

# YOUNG PEOPLE AND COHABITATION – EXPERIENCES AND ATTITUDES

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**Abstract:** Cohabitation has become an important form of romantic partnership, gaining momentum especially over the last several decades and specifically among young people. Their cohabitations can be seen either as a probationary, premarital period or as an alternative lifestyle. Several studies examine various aspects of cohabitation in contemporary Serbia. However, there is a lack of studies on the subject of young people's experiences and perception of cohabitation. This study aims to analyze: a) the prevalence of cohabitation among young people, b) their attitudes towards cohabitation and c) the sociological profile of those who cohabit. The research goal is to provide a sociological explanation of the factors that shape young people's experiences of cohabitation as well as their perception of it (both as a specific form of partnership and in comparison to marriage). According to the main hypothesis, there is a discrepancy between young people's experience and perception of cohabitation. There are three supporting hypotheses: a) few young people cohabited, b) young people have generally positive attitude towards cohabitation and c) cohabitation experience and perception depend on key socio-demographic and economic characteristics of the respondents. The characteristics of young people's experience and attitudes towards cohabitation were analyzed based on data collected in 2024 through a survey. The sample includes 989 respondents, aged 18 to 34, living in the Autonomous province of Vojvodina, Republic of Serbia. An online questionnaire consisting of 40 questions was initially distributed via social networks (snowball sampling). Data analysis was conducted in SPSS 26.0, using basic statistical methods (descriptive statistics, correlation coefficient, non-parametric tests) and principal component analysis. Results supported the main and supporting hypotheses. For the young people, cohabitation is more an acceptable idea than a realistic practice, which questions the scope of de-standardization of the life trajectory of young people in contemporary Serbia.

**Keywords:** cohabitation, young people, experience, attitudes, Serbia.

**Field:** Social sciences - Sociology

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cohabitation encompasses a wide range of living arrangements, making it challenging to pin down a single, universally accepted definition (Gold, 2012). In this study, cohabitation refers to living together with a partner outside of wedlock for a sustained period of time. Regardless of its type and formation (Gold, 2012), cohabitation has become an important form of romantic partnership, gaining momentum especially over the last several decades (Coast, 2009). This trend coincides with the postponement of marriage, the rise of committed singlehood and increasing divorce rates – all key characteristics of what's known as the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) (Lesthaeghe, 2020). While this process affects the population as a whole, it has a particularly significant impact on young people transitioning into adulthood. The normalization of cohabitation is a result of significant shifts in social, economic, cultural, and legal landscapes, particularly among young adults in societies experiencing advanced SDT (Manning, Smock, Dorius, Cooksey, 2014). This applies both to their practices and attitudes towards cohabitation (Coast, 2009). Nubile cohabitations (Kiernan, 2002, according to: Mynarska, Bernardi, 2007) can be seen either as a probationary, premarital period or as an alternative life style (Mynarska, Bernardi, 2007).

Many studies on cohabitation in Serbia tend to focus on the legal aspects (Randelović, Šolaja, 2019), extra-marital birth (Penev, Stanković, 2010), demographic analysis (Negovanović, 2017) or specifics of SDT in the Serbian context (Bobić, 2014; Petrović, 2011; Tomanović, Stanojević, 2022). Cohabitation are also analyzed indirectly, through the lens of marriage and family values (in transitional system), as well as (Gavrilović, 2012, Manić, 2017) the transition to adulthood (Tomanović, Ignjatović, 2006; Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016; Popadić, Pavlović, Mihailović, 2019). However, there is a lack of studies concentrating specifically on young people's experiences and perception of cohabitation in Serbia. Thus, this study aims to analyse not only the prevalence of cohabitation among young people, but also their attitudes towards it, as well as the sociological profile of those who cohabit. According to the main hypothesis, there is a discrepancy between experience and perception of cohabitation among young people. Three additional hypotheses support the main one: a) few young people cohabit, b) young people have generally positive attitude towards cohabitation and c) cohabitation experience and perception depend on key socio-demographic and economic characteristics of the respondents.

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## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The characteristics of the experience and attitudes towards cohabitation among young people were analyzed based on empirical data collected through a survey during the March and April 2024. The sample comprised of 989 respondents living in Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, Republic of Serbia. In addition to residency, the second selection criterion was age. The sample included individuals between 18 and 34 years old. Eighteen was chosen as the lower bound due to its legal significance, marking the official attainment of adulthood and the capacity to make independent decisions regarding relationships and family formation. The upper age limit was determined by considering relevant social circumstances presented in existing research (e.g. the trend of delayed marriage, the concept of extended youth, and the difficulties young people face during the transition to adulthood in contemporary Serbian society) (Tomanović, Stanojević 2015). The data were collected based on an online questionnaire consisting of 40 questions classified into four main groups. In this study, the third battery of questions was used; four questions were related to experiences of cohabiting, while one question was formulated as a Likert scale of attitudes towards cohabitation. Some of the items used in the scale were taken or inspired by items from previous studies (Bartolac, 2013; Bandalović, 2017; Boneta, Mrakovčić, 2021; De Coninck, Van Doren, Matthijs, 2020).

