Examining the Role of Social Networks and Subjective Norms within Rusbult's Investment Model Framework to Predict the Stability of Marital Relationships in Divorce-Seeking Couples

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Objective: The primary aim of this study was to integrate the role of social networks and subjective norms into the theoretical framework of the investment model of relationships to predict marital stability among divorce-seeking couples in the city of Ilam.

Methods: This research employed a correlational design. The statistical population included all divorce-seeking couples in Ilam during 2019–2020 who visited family courts, counseling centers, and divorce registry offices. A sample of 160 participants was selected using convenience sampling. Data collection utilized the following instruments: the Marital Instability Index (Edwards et al., 1987), the Social Networks in Marital Relationships Scale (researcher-developed, 2019), the Subjective Norms in Marital Relationships Scale (researcher-developed, 2019), and Rusbult's Investment Model Scale (1980). Data analysis was conducted using path analysis via AMOS version 23.

Findings: The findings indicated that the tested model exhibited acceptable fit. Significant positive correlations were found between marital satisfaction and marital commitment, while significant negative correlations were observed between the quality of alternative relationships and marital commitment. Additionally, relationship investment and marital commitment were significantly positively correlated. A significant relationship was identified between marital commitment and marital instability at the level of p<0.05. However, no significant relationship was observed between social networks and marital commitment or between subjective norms in marital relationships and marital commitment. Furthermore, the results demonstrated that marital commitment mediated the relationship between satisfaction with the relationship and marital instability (p≤.05), the quality of alternative relationships and marital instability (p≤.05), relationship investment and marital instability (p≤.01), and subjective norms and marital instability (p≤.05). However, marital commitment did not significantly

mediate the relationship between the influence of social networks in marital relationships and marital instability.

Conclusion: Based on the findings and the role of subjective norms and social networks within Rusbult's investment model, the results of this study can be utilized in counseling centers to enhance and prevent the instability of marital relationships.

Keywords: *investment model, marital satisfaction, quality of alternative relationships, relationship investment, relationship commitment, social networks, subjective norms, marital stability.*

1. Introduction

The most critical aspect of marriage and family formation is the sense of tranquility individuals derive from this relationship. Unfortunately, statistics indicate that approximately two-thirds of marriages worldwide end in divorce (Nasir, 2017). In recent decades, Iranian families have undergone similar changes. According to statistics published by the National Organization for Civil Registration in 2009, the divorce rate relative to marriages has increased compared to previous years; specifically, 14.26 out of every 100 marriages ended in divorce (Modiri, 2017). With such a high divorce rate, it is unsurprising that many researchers intensely seek answers to questions about what contributes to marital satisfaction and longevity. Understanding the primary factors associated with marital dissolution or success is crucial for researchers (Nasir, 2017). Today, one of the significant topics in psychology is the focus on family sustainability or disintegration.

It is assumed that a committed, stable, and reliable romantic partnership enhances individuals' lives and gives them meaning. Having a profound motivation for social connection is considered natural for individuals, and engaging with a romantic partner is a common pathway to achieving this connection (Tan, 2020).

While falling in love may be relatively easy, maintaining a long-term romantic relationship and achieving high satisfaction in such a relationship, such as marriage, requires the commitment of both partners. The relationship between commitment and satisfaction in marriage is influenced by the extent of learning (Givertz, 2013, 2016; Khorrami Nobandi & Yaghoubi Pour, 2024). Couples must adapt, adjust, and align themselves for the benefit of the relationship (Givertz, 2013, 2016; Van Lange, 1997).

Over the past three decades, research examining predictors of commitment and stability in romantic relationships has increased, with findings consistently demonstrating the significance of high-quality, stable relationships in promoting overall health. Numerous studies have explored a range of variables related to relationship stability, including individual differences and dependency processes (Etcheverry, 2013).

Two key theoretical perspectives have guided much of this research: the adult attachment theory (Hazan & Shaver, 1994) and the investment model. The investment model, grounded in principles of dependency, suggests that dependency produces the subjective experience of commitment, aiming for relationship stability, long-term orientation, and psychological attachment to the partner and the relationship (Arriaga, 2004; Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Givertz, 2013, 2016). Although commitment emerges as a result of dependency, it is commitment that influences daily behavior and creates the development of pre-relationship dynamics (Adams & Jones, 1999; Givertz, 2016).

