

The Mediating Role of Guilt in the Relationship Between Dark Personality Traits and Tendency Toward Marital Infidelity Among Married Individuals

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to examine the mediating role of guilt in the relationship between dark personality traits and the tendency toward marital infidelity among married individuals.

Methods and Materials: This quantitative study used a descriptive-correlational design based on path analysis. The statistical population included married individuals residing in Neyshabur, Iran, in 2024. A sample of 300 participants was selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Dirty Dozen Dark Personality Traits Scale developed by Jonason and Webster, the Guilt Inventory developed by Kugler and Jones, and the Marital Infidelity Tendency Questionnaire developed by Whatley. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 24. Pearson correlation coefficients and path analysis were applied to test the hypothesized direct and indirect relationships among narcissism, Machiavellianism, antisocial traits, guilt, and tendency toward marital infidelity.

Findings: The revised structural model showed acceptable fit to the data, with $\chi^2 = 1.41$, $df = 1$, $RMSEA = .038$, $GFI = .99$, $AGFI = .98$, $NFI = .97$, $IFI = 1.00$, and $CFI = 1.00$. Machiavellianism had a significant negative effect on guilt ($\beta = -.24$, $p = .001$), and antisocial traits also had a significant negative effect on guilt ($\beta = -.56$, $p = .044$). Guilt had a significant negative effect on tendency toward marital infidelity ($\beta = -.10$, $p = .005$). Machiavellianism ($\beta = .41$, $p = .029$) and antisocial traits ($\beta = .47$, $p = .006$) had significant positive direct effects on tendency toward marital infidelity. The indirect effects of Machiavellianism ($\beta = .04$, $p = .006$) and antisocial traits ($\beta = .02$, $p = .033$) on infidelity tendency through guilt were significant, whereas the indirect effect of narcissism was not significant ($p = .743$).

Conclusion: The findings indicate that guilt partially mediates the relationship between dark personality traits and tendency toward marital infidelity. Higher Machiavellian and antisocial traits were associated with lower guilt and greater infidelity tendency. Therefore, assessing dark personality traits and strengthening guilt-related moral responsibility may be useful in marital counseling and preventive interventions.

Keywords: Guilt; dark personality traits; Machiavellianism; antisocial traits; narcissism; marital infidelity; married individuals.

1. Introduction

Marriage is one of the most important social, emotional, and psychological bonds in adult life, and its quality has a direct influence on individual well-being, family stability, and broader social functioning. Within the marital relationship, spouses are expected to establish commitment, intimacy, emotional security, mutual responsibility, and trust. However, despite the idealized image of marriage as a stable and exclusive relationship, many marital systems are exposed to severe relational threats, among which marital infidelity is one of the most destructive. Marital infidelity violates the implicit or explicit agreement of emotional and sexual exclusivity between spouses and can undermine the foundation of trust that maintains marital life. In many cases, infidelity does not remain a private interpersonal event but produces broader psychological, familial, and social consequences, including emotional trauma, marital conflict, divorce, family disintegration, psychological distress, and impaired functioning in children and other family members. Studies conducted in the Iranian context have also emphasized that marital infidelity is shaped by multiple personal, relational, cultural, and social factors and cannot be reduced to a single cause (Nasiri et al., 2022; Sharifi-Saei & Azad-Armaki, 2021). Therefore, understanding the psychological determinants of tendency toward marital infidelity is essential for developing preventive, counseling, and therapeutic interventions.

