more based on both parties' socioeconomic resources. The motivation for self-initiated marriages emphasizes interpersonal emotional factors, whereas that for non-self-initiated marriages focuses on material economic and familial social factors. For both men and women, interpersonal emotional factors in marital motivation can positively predict ten marriage satisfaction-related indicators including spousal personality compatibility, communication and economic arrangements, while material economic or familial social factors in marital motivation negatively predict these indicators[10]. Thus, mate selection methods can influence marital satisfaction through marital motivation.

3.Theoretical Analysis and Research Hypotheses

This study categorizes mate selection methods into two distinct types: "self-initiated acquaintance" and "non-self-initiated acquaintance". The "non-self-initiated acquaintance" classification encompasses partnerships formed through introductions by friends, parents or other relatives, as well as those established via marriage-oriented platforms and activities including television matchmaking programs, online dating platforms, and large-scale offline matchmaking events. Conversely, "self-initiated acquaintance" refers to relationships developed through organic interactions in settings such as educational institutions and workplaces, or through non-marriage-oriented online platforms and activities where the primary purpose is not partner matching.

Arranged marriages typically undergo rigorous matching processes, where matchmakers primarily apply the "matching social status" criterion for selection[11]. However, such social parity does not necessarily guarantee marital happiness or satisfaction[12][13]. The arranged approach places considerable emphasis on first impressions, particularly physical appearance. Due to the "primacy effect," individuals who are less articulate or possess less favorable physical attributes may be overlooked during initial encounters, despite their other outstanding qualities, consequently losing potential relationship opportunities. This introduction-based method often neglects emotional compatibility between partners, resulting in marital foundations that may lack stability[14]. In contrast, relationships developed through self-initiated acquaintance are predominantly rooted in mutual attraction rather than external marital pressures. Partners who meet through self-initiated channels typically cultivate their relationships through academic or social activities, where interactions occur more naturally with minimal utilitarian motives. The extended period of mutual exposure allows for deeper understanding and greater acceptance of each other's external imperfections. Consequently, families established through self-initiated acquaintance tend to demonstrate higher life satisfaction compared to those formed through arranged introductions, which correspondingly enhances their overall marital satisfaction.

Based on the preceding analysis, this study proposes its first research hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: Compared with non-self-initiated acquaintance, self-initiated acquaintance leads to higher marital satisfaction.

Compared to offline self-initiated acquaintance, online-initiated partnerships typically exhibit fewer shared living spaces, overlapping social networks, similar life experiences, and mutual interaction histories, all of which hinder emotional bonding. Furthermore, internet platforms abound with carefully curated profile pictures, retouched personal photos, and selectively positive life portrayals. These idealized representations significantly alter individuals' perceptions of potential partners and marriage, while reshaping their reference points for marital expectations. In contrast, those who meet partners through offline channels develop their understanding through direct social interactions, gaining more authentic perceptions of their counterparts. Their cognitions of potential partners and marital expectations typically derive from local marriage market conditions, their partner's authentic characteristics, and the marital statuses of close acquaintances. For couples meeting online, the polished partner images prevalent on social platforms like WeChat Moments and Weibo may inflate marital expectations[15]. When reality fails to meet these heightened expectations, marital satisfaction consequently declines[16].

Based on the above analysis, this study proposes its second research hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: Compared with offline self-initiated acquaintance, online self-initiated acquaintance results in lower marital satisfaction.

The identity of matchmakers significantly influences marital matching outcomes, which subsequently affects marital satisfaction. Colleagues and classmates represent close-knit groups within specific social spheres who maintain frequent

communication and strong connections with match-seekers. Their shared life experiences, emotional perspectives, and value systems enable them to better understand the expectations and requirements that match-seekers have for potential partners. Consequently, the candidates they introduce are more likely to develop emotional bonds with match-seekers.