In interpersonal relationship literature, commitment is defined as the intention to maintain a connection with an interpersonal entity (e.g., romantic partner, group, organization). The culmination of Rusbult and colleagues' research indicates that commitment is a direct and robust predictor of many critical relationship-maintenance behaviors, reflecting altered motivations (Givertz, 2016). According to the investment model proposed by Rusbult et al. (1998), commitment in a relationship is determined by three primary components: rewards and costs associated with the relationship (satisfaction level), the perception and evaluation of alternative relationships (quality of alternatives), and the magnitude and significance of resources dependent on the relationship (investment size). Satisfaction reflects the emotional sense that relational needs are being met. Alternatives are conceptualized as the attractiveness of the best attainable alternative to the relationship (e.g., a new romantic partner). Finally, investment is conceptualized as the amount of resources an individual devotes to the relationship (Chow & Tan, 2013).

Rusbult, Johnson, and Morrow (1986) supported the investment model through their study on adult romantic relationships. They found that the investment model accurately predicted commitment among young and adult

individuals based on demographic characteristics such as gender, marital status, education, and income (Merolla, 2003). Empirical research has consistently shown that each of these three factors (relationship satisfaction, relationship investment, and quality of alternatives) influences relationship commitment across various communities and contexts (Haghparast, 2017). Recently, the quality of alternatives has garnered more attention due to the evolving digital media landscape, which enables individuals to meet new people at unprecedented speeds (West, 2013).

Research has also examined how other individuals influence couples' motivation to continue their relationships. Studies have explored the role of social networks in approving or disapproving of romantic relationships and their characteristics (Agnew, 2001; Arriaga, 2004; Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Lehmiller & Agnew, 2007). Overall, past research suggests that the structure and opinions of social network members are closely linked to the quality and functioning of members' interactions (Caryl, 2011).

Studies integrating the investment model with research on social networks have examined the role of perceived social references: couples' commitment may be influenced by their perception of what others think about their relationships, affecting their motivation for relationship stability. Etcheverry and Agnew (2013) found that subjective norms provide additional predictions of relationship commitment beyond satisfaction, alternatives, and past investments (Etcheverry, 2013). Similar to how subjective norms influence behavior in the theory of reasoned action (Warshaw, 1980), commitment mediates this relationship. Theoretically and empirically, subjective norms expand predictions of relationship commitment beyond the three main variables of the investment model (Caryl, 2011). Therefore, the present study seeks to predict marital stability among divorce-seeking couples in Ilam by integrating the role of social networks and subjective norms with the theoretical investment model of relationships.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study utilized a correlational design employing path analysis. The statistical population consisted of all divorce-seeking couples in Ilam during 2019–2020, who visited family courts, counseling centers, and divorce registry offices daily. The sampling method employed was convenience sampling. From this population, 160 individuals meeting the inclusion criteria were selected. The

sample size was determined based on James Stevens' recommendation of using 15 cases per predictor variable in standard multiple regression analysis as a sound guideline.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Investment in Relationships

Rusbult's Investment Model Scale, developed in 1980, comprises 22 items and assesses four variables: marital satisfaction, quality of alternative relationships, relationship investment, and marital commitment. This scale adopts an 8-point Likert-style format, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (8). To estimate reliability, Nasir et al. (2019) conducted a test-retest over one week with 25 participants, reporting reliability coefficients for marital satisfaction, quality of alternatives, relationship investment, marital commitment, and the overall scale as .82, .88, .75, .71, and .74, respectively (Nasir, 2017). In this study, internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding coefficients of .89, .79, .76, .85, and .87 for marital satisfaction, quality of alternatives, relationship investment, marital commitment, and the overall scale, respectively.

2.2.2. Marital Instability

The Marital Instability Index is a 14-item tool designed by Edwards et al. (1987) to assess marital instability. This scale was first used in 1980 with 2,034 married individuals under 55 years of age and subsequently with 1,578 married individuals in 1983. The questionnaire is structured with four response options: "very often," "often," "sometimes," and "never," scored from 1 to 4. Sanaei (2008) reported a reliability coefficient of .93 using Cronbach's alpha. Yari Pour (2000) assessed reliability using the split-half method, reporting a coefficient of .70 (Mir Arab Razi et al., 2023). In the present study, internal consistency for the Marital Instability Index was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of .85.