Data were collected using an online questionnaire developed in Google Forms. The questionnaire was initially disseminated through social media platforms and subsequently distributed using a snowball sampling technique, whereby respondents shared the questionnaire with eligible individuals in their networks (relatives, friends, colleagues, and neighbors). This method was selected due to its efficiency in reaching the target demographic and its cost-effectiveness. Although the resulting sample was both voluntary and recruited through snowball sampling, its size and demographic composition are sufficient to apply relevant statistical methods and draw meaningful conclusions about the research topic. Respondents were assured of complete anonymity and provided written informed consent before participating. Basic statistical methods (descriptive statistics, correlation coefficient, non-parametric tests) and factor analysis were applied. SPSS 26.0 was used for the analysis.

Table 1. The sample - general characteristics

<i>Sex</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Work status</i>	<i>%</i>
Male	30,8	employed	35,9
Female	69,2	enterprise owner	2,5
		farmer	0,8
<i>Age</i>	<i>%</i>	Freelancer	1,5
18 – 21	47,8	unemployed	8,2
22 – 25	25,5	Attending school schooling	48,4
26 – 29	14,0	other	2,6
30 – 34	12,5		
<i>Education</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Subjective estimation of financial situation</i>	<i>%</i>
elementary school	5,1	excellent	2,5
secondary school	67,8	very good	15,2
College	6,0	Good	57,2
university	14,2	bad	16,1
master, PhD	7,0	very bad	9,0
<i>Growing up in a...</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Religiosity</i>	<i>%</i>
Village	29,9	not religious at all	14,7
Town	33,3	more inclined to disbelief than to belief	11,6
City	17,1	don't know	28,2
large urban area	19,7	more inclined to belief than to disbelief	28,4
		very religious	17,1

Source: research data

## 3. RESULTS AND DISSCUSION

According to the results, 22.6% of respondents reported current or past cohabitation experience. While some initially misidentified their relationships, further questioning revealed that they were indeed cohabiting. Among those with cohabitation experience, the distribution was nearly even between past (49.1%) and current (50.9%) cohabitators. However, only 11.1% of all respondents were currently cohabiting, consistent with recent census data (RZS, 2023a; 2023b) and prior research (Tomanović, Stanojević,

2024; Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016).

Three key characteristics of nubile cohabitations emerged. First, the vast majority of respondents (92.4%) had cohabited only once. Second, most respondents (41.1%) described their cohabitations as middle-term, lasting between one and three years. Furthermore, a significant 45% of married respondents had cohabited at least once prior to their current marriage, highlighting the role of cohabitation in the transition to marriage. Previous research showed similar results, especially when it comes to premarital character of young people's cohabitation (Tomanović, Ignjatović, 2006; Tomanović, Stanojević, 2015).