In modern society, however, increasing social distance has emerged between individuals and their relatives. Relatives' matchmaking perspectives often substantially diverge from those of match-seekers themselves. As a result, the characteristics of candidates introduced by relatives frequently mismatch with match-seekers' preferences, making emotional connection more difficult to establish.

Based on the foregoing analysis, this study proposes its third research hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: Compared with friend-arranged introductions, relative-arranged introductions exert greater negative effects on marital satisfaction.

4.Empirical Analysis

4.1 Data, Variables, and Model Specification

4.1.1 Data Sample

The data for this study were drawn from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) project spanning 2010 to 2020. As a comprehensive longitudinal survey, CFPS systematically collects tri-dimensional data at community, household, and individual levels, capturing the current status and evolving trends of China's economic conditions, social development, demographic characteristics, and public health. The survey's nationally representative sample covers households and their members across 25 provincial-level administrative regions, including provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities directly under the central government, ensuring both substantial sample size and robust representativeness.

This study focuses on examining the impact of mate selection methods on marital satisfaction, and therefore selects currently married individuals as the research population. The final analytical sample comprises 12,883 valid observations.

4.1.2 Variable Specification

Independent variable: The independent variable in this study is mate selection method. According to the 2020 CFPS questionnaire, "any acquaintance made through marriage-oriented organizations or activities should be categorized as matchmaker-arranged," which includes partner selection via dating apps or participation in large-scale offline matchmaking events. This research operationally defines "self-initiated acquaintance" as meeting partners through schools, workplaces, residential communities, other physical locations, or internet platforms, coded as 1. Conversely, "non-self-initiated acquaintance" includes introductions by relatives, friends, or professional matchmakers, coded as 0. The variable was constructed by integrating mate selection method data from the CFPS database spanning 2010 to 2020.

Dependent Variable: Marital satisfaction serves as the dependent variable in this study. The CFPS questionnaire measures this construct through the item: "Overall, how satisfied are you with your current marriage/cohabitation relationship?" As a crucial indicator for assessing marital quality and personal wellbeing within marital relationships, the variable adopts a five-point Likert scale:1 = "Very dissatisfied".2 = "Dissatisfied".3 = "Neutral".4 = "Satisfied".5 = "Very satisfied".

Control Variables: In marital satisfaction research, the selection of control variables follows a principled approach. For studies examining independent variables with weak correlations to spousal interactions—such as internet usage patterns or media consumption—researchers typically control for individual and household characteristics[17][18]. Conversely, when investigating independent variables strongly associated with dyadic interactions—including spousal religious differences or gender role divisions—the analytical model generally incorporates individual characteristics, household attributes, and partner-specific factors as controls[19][20].

Since mate selection methods form the contextual background of premarital interactions, this study controls for variables across three dimensions: individual characteristics (including gender, health status, age, educational attainment, and current household registration type), household characteristics (comprising the logarithm of per capita household income and the total number of children), and spousal characteristics (covering spouse's educational level and age). Detailed definitions for all control variables incorporated in the analysis are provided in Table 1.

Table 1 Variable Definitions

	Definition and assignment	Minimum	Maximum
Dependent variable			
Marital satisfaction	1=Very dissatisfied, 5=Very satisfied	1	5
Independent variable			
Mate selection method	0=Non-self-initiated acquaintance, 1=Self-initiated acquaintance	0	1
Control variables			
Gender	0=Female, 1=Male	0	1
Age	2020 minus the respondent's birth year	18	88
Logarithm of household income per capita	Logarithm of household income per capita	4.200	14.514
Total number of children	Actual number of children raised by the individual	0	9
Education Level	1=Illiterate/semi-literate,2=Primary school,3=Junior high school,4=Senior high school/secondary specialized school/technical school/vocational high school,5=Junior college,6=Undergraduate,7=Master's degree,8=Doctoral degree	1	8
Health status	1=Very healthy,2=Quite healthy,3=Relatively healthy,4=Fair,5=Unhealthy	1	5
Current household registration	0=Non-agricultural household registration, 1=Agricultural household registration	0	1
Spouse's education level	1=Illiterate/semi-literate, 2=Primary school, 3=Junior high school, 4=Senior high school/secondary specialized school/technical school/vocational high school, 5=Junior college, 6=Undergraduate, 7=Master's degree, 8=Doctoral degree	1	8
Spouse's age	2020 minus the spouse's birth year	20	87