2.2.3. Social Networks in Marital Relationships

This scale, developed by Nadi in 2019, measures the impact of social networks on marital relationships. It includes 28 items scored on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5), with scores ranging from 28 to 140. In the present study, internal consistency for the Social Networks in Marital Relationships Scale was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, resulting in a coefficient of .75.

2.2.4. Subjective Norms in Marital Relationships

Developed by Nadi in 2019, this scale measures subjective norms in marital relationships. It includes 14 items scored on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5), with scores ranging from 14 to 70. In the present study, internal consistency for the Subjective Norms in Marital Relationships Scale was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of .82.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in two stages. In the descriptive statistics phase, measures such as mean and standard deviation were calculated. In the inferential statistics phase, hypotheses were tested using simultaneous multiple regression analysis via SPSS software version 24.

3. Findings and Results

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of participants' scores for the research variables. The results show that the mean and standard deviation for relationship satisfaction were 22.07 and 10.29, for quality of alternative relationships 12.47 and 6.83, for relationship investment 20.87 and 8.59, for marital commitment 30.22 and 14.05, for social networks 49.01 and 9.08, for subjective norms 41.38 and 9.50, and for marital instability 28.86 and 8.85, respectively.

Table 1

Descriptive Findings of Participants' Scores for Research Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Relationship Satisfaction	22.07	10.29
Quality of Alternative Relationships	12.47	6.83
Relationship Investment	20.87	8.59
Marital Commitment	30.22	14.05
Social Networks	49.01	9.08
Subjective Norms	41.38	9.50
Marital Instability	28.86	8.85

To examine the inter-correlations among research variables, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated. The results are presented in Table 2. The findings indicate that marital instability was significantly negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction, marital commitment, and subjective norms in marital relationships ($p \leq 0.01$). Furthermore, marital instability was significantly positively correlated with the quality of alternative relationships and the influence of social networks in marital relationships ($p \leq 0.01$). However, no significant relationship was found between marital instability and relationship investment.

Marital commitment was positively and significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction and relationship investment ($p \leq 0.01$) and negatively and significantly correlated with the quality of alternative relationships and the influence of social networks ($p \leq 0.01$). These relationships suggest that marital commitment can significantly influence the creation of marital instability.

Table 2

Inter-Correlations Among Research Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Marital Instability	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Relationship Satisfaction	-0.57	-	-	-	-	-
3. Quality of Alternatives	0.23	-0.20	-	-	-	-
4. Relationship Investment	-0.05	0.20	0.07	-	-	-
5. Social Networks	0.32	-0.26	0.28	0.03	-	-
6. Subjective Norms	-0.27	0.29	-0.10	0.11	-0.02	-
7. Marital Commitment	-0.50	0.70	-0.22	0.37	-0.20	0.14

To evaluate the fit of the proposed research model, path analysis was conducted. The results are shown in Table 3. The findings reveal that the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) was 0.99, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) was 1.00, and the Normed Fit Index (NFI) was 0.98. Additionally, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was 0.000, which is below the threshold of 0.08, indicating a good model fit (Table 3).
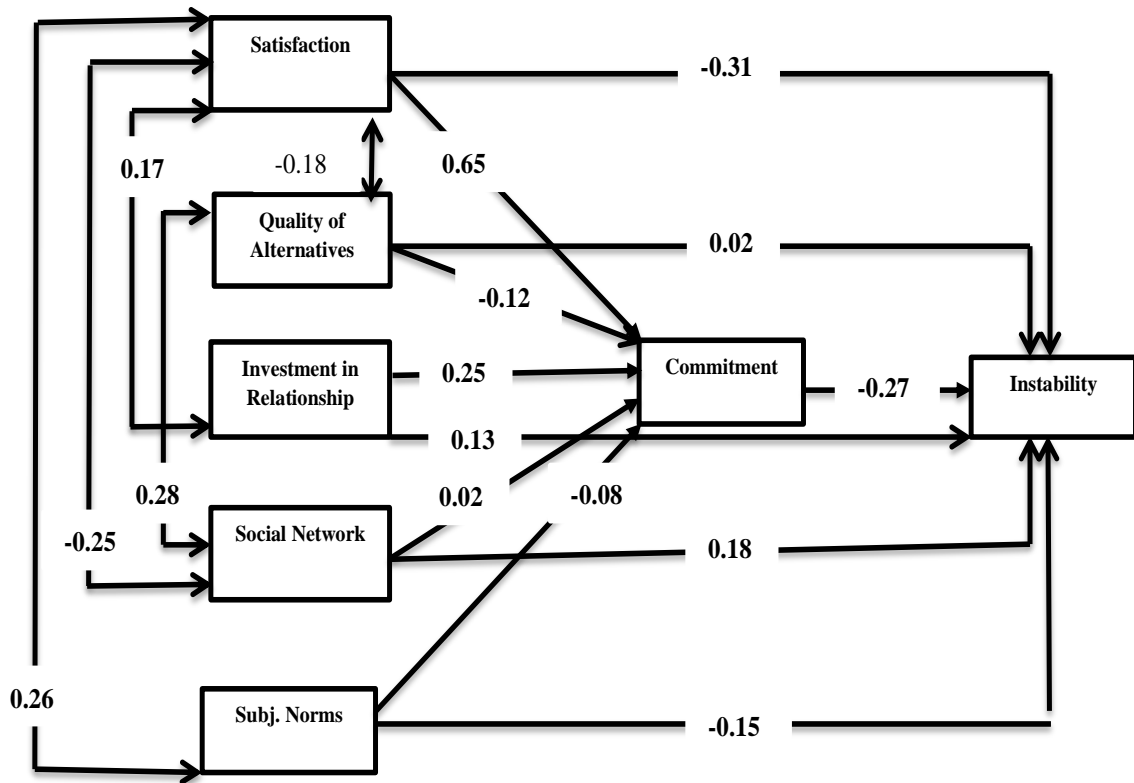
Table 3