The respondents' experience of cohabiting statistically differed based on their socio-demographic features. There was a 4.5 year age difference, on average, between young people who had cohabited (26.7 years) and those who had not (22.2 years) ( $t(989)=14,825$ ,  $p=.000$ ), which matched previous findings (Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016). In addition to age, education level also played a role in delaying cohabitation ( $\chi^2(1, N=989)=124.082$ ,  $p=.000$ , Cramer's  $V=.355$ ). Cohabitation was significantly more common among those who had completed their education (37.1%) than among those were still studying (7.3%). This trend of increasing cohabitation with higher education levels was statistically significant ( $\chi^2(5, N=989)=84.293$ ,  $p<.000$ , Cramer's  $V=.292$ ), ranging from 0.6% for elementary education to 44.0% for university education. These results aligned with previous findings (Tomanović, 2012a; Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016). Two distinct explanations emerged for the lower cohabitation rates among different educational groups. For young people with lower levels of education, their primary focus on studies seemed to be a major contributing factor. In contrast, among those with higher education, cohabitation was often perceived as either a preparation for married life or a result of changing views on the value of marriage. The influence of religious affiliation was also evident, with non-religious respondents showing higher cohabitation rates (27.7%) compared to religious respondents (18.2%;  $\chi^2(4, N=989)=11.986$ ,  $p=.017$ , Cramer's  $V=.110$ ), supporting previous research (Bandalović, 2017; Bartolac, 2013). This association was particularly strong for young women ( $\chi^2(4, N=684)=9,531$ ,  $p=.046$ , Cramer's  $V=.118$ ). The link between religiosity and cohabitation was anticipated, reflecting religiously influenced views on relationships, particularly the preference for marriage. Religiosity also shaped gender roles and norms, indirectly impacting the acceptance and practice of cohabitation. On the other hand, gender ( $\chi^2(1, N=989)=.698$ ,  $p=.403$ ), settlement type ( $\chi^2(3, N=989)=4,842$ ,  $p=.184$ ), type of family of origin ( $\chi^2(6, N=989)=1,736$ ,  $p=.942$ ), parents' experience of cohabitation ( $\chi^2(1, N=989)=.179$ ,  $p=.672$ ), political orientation (liberal vs. conservative) ( $\chi^2(4, N=989)=11,469$ ,  $p=.649$ ) and migration plans ( $\chi^2(4, N=989)=5,368$ ,  $p=.252$ ) didn't have a statistically significant impact on cohabitation experience. The results were not entirely consistent. While certain findings aligned with Willoughby and Carroll (2012), others contradicted the results obtained by Tomanović et al. (2016) and Boneta and Mrakovčić (2021).

Three main components of economic status were identified as a statistically significant factors influencing cohabitation practices among the respondents: a) employment status ( $\chi^2(7, N=989)=149,173$ ,  $p=.000$ , Cramer's  $V=.388$ ), b) type of employment contract ( $\chi^2(5, N=989)=147,167$ ,  $p=.000$ , Cramer's  $V=.386$ ) and c) income ( $\chi^2(4, N=989)=125,383$ ,  $p=.000$ , Cramer's  $V=.356$ ). Cohabitation rates were lowest among farmers (0%), followed by students (7.3%) and the unemployed (19.8%). This was especially pronounced among unemployed young men. The study found no instances of cohabitation among unemployed young men, whereas 25% of unemployed young women were cohabiting. This indicated different gender standards regarding the perception of partner's employment status, highlighting the importance of the traditional gender role of men as breadwinners. The following factors could potentially explain these findings: (a) stronger adherence to traditional marital norms among farmers, (b) the delaying effect of extended education, and (c) difficulties in finding and forming stable partnerships. However, among employed respondents, cohabitation was substantially more common, with rates ranging from 40% (enterprise owners) to 46.7% (freelancers). The results also indicated that among employed young people with more favourable employment contracts, a greater share were cohabiting, which was in line with previous research (Landaud, 2021). Specifically, 46.9% of permanently employed respondents were cohabiting, compared to only 23.3% of those working without a contract. Several factors may explain this difference, including variations in age, educational attainment, and the precarious nature of employment, which can contribute to financial instability. Although cohabitation rates were generally low among the unemployed, some differences were observed within this category ( $\chi^2(4, N=989)=50.733$ ,  $p=.000$ , Cramer's  $V=.226$ ). The longer the unemployment period, the greater the proportion of respondents with no cohabitation experience. Among the long-term unemployed, 89.6% had never cohabited, while among those unemployed for up to six months, the proportion was 84.2%.

Income also had an impact on cohabitation patterns ( $\chi^2(4, N=989)=125.383$ ,  $p=.000$ , Cramer's  $V=.356$ ). Young people of both sexes with above-average income (90.000 RSD; RAV, 2024) cohabited more frequently (47.3%) than those with below-average income (22.3%). Among those with above-

average income, the share of female respondents who cohabited was significantly higher than that of male respondents (54.9% vs. 40.2%). This was inconsistent with earlier findings (Čudina-Obradović, Obradović, 2006; according to: Bandalović, 2017). Subjective income assessment also had an impact on cohabitation decisions ( $\chi^2(4, N=989)=10.724, p=.030$ , Cramer's  $V=.104$ ). Those who rated their financial situation more favourably were more likely to cohabit. Among respondents who assessed their financial situation as excellent or very good, 31.4% had cohabited, compared to just 18.5% among those who considered their financial situation (very) poor.

Vulnerability status also influenced cohabitation experiences, particularly among internally displaced persons ( $\chi^2(1, N=989)=10.130, p=.001$ , Cramer's  $V=.101$ ; 44.5% of cohabiting respondents) and young people without parental care ( $\chi^2(1, N=989)=8.716, p=.003$ , Cramer's  $V=.094$ ; 50.0% of cohabiting respondents). Additional analyses showed that this pattern applied to female respondents, but not to males. This could be interpreted as a response to necessity, rather than a reflection of their (post) modern views on partnership. The challenges associated with a vulnerable social status often left these young people with limited options or support, likely leading them to enter romantic relationships earlier while having fewer opportunities for marriage.