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of all variables, displaying means and standard deviations for the full sample as well as subsamples stratified by mate selection method (self-initiated vs. arranged). The marital satisfaction levels show minimal divergence between groups, with both cohorts reporting relatively high satisfaction (mean ≈4.49 on 5-point scale).

Regarding the control variables, the overall sample had an average age of approximately 50.5 years, with males accounting for about 49.5% of the total sample, and the average education level was 2.63. In the subsamples, individuals who met their partners through self-initiated acquaintance were younger, had more children, and exhibited better health status, higher educational attainment, and greater per capita household income compared to other groups.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Variable	Total sample(obs=12 864)		Self-initiated acquaintance(obs=2 961)		Non-self-initiated acquaintance(obs=9 903)	
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
Dependent variable						
Marital satisfaction	4.491	0.854	4.491	0.837	4.49	0.859
Independent variable						
Mate selection method	0.230	0.421	1	0	0	0
Control variables						

Variable	Total sample(obs=12 864)		Self-initiated acquaintance(obs=2 961)		Non-self-initiated acquaintance(obs=9 903)	
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
Education Level	2.630	1.274	3.091	1.357	2.492	1.215
Gender	0.497	0.500	0.52	0.500	0.490	0.500
Health status	2.989	1.224	3.10	1.140	2.956	1.246
Age	50.546	12.902	44.601	12.572	52.324	12.460
Current household registration	0.176	0.381	0.230	0.421	0.160	0.367
Logarithm of household income per capita	9.705	0.926	9.926	0.903	9.639	0.923
Total number of children	1.585	0.900	1.640	0.843	1.569	0.916
Spouse's education level	2.591	1.281	3.069	1.397	2.448	1.209
Spouse's age	50.551	12.932	44.480	12.537	52.366	12.488

4.1.3 Model Specification

In the CFPS questionnaire, marital satisfaction is measured as an ordinal variable (ranging from 1 to 5, corresponding to "very dissatisfied," "dissatisfied," "neutral," "satisfied," and "very satisfied"), making the ordered logit model appropriate for analysis. The ordinary least squares (OLS) model was not adopted because ordinal variables fail to meet the homoscedasticity requirement of OLS regression, and using OLS would lead to biased coefficient estimates. Drawing on existing research, which indicates that individual marital satisfaction is influenced by provincial-level factors, this study incorporates province fixed effects in the model[21][22]. The ordered logit model is specified as follows:

$$log=\frac{P(Y\leq y)}{1-P(Y\leq y)}=\theta_j-\alpha_{xi} \quad (1)$$

In the equation, x_i represents the independent variable of mate selection method, P denotes the conditional probability of mate selection method xi, and α_{xi} signifies the regression coefficient of the ith dependent variable on the independent variable x_i under the condition that the mate selection method takes the value x_i.

The preceding analysis demonstrates that both mate selection methods and marital satisfaction are subject to modernization effects. Variables including age, urban-rural background, educational attainment, gender, and age at first marriage influence both mate selection patterns and marital satisfaction outcomes. Moreover, individuals adopting different mate selection approaches exhibit systematic differences across generational cohorts, income levels, urban-rural backgrounds, and health status. Under these conditions, conventional Logit models cannot disentangle whether observed variations in marital satisfaction stem from mate selection methods or these underlying sample selection biases. The propensity score matching method addresses this by constructing comparison groups with minimized observable differences from the treatment group, enabling more accurate estimation of treatment effects to isolate the impact of mate selection methods on marital satisfaction. The implementation involves three key steps: First, we employ a Logit model to estimate each individual's probability of self-initiated mate selection during first marriage, converting these probabilities into propensity scores. Second, using nearest-neighbor matching without replacement based on these scores, we reconstruct balanced treatment and control groups. Finally, we estimate treatment effects using these matched samples and conduct ordered logit regression analyses on the matched dataset.