Model Fit Indices for the Research Model

Model	P	df	X²	GFI	CFI	NFI	RMSEA
Proposed Model	0.502	4	3.34	0.99	1.00	0.98	0.000

Figure below illustrates the coefficients and explained variance for variables in the research model. The numbers on the arrows represent standardized beta coefficients.

Figure 1

Final Model Depicting Relationships Between Marital Instability and Predictor Variables with the Mediating Role of Marital Commitment

As shown in Table 4, significant positive correlations were found between marital satisfaction and marital commitment, and significant negative correlations were observed between the quality of alternative relationships and marital commitment. Positive significant correlations were identified between relationship investment and marital commitment. Furthermore, marital commitment was significantly negatively correlated with marital instability (p < 0.05). However, no significant relationships were observed between the influence of social networks and marital commitment or between subjective norms in marital relationships and marital commitment.

Table 4

Path Coefficients and Explained Variance in the Fitted Model for the Relationship Between Predictor Variables and Relationship Commitment

Path	Direct Effects	Indirect Effects	Total Effects	p
Marital Satisfaction → Commitment	0.65	-	0.65	0.014
Quality of Alternatives → Commitment	-0.12	-	-0.12	0.034
Relationship Investment → Commitment	0.25	-	0.25	0.009
Social Networks → Commitment	0.015	-	0.015	0.733
Subjective Norms → Commitment	-0.084	-	-0.084	0.153
Commitment → Marital Instability	-0.270	-	-0.270	0.013

As shown in Table 5, marital commitment mediated the relationship between marital satisfaction and marital instability ($p \leq 0.05$), quality of alternatives and marital instability ($p \leq 0.05$), relationship investment and marital instability ($p \leq 0.01$), and subjective norms and marital instability ($p \leq 0.05$). However, the mediating role of marital commitment in the relationship between the influence of social networks in marital relationships and marital instability was not statistically significant.

Table 5

Path Coefficients and Explained Variance in the Fitted Model for the Relationship Between Predictor Variables and Marital Instability

Path	Direct Effects	Indirect Effects	Total Effects	p
Marital Satisfaction → Marital Instability	-0.308	-0.177	-0.484	0.012
Quality of Alternatives → Marital Instability	0.032	0.033	0.065	0.022
Relationship Investment → Marital Instability	0.127	-0.068	0.059	0.004
Social Networks → Marital Instability	0.184	-0.004	0.179	0.696
Subjective Norms → Marital Instability	-0.147	0.026	-0.121	0.05

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrated that the proposed model regarding the role of social networks and subjective norms within the framework of Rusbult's Investment Model in predicting marital instability among divorce-seeking women in Ilam was well-fitted. Direct effects of marital satisfaction and relationship investment on commitment were positive and significant, while the direct effect of the quality of alternative relationships on marital commitment was negative and significant. Additionally, the direct effect of commitment on marital instability was negative and significant. The mediating role of commitment revealed that it significantly mediated the relationships between marital satisfaction, quality of alternatives, relationship investment, and subjective norms regarding the relationship. These findings align with previous research (Gaines Jr & Agnew, 2003; Givertz, 2013, 2016; Haghparast, 2017; Lehmiller & Agnew, 2007; Lydon, 2010; Lydon & Linardatos, 2012; Modiri, 2017; Nasir, 2017; Tan, 2020; West, 2013).