Along with cohabitation experience, the study investigated attitudes toward cohabitation. A 15-item scale explored key aspects of attitudes towards cohabitation, revealing generally positive views. The majority of respondents agreed with the items, with 51.1% agreeing moderately and 7.3% agreeing strongly, indicating general acceptance of cohabitation, particularly as a prelude to marriage. This aligns with prior research (Bandalović, 2017; Bartolac, 2013; De Coninck, Van Doren, Matthijs, 2020). The items were subjected to principal component analysis (PCA) using SPSS 26.0. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was .829, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.6. The Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ( $\chi^2=4302.318, p=.000$ ), justifying the factorability of the correlation matrix. The PCA identified three components with eigenvalues greater than 1, which explained 25.892%, 18.725%, and 8.421% of the variance, respectively. Following factor extraction, Oblimin rotation with Kaiser normalization was applied. All items had communalities greater than .40. The identification of the components was confirmed by the Scree plot. Ultimately, the PCA resulted in a model with 15 items grouped into three factors (Table 2), explaining a total of 53.037% of the variance. The Cronbach's alpha value indicated acceptable internal consistency (.762).

Table 2. Attitudes towards cohabitation – descriptive statistics and factor loadings

	M	SD	Factor loadings
<b>Factor 1 – benevolent perception of cohabitation</b>			
1. I would not mind living in cohabitation.	3.28	1.389	.731
2. When it comes to the relationship between partners, there is no difference between marriage and cohabitation.	3.30	1.383	.786
5. People who live in cohabitation should have the same legal rights as those who are married.	3.17	1.342	.655
12. It is completely acceptable for people to live in cohabitation, even if they never get married.	3.76	1.355	.762
15. It is okay for same-sex couples to live in cohabitation.	3.24	1.600	.652
<b>Factor 2 - favouring cohabitation</b>			
7. Partners in cohabitation are more equal than in marriage.	2.23	1.094	.727
8. Cohabitation provides more freedom to the individual.	2.36	1.216	.818
9. People who live in cohabitations are happier than those who are married.	2.08	1.085	.814
10. Cohabitation suits today's times better than marriage.	2.65	1.292	.704
<b>Factor 3 - critical and conservative perception of cohabitation</b>			
3. Couple can live in cohabitation only if later gates married.	2.24	1.330	.577
4. Cohabitation is a fad.	2.42	1.149	.706
6. Cohabitation break up more easily than marriage.	3.59	1.317	.633
11. People living in cohabitation are less faithful than those who are married.	2.17	1.172	.407
13. Living in cohabitation is a sin.	1.76	1.136	.530
14. Living in cohabitation is opposing our tradition.	2.58	1.373	.645
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.15</b>	<b>0.619</b>	-

Source: research data

The first factor encompassed five items with factor loadings greater than 0.65 (Table 2) and a Cronbach's alpha above 0.7 (.789). Two items with the highest loadings (2 and 12) primarily described attitudes toward cohabitation in comparison to marriage, as well as the social acceptance of such partnerships. Based on the content of the items, the first factor was labeled benevolent perception of cohabitation. Furthermore, this factor was characterized by acceptance of cohabitation's normative status

(i.e., its legal equality with marriage), positive views on same-sex cohabitation, and a willingness to consider personal cohabitation.

The second factor was defined by four items with factor loadings and Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.70 (.777) (Table 2). Three items clearly indicated a preference for cohabitation from the perspective of individual aspirations and the quality of partnership relations (equality, happiness, and freedom – items 7, 8, and 9). The fourth item emphasized the endorsement of cohabitation in the contemporary social context. Thus, this factor was labeled favoring cohabitation.

The third factor was defined by six items (Table 2) with factor loadings greater than 0.40 and Cronbach's alpha of .704. Three items with the highest factor loadings (items 4, 14, and 6) presented a negative and conservative perception of cohabitation, asserting that these unions: a) reflected an uncritical submission to current social trends, b) were unsuitable for the Serbian cultural milieu and tradition, and c) were more volatile than marital unions. Accordingly, this factor was named critical and conservative perception of cohabitation. Other items within this factor indicated a religious view on the sinful nature of cohabitation (item 13) and a perception of lower partnership commitment in cohabitation compared to marriage (item 11). Conservatism was also reflected in item 3, which addressed the normalization of prenuptial cohabitation only.