4.2 Ordered Logit Model Analysis of Mate Selection Methods' Impact on Marital Satisfaction

Table 3 presents the estimation results examining the impact of mate selection methods on marital satisfaction. Model 1 displays the ordered logit regression outcomes incorporating control variables for individual and household characteristics, along with province fixed effects.

Table 3 Ordered Logit Model Analysis of the Impact of Mate Selection Methods on Marital Satisfaction

	Model 1
Mate selection method	0.145***(0.048)
Education Level	-0.132***(0.020)
Gender	0.794***(0.046)
Health status	0.255***(0.017)
Age	0.011*(0.006)
Current household registration	-0.026(0.058)
Logarithm of household income per capita	0.036(0.024)
Total number of children	0.045*(0.024)
Spouse's education level	0.052***(0.020)
Spouse's age	0.005(0.006)
N	12 864
Province fixed effects	Yes
PseudoR^2	0.04

Note:*p ＜ 0.1、**p ＜ 0.05、***p ＜ 0.01;The values in parentheses represent standard errors.

Model 1 results suggest that self-initiated mate selection enhances marital satisfaction. Regarding control variables, higher educational attainment appears to reduce marital satisfaction—a phenomenon potentially attributable to traditional gender role norms in a "male breadwinner" societal context, where more educated individuals may experience greater conflicts over domestic labor allocation, thereby diminishing marital quality[23]. The analysis further reveals that males report higher marital satisfaction than females, better health status positively correlates with marital satisfaction, satisfaction levels increase with age, and greater offspring numbers exert positive effects. Additionally, higher spousal education levels contribute to improved marital satisfaction for the focal respondents.

4.3 Heterogeneous Effects of Mate Selection Methods Across Demographic Groups

The influence of mate selection methods on marital satisfaction may vary across different demographic groups characterized by education levels, income brackets, household registration status, parental status, and gender. This study conducts heterogeneity analysis along these five key dimensions. The results from ordered logit regressions incorporating control variables and province fixed effects are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Differences in the Impact of Mate Selection Methods on Marital Satisfaction Across Population Groups

Variable	Grouped regression by educational level	
	Low-education level	High-education level
Mate selection method	0.112*（0.058）	0.270***（0.090）
N	10 148	2 716
Pseudo R^2	0.037	0.056
Variable	Grouped regression by income level	
	Low-income groups	High-income groups
Mate selection method	0.120（0.078）	0.157**（0.062）
N	4 489	8 375

Pseudo R^2	0.055	0.037
Variable	Grouped regression by household registration type	
	Agricultural household registration	Non-agricultural household registration
Mate selection method	0.110** （0.054）	0.268** （0.105）
N	10 598	2 266
Pseudo R^2	0.040	0.053
Variable	Regression based on whether there are children	
	None	Yes
Mate selection method	-0.040（0.214）	0.148***（0.050）
N	1 114	11 750
Pseudo R^2	0.057	0.040
Variable	Grouped regression by gender	
	Female	Male
Mate selection method	0.125*（0.064）	0.193***（0.074）
N	6 471	6 393
Pseudo R^2	0.031	0.021

Note: ① In 2020, China's personal income tax exemption threshold was set at 3,500 yuan per month. Accordingly, this study defines individuals with annual incomes ≤42,000 yuan as the low-income group, and those exceeding this threshold as the high-income group.。② *p<0.1、**p<0.05、***p<0.01，The values in parentheses represent standard errors.