The tendency toward marital infidelity refers to cognitive, emotional, and behavioral readiness to engage in extramarital relationships or to adopt permissive attitudes toward such relationships. This tendency may precede actual infidelity and can be considered an important warning sign in marital assessment. Research has shown that infidelity-related attitudes and tendencies are associated with relational dissatisfaction, maladaptive beliefs, emotional disconnection, and weakened commitment. For example, studies have demonstrated that marital satisfaction and personality traits can predict couples' attitudes toward infidelity, suggesting that both relational and intrapersonal factors contribute to the formation of infidelity-related tendencies (Isma & Turnip, 2019). In the Iranian context, relational beliefs, dark personality dimensions, and social trust have also been found to play a role in couples' attitudes toward infidelity (Yousefi Moridani et al., 2020). More recent structural models have further shown that attitudes toward marital infidelity can be predicted through

attachment-related and coping-related mechanisms in married individuals, indicating that infidelity tendency emerges from a complex interaction between personality, emotional regulation, attachment, and relational functioning (Khazraloo et al., 2026). Accordingly, the study of infidelity tendency requires attention not only to external marital circumstances but also to personality structures and moral-emotional processes.

One of the psychological domains that has received increasing attention in explaining maladaptive interpersonal behaviors is personality pathology and subclinical maladaptive personality traits. Personality disorders and personality-related dysfunctions involve enduring patterns of cognition, emotion, impulse regulation, and interpersonal behavior that deviate from adaptive functioning and impair social and relational life (Johnson et al., 2020). Even when personality features do not reach the clinical threshold of a personality disorder, they may still affect marital functioning by shaping how individuals perceive themselves, regulate emotions, respond to conflict, and treat their partners. Emotional self-awareness, defense mechanisms, and maladaptive personality patterns have been shown to be closely interrelated, indicating that problematic personality features can influence how individuals manage guilt, shame, anger, and interpersonal responsibility (Chattardar et al., 2020). In marital relationships, such patterns may manifest through manipulation, emotional coldness, entitlement, impulsivity, lack of empathy, and weakened responsibility toward the spouse. These features are particularly visible in the group of personality characteristics known as dark personality traits.

Dark personality traits generally refer to socially aversive but often subclinical personality tendencies that involve self-interest, callousness, manipulation, and moral flexibility. The most widely studied framework in this domain is the Dark Triad, which includes narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Narcissism is characterized by grandiosity, entitlement, superiority, admiration-seeking, and sensitivity to threats against the self. Machiavellianism involves manipulation, strategic exploitation, cynicism, emotional detachment, and instrumental use of others. Psychopathy is associated with impulsivity, emotional coldness, lack of remorse, antisocial behavior, and low empathy. Screening and assessment of dark personalities have been emphasized in psychological research because these traits, even at subclinical levels, can predict maladaptive social behavior and interpersonal harm (Paulhus et al., 2020). Research on organizational and social

contexts has also shown that dark traits are relevant in nonclinical populations and can influence selection, interpersonal interaction, and behavioral decision-making (Sutton, 2019). In addition, systematic evidence has linked dark personality traits with antisocial behaviors, suggesting that these traits have broad implications for harmful interpersonal conduct (Moor & Anderson, 2019). Since marriage requires empathy, honesty, mutual care, and commitment, the presence of dark personality tendencies may place the marital bond at risk.

The connection between dark personality traits and marital problems has been supported by several empirical studies. Dark personality has been associated with marital quality, marital instability, and problematic couple dynamics. For example, research among couples has shown that dark personality traits can contribute to poor marital quality and instability through interpersonal processes that weaken relational security (Yu et al., 2020). In Iranian samples, dark personality traits have also been associated with marital disturbances, particularly in stressful social contexts such as the COVID-19 crisis (Khaksari, 2021). These findings suggest that dark traits may reduce marital adjustment by increasing conflict, reducing empathy, and promoting self-serving responses during relational stress. In relation to infidelity specifically, dark personality traits have been found to predict more permissive attitudes toward infidelity among married individuals (Bilal et al., 2021). Similarly, early maladaptive schemas and dark personality traits have been identified as predictors of tendency toward marital infidelity, indicating that deep cognitive-personality patterns may contribute to vulnerability to extramarital involvement (Hasheminejad, 2020). These findings are consistent with broader models suggesting that marital infidelity is often rooted in enduring maladaptive personality and cognitive structures.