In addition to differences in cohabitation experience, respondents' attitudes toward cohabitation were also significantly shaped by their socio-demographic and economic characteristics. Young women generally held more positive views on cohabitation ( $\chi^2=18.320$ ,  $p=.000$ ), while young men's attitudes were more diverse, ranging from favourable ( $\chi^2=3.996$ ,  $p=.000$ ) to critical and conservative ( $\chi^2=26.510$ ,  $p=.000$ ). This findings contrast with previous research suggesting men's greater inclination to cohabit (Bandalović, 2017). A weak negative correlation was found between age and benevolent perception of cohabitation ( $r=-0.126$ ,  $p=.000$ ), as well as between age and critical and conservative perception of cohabitation ( $r=-0.094$ ,  $p=.003$ ). This suggests that older respondents were less likely to hold either of these perspectives. Education had a statistically significant effect on the benevolent perception of cohabitation ( $\chi^2=12.001$ ,  $p=.035$ ), with respondents holding university, MSc/MA, or PhD degrees expressing a more benevolent attitude. Additionally, those still in school expressed a more favourable perception ( $\chi^2=9.364$ ,  $p=.002$ ), as did the unemployed ( $\chi^2=9.364$ ,  $p=.002$ ). Growing up in a large urban area was associated with a more benevolent perception of cohabitation ( $\chi^2=11.564$ ,  $p=.009$ ). Less religious young people demonstrated higher scores on both the first (benevolent perception –  $\chi^2=176.454$ ,  $p=.000$ ) and second factors (favouring cohabitation –  $\chi^2=42.045$ ,  $p=.000$ ), while more religious individuals showed a more critical and conservative perception ( $\chi^2=99.743$ ,  $p=.000$ ). As expected, respondents currently living in cohabitation had the most benevolent perception of cohabitation ( $\chi^2=24.552$ ,  $p=.000$ ) and were also more likely to favour it, like identified in prior research (Willoughby, Carroll, 2012). Interestingly, the highest scores on the second factor ( $\chi^2=10.069$ ,  $p=.007$ ) and third factor ( $\chi^2=30.600$ ,  $p=.000$ ) were found among respondents who had never lived in cohabitation. These individuals were primarily the youngest respondents. The results indicated a bifurcation within this subgroup, with young people exhibiting either a liberal or conservative view of alternative forms of partnership, particularly in comparison to marriage. Income level (both objective and subjective estimation) and contract type did not have statistically significant impacted on respondents' attitudes toward cohabitation. Employment status impacted first ( $\chi^2=15.649$ ,  $p=.016$ ) and second factor ( $\chi^2=16.262$ ,  $p=.012$ ). Employees in state and private sector expressed a more benevolent perception of cohabitation, while freelancers were the most inclined to favour it, expressing more alternative life.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The study confirmed the main hypothesis and three supporting assumptions. Data revealed the gap between the acceptance of cohabitation as a concept and its actual prevalence among the respondents. Respondents' experiences with cohabitation indicated its continued association with a trial period before marriage and family formation. This suggests that the transformation of partnerships in Serbia is still in its early stages (Printz, 1995). Previous findings aligned with most of the results in this study, confirming the absence of "evidence for the heterogenization of life trajectories..., marked by a 'culture of delay' (Reiter, 2009) and sometimes also referred to as 'frozen transitions' (Kuhar, Reiter 2012a; 2012b)" (Tomanović, 2012b: 22).

Characteristics of de-standardization of life course and transition to adulthood are key factors in shaping attitudes toward cohabitation, both as a practice and as a socially accepted standard. In contemporary Serbian society, both processes faced significant challenges due to multiple structural and cultural factors (e.g. long-term and deep-rooted social instability, youth unemployment, re-traditionalized norms regarding marriage and family, difficulties in achieving housing independence, features of

the welfare regime, etc.). Although Serbia (like all former Yugoslav republics) has legally recognized cohabitation (Randelović, Šolaja, 2019), identified structural and cultural factors have limited the scope of transformation in partnership practices. As Tomanović (2012a: 128) wrote, “Serbia clearly belongs to the Southern European model of family formation”. However, notes of bifurcation in a partnership transformation practices and attitudes among young people can be observed, depending on the characteristics of their social profiles (e.g. age, gender, education, employment status, contract type, income). That opens new research questions regarding intersectional analysis. This approach allows for the development of more detailed insights into the experiences and perceptions of individual subgroups of young people and their intersecting social identities regarding cohabitation, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive explanation of the direction of partnership transformation within the specific social circumstances of our society.

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