For individuals in non-self-initiated marriages, incompatibility in spousal dispositions may be more prevalent, necessitating greater interpersonal coordination. Inadequate coordination in such cases tends to reduce marital satisfaction. These effects become particularly pronounced when couples accumulate more shared marital experiences over time. The positive effect of self-initiated mate selection on marital satisfaction proves more substantial among highly educated individuals, high-income earners, and urban residents with non-agricultural household registration, compared to their less-educated, lower-income, and rural counterparts. As education levels and incomes rise within urban contexts, individuals develop more diverse needs and differentiated spousal expectations—requirements that non-self-initiated partners often struggle to fulfill, resulting in more pronounced marital dissatisfaction. This effect is particularly amplified among parents relative to childless couples. Parental responsibilities necessitate increased spousal interaction regarding childrearing, which magnifies the negative consequences of dispositional incompatibility in non-self-initiated marriages. Furthermore, self-initiated selection demonstrates stronger effects on marital satisfaction for men than women. This gender differential arises because relative-arranged marriages disproportionately promote female hypergamy (upward marital mobility in household registration, education, and occupational status)—a pattern empirically shown to enhance women's marital satisfaction. Consequently, the beneficial impact of self-initiated selection appears less statistically significant and substantively smaller for female respondents.

4.4 Further Analysis

4.4.1 Comparison Between Online and Offline Self-Initiated Mate Selection Methods

The widespread adoption of internet technologies and the proliferation of social media platforms have significantly increased online social networking. Popular applications like WeChat, Douyin, and Kuaishou now facilitate new friendships and even romantic connections through features such as WeChat's "Shake" and QQ's "People Nearby." This study specifically examines how partner selection through general social platforms (not explicitly designed for dating) differs from other self-initiated acquaintance methods in influencing marital satisfaction outcomes.

This study constructs a new independent variable by coding online self-initiated partner selection as 1 and all other self-

initiated methods as 0, while retaining the original dependent variable, control variables, and province fixed effects for ordered logit regression analysis. As shown in Table 5 (Model 5), online self-initiated acquaintance demonstrates significantly lower marital satisfaction compared to offline self-initiated methods. This finding validates Hypothesis 3 through two mechanisms: first, the limited shared physical contexts for emotional bonding in online-formed relationships; second, the inflated marital expectations created by online dating platforms that often remain unfulfilled in reality.

Table 5 Heterogeneous Effects of Mate Selection Methodson Marital Satisfaction Across Demographic Groups

	Model 6
Online self-initiated acquaintance	-0.496**(0.240)
Education level	-0.123***(0.043)
Gender	0.881***(0.097)
Health status	0.327***(0.038)
Age	0.025*(0.013)
Current household registration	0.070(0.116)
Logarithm of household income per capita	-0.073(0.055)
Total number of children	0.041(0.055)
Spouse's education level	0.106**(0.041)
Spouse's age	-0.009(0.013)
Province fixed effects	Yes
N	2 961
Pseudo R^2	0.054

Note:*p<0.1、**p<0.05、***p<0.01，The values in parentheses represent standard errors.

4.4.2 Impact of Different Arranged Introduction Channels on Marital Satisfaction

This study extracts three subsamples of individuals who met partners through friend introductions, relative introductions, or professional matchmaking services, then merges each subsample with the self-initiated acquaintance subsample separately. Using mate selection method as the independent variable while retaining the dependent variable, all control variables, and province fixed effects, we perform three ordered logit regressions, with results presented in Table 6.

Models 7 and 8 demonstrate that compared to self-initiated acquaintance, both friend-introduced and relative-introduced matches reduce marital satisfaction, with relative-introduced matches showing a more substantial negative effect. The regression results indicate that relative introductions lead to greater marital satisfaction decline than friend introductions. In contemporary society characterized by frequent population mobility and the separation of kinship, geographic, and occupational ties, relatives are more prone to misunderstandings about match-seekers' partner preferences and expectations compared to friends. Moreover, limited daily interactions make it more difficult for relatives to accurately communicate match-seekers' personal qualities to potential partners, creating greater obstacles for emotional bonding in relative-arranged matches. These findings validate Hypothesis 4.