The findings can be explained by referring to Social Exchange Theory, which posits that individuals' perceptions of a relationship depend on the rewards they receive, the costs they incur, their beliefs about the kind of relationship they deserve, and the likelihood of finding a better relationship with someone else. Over time, individuals develop an extensive history of relationships, which shapes their expectations for current and future relationships. Those with a high comparison level expect high rewards and low costs in their relationships, and if a particular relationship does not meet this standard, dissatisfaction occurs rapidly. Conversely, individuals with a low comparison level are more content in such relationships because they expect difficulties and high costs. Ultimately, satisfaction in a relationship depends on individuals' perceptions of the likelihood of finding better alternatives (Haghparast, 2017).

All major relationship commitment theories indicate that the availability of attractive alternatives negatively impacts commitment and relationship stability. Extensive empirical evidence supports this view. Recent studies have examined how commitment influences attention, perception, and judgment regarding attractive alternatives, often through mechanisms that promote relationship stability (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2007; Lydon & Linardatos, 2012).

In general, when a relationship offers substantial rewards, individuals feel satisfied and happy. However, many people do not leave their partners even when dissatisfied and when alternatives appear more appealing. Studies suggest that an additional factor, investment in the relationship, must be considered to understand close relationships fully. Rusbult (1983) defined investment in her Investment Model of Close Relationships as any resources individuals contribute to a relationship, which would be lost if the relationship ended. Tangible examples include financial resources, assets, and possessions, while intangible examples include emotional well-being, time, emotional energy spent building the relationship, and a sense of personal integration that would be lost after separation (Givertz, 2013, 2016). Commitment reflects motivation to sustain energy, effort, and resilience against difficulties. Cognitive-motivational approaches suggest that commitment is linked to various cognitive and behavioral mechanisms that help maintain relationships. Numerous studies have explored how different levels of commitment enhance relationship stability (Arriaga, 2004; Arriaga & Agnew, 2001).

Based on this framework, it can be stated that the greater the investment and satisfaction in a marital relationship, and the lower the quality of alternatives and comparison levels, the higher the commitment, which predicts relationship stability. Conversely, for divorce-seeking couples, instability is associated with dissatisfaction, high-quality alternatives, and minimal investment in the relationship.

Subjective norms are a highly influential variable and can predict relationship stability. Subjective norms refer to the perception of social norms and pressures to perform a behavior and an individual's motivation to comply with these pressures. In a relationship, these norms can affect both commitment and relationship instability. For example, individuals may consider: "If I divorce my spouse, will I gain the approval of those who matter to me, or will they endorse my decision?" The findings of this study suggest that divorce-seeking couples who wish to end their relationships likely gain approval from their social environment and significant others due to cultural changes that have reduced the stigma around divorce. Consequently, they are more willing to accept divorce and its consequences.

The results also indicated that social networks significantly correlated with marital instability among divorce-seeking couples. These findings align with the prior studies (Agnew, 2001; Etcheverry, 2013). As the number and variety of social networks increase, users experience new modes of socialization (Gaines Jr & Agnew, 2003; Givertz, 2013, 2016). With the mass production and distribution of smartphones, social networks have rapidly become platforms for frequent interaction and information exchange. These networks are so powerful that they can create or alter norms, values, and laws. Given their widespread use among community members, they significantly impact society (Haghparast, 2017).

5. Suggestions and Limitations

Social networks, whether internet-based virtual networks or real-life networks of friends, family, and significant others, play a decisive role in the stability or instability of marital relationships. Based on the results and the role of variables such as subjective norms and social networks within Rusbult's Investment Model, the findings of this study can be utilized in counseling centers to enhance and prevent marital instability. However, given the convenience sampling method and the study population limited to Ilam, caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings due to cultural differences.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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