Table 6 The Impact of Different Arranged Introduction Methods on Marital Satisfaction

	Model 7	**Model 8**	**Model 9**
Met through a friend's introduction	-0.141**(0.071)		
Met through a relative's introduction		-0.158**(0.065)	
Met through a matchmaking agency			-0.108(0.117)
Education level	-0.083**(0.035)	-0.123***(0.032)	-0.113***(0.039)
Gender	0.828***(0.077)	0.856***(0.073)	0.859***(0.089)
Health status	0.292***(0.030)	0.287***(0.027)	0.298***(0.034)
Age	0.029***(0.010)	0.010(0.010)	0.016(0.012)

	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Current household registration	-0.053(0.092)	0.094(0.092)	0.115(0.111)
Logarithm of household income per capita	-0.019(0.044)	-0.061(0.040)	-0.042(0.049)
Total number of children	0.060(0.044)	0.058(0.039)	0.037(0.048)
Spouse's education level	0.080**(0.033)	0.081***(0.031)	0.080**(0.038)
Spouse's age	-0.012(0.010)	0.007(0.010)	-0.000(0.012)
Province fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	4 430	5 164	3 451
Pseudo R^2	0.047	0.047	0.046

Note:*p<0.1、**p<0.05、***p<0.01，The values in parentheses represent standard errors.

4.5 Robustness Tests

To verify the robustness of the regression results presented in Table 3, this study implements three validation approaches: propensity score matching, alternative variable specifications, and modified model formulations.

4.5.1 Re-examination Using Propensity Score Matching

To address potential estimation bias caused by sample self-selection, this section re-estimates the effect of mate selection methods on marital satisfaction using an ordered logit model with propensity score matching. The PSM approach requires careful selection of covariates that influence treatment assignment while excluding post-treatment variables[24]. As established in previous sections, birth year, urban-rural background, education level, gender, and age at first marriage significantly determine mate selection patterns. Accordingly, we specify mate selection method as the treatment variable, with birth year, household registration at age twelve, educational attainment, gender, and first marriage age as covariates. The analysis proceeds by first estimating propensity scores through an ordered logit model predicting the probability of self-initiated partner selection, then implementing three-to-one nearest neighbor matching without replacement to construct balanced treatment and control groups based on these propensity scores.

Table 7 presents the balance test results obtained through nearest-neighbor matching. The findings indicate that after matching, none of the covariates significantly predict mate selection methods, confirming the sample meets randomized experiment requirements. All t-tests for characteristic variables between the matched treatment and control groups become statistically insignificant, demonstrating successful balance achievement through propensity score matching. This confirms the elimination of systematic differences between groups in critical variables that could influence mate selection patterns—including birth year, household registration at age twelve, educational attainment, gender, and age at first marriage. The matching procedure effectively reduced observable differences between self-initiated and non-self-initiated subsamples.

Table 7 Balance Test

Variable	Inspection methods	Before matching	After matching
Birth year	T-test	26.48***	-0.71
Household registration status at age 12	T-test	11.82***	1.29
Education level	T-test	22.81***	0.41
Gender	T-test	2.33**	-0.34
Age at first marriage	T-test	0.32	-1.19

Note: ① The reported values in the t-tests represent t-statistics.； ② *p<0.1、**p<0.05、***p<0.01，The values in parentheses represent standard errors.

Table 8 reports the treatment effects estimated through nearest-neighbor matching, including the Average Treatment Effect

on the Treated (ATT), the Average Treatment Effect on the Untreated (ATU), and the Average Treatment Effect (ATE). The ATT quantifies how much self-initiated mate selection enhances marital satisfaction for those who actually used this method, while the ATU measures the potential effect for those who did not. The ATE represents the population-level impact of mate selection methods on marital satisfaction. The propensity score matching results reveal an ATE of 0.012 after controlling for observable differences, indicating that self-initiated acquaintance increases marital satisfaction by 1.2 percentage points—a finding consistent with the Table 3 conclusions.

Table 8 Results of Propensity Score Matching Analysis

Statistic	Nearest neighbor matching
ATT	0.022
ATU	0.009
ATE	0.012

The ordered logit regression performed on the matched samples, as presented in Table 9, continues to show statistically significant effects of mate selection methods on marital satisfaction. These results robustly confirm that self-initiated acquaintance consistently enhances marital satisfaction.

Table 9 Ordered Logit Model Analysis of Mate Selection Effects on Marital Satisfaction Using Post-Matching Sample

	Model 10
Mate selection method	0.165***(0.054)
Education level	-0.144***(0.026)
Gender	0.762***(0.058)
Health status	0.279***(0.021)
Age	0.015*(0.008)
Current household registration	0.034(0.072)
Logarithm of household income per capita	-0.001(0.031)
Total number of children	0.019(0.031)
Spouse’s education level	0.055**(0.025)
Spouse’s age	0.003(0.008)
N	8 125
Province fixed effects	Yes

Note:*p<0.1、**p<0.05、***p<0.01，The values in parentheses represent standard errors.

4.5.2 Alterations to variable specifications and modifications to model formulations

This study modifies the variable specification by creating a binary “marital satisfaction” indicator, where responses of “very dissatisfied,” “dissatisfied,” or “neutral” in the original scale are coded as 0, while “satisfied” and “very satisfied” responses are coded as 1. As shown in Table 10, mate selection methods significantly improve marital satisfaction at the 1% level under this alternative measurement. Furthermore, the analysis employs model specification changes by substituting the ordered logit model with both ordered probit and OLS models. Table 10 demonstrates that regardless of model specification, mate selection methods maintain statistically significant effects on marital satisfaction at the 1% significance level.

Therefore, this study concludes that the regression results presented in Table 3 demonstrate robust stability, providing further empirical validation for the conclusion that self-initiated mate selection methods significantly enhance marital satisfaction.

Table 10 Alternative Model Specifications and Variable Coding Approaches

Variable	Whether satisfied with marriage	Change model settings: Ordered Probit	Change model settings: OLS
Satisfaction with marriage	0.230***(0.068)		
Change model settings: Ordered Probit		0.085**(0.028)	
Change model settings: OLS			0.054***(0.019)
R^2/Pseudo R^2	0.060	0.039	0.065

Note:*p<0.1、**p<0.05、***p<0.01，The values in parentheses represent standard errors.

5.Conclusions and Policy Implications

In China, self-initiated mate selection methods have become increasingly prevalent. This raises two critical research questions: Does a relationship exist between mate selection approaches and marital satisfaction? If so, what is the nature of this relationship? Utilizing China Family Panel Studies data from 2010 to 2020 and employing propensity score matching with ordered logit models, this investigation examines both the impact of mate selection methods on marital satisfaction and its underlying mechanisms across demographic subgroups. Four key findings emerge: First, self-initiated acquaintance significantly enhances marital satisfaction. Second, online-initiated self-acquaintance demonstrates lower satisfaction outcomes compared to offline self-initiated methods. Third, relative-introduced matches exhibit more detrimental effects on satisfaction than friend-introduced arrangements. Fourth, the influence of mate selection methods proves particularly pronounced among younger, highly educated, high-income, urban, parenting, and male populations.

As a crucial determinant of marital formation among youth, this study's findings offer valuable insights for educational institutions, employers, and policymakers to facilitate optimal partner selection. First, schools, companies, and government agencies should prioritize expanding young adults' social networks and fostering organic interpersonal connections—such as encouraging participation in campus organizations and workplace interest groups—rather than relying exclusively on matchmaking events or marital intermediaries. Second, couples introduced through third parties should consciously cultivate emotional bonds by creating more natural interaction opportunities. Third, matchmakers must emphasize compatibility in personality traits, value systems, and daily habits—key factors influencing emotional connection development—when facilitating potential unions.

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