Recent studies have further extended this line of inquiry by examining the predictive role of dark and light personality traits in infidelity-related outcomes. Grigoropoulos found that intrapersonal personality factors, including light and dark personality traits, are relevant for understanding infidelity, especially among women, highlighting the importance of personality-based vulnerability and protective factors (Grigoropoulos, 2023). Domanik also examined religiosity as a moderator of infidelity in women with Dark Triad traits, suggesting that the influence of dark personality traits on infidelity may depend on additional moral, religious, and self-regulatory variables (Domanik, 2023). Yasaran investigated how the

Dark Tetrad predicts responses to infidelity threats, further showing that dark personality traits shape individuals' emotional and behavioral responses in the context of relationship betrayal (Yasaran, 2023). These studies collectively imply that dark traits not only increase vulnerability to infidelity-related tendencies but may also influence how individuals interpret, justify, and respond to betrayal. In addition, structural research has shown that dark personality constructs and emotional inhibition can be related to extramarital relationships through attitudes toward marital commitment, suggesting that dark traits may operate indirectly through relational and moral-cognitive pathways (Arabi Divarzemi et al., 2023).

Alongside dark personality traits, maladaptive schema modes and emotional divorce have also been identified as important predictors of marital infidelity. Emotional divorce refers to a condition in which spouses remain formally married but experience emotional separation, weakened intimacy, and reduced psychological connection. In such conditions, marital dissatisfaction and emotional deprivation may increase vulnerability to extramarital involvement. Research among women referring to counseling centers in Iran has shown that maladaptive schema modes and emotional divorce can predict marital infidelity, indicating that deeply rooted cognitive-emotional patterns and relational detachment are important in explaining infidelity risk (Shoa Kazemi et al., 2025). Similarly, evidence from a related study demonstrated that incompatible mental schemas and emotional divorce can predict marital infidelity among women seeking counseling services in Iran (Shoa Kazemi et al., 2026). These findings are important because they show that infidelity tendency is rarely a simple behavioral choice; rather, it may emerge from long-standing emotional wounds, unmet relational needs, distorted self-other schemas, and maladaptive personality characteristics. The study of retaliatory marital infidelity after betrayal further suggests that infidelity may sometimes develop as a response to perceived injustice, revenge motivation, and relational injury (Hajihassani, 2026). Therefore, infidelity must be understood within a multidimensional psychological framework that includes personality traits, moral emotions, schemas, attachment, relational dissatisfaction, and self-regulatory processes.

One moral-emotional construct that may clarify the pathway between dark personality traits and infidelity tendency is guilt. Guilt is a self-conscious emotion that emerges when individuals evaluate their behavior as inconsistent with internalized moral standards or as harmful

to others. Unlike shame, which often involves a negative evaluation of the self, guilt is more closely tied to negative evaluation of a specific behavior and may motivate reparative action, apology, responsibility, and behavioral inhibition. In interpersonal relationships, guilt can function as an internal moral regulator by preventing harmful actions and encouraging individuals to repair relational damage. Evidence has shown that guilt- and shame-proneness are related to perceptions of infidelity, such that individuals who are more prone to guilt and shame may perceive infidelity as less acceptable and may be less permissive toward dating or relational betrayal (Kaplanova & Gregor, 2019). In the marital context, guilt has also been directly examined in relation to extramarital relationships, and findings indicate that guilt is an important emotional factor in understanding infidelity-related behavior (Palizgir, 2020). These findings suggest that guilt may reduce the tendency toward marital infidelity by activating moral responsibility and increasing awareness of the emotional harm caused to the spouse.

The protective function of guilt can also be understood through the broader concept of moral disengagement. Moral disengagement refers to cognitive mechanisms through which individuals justify harmful behavior, minimize responsibility, distort consequences, or blame victims in order to avoid guilt and self-condemnation. When moral disengagement increases, individuals may become more capable of engaging in unethical or harmful behavior without experiencing sufficient internal discomfort. Research has shown that moral disengagement mechanisms are associated with aggressive and harmful interpersonal behaviors, including indirect and direct bullying as well as pro-aggressive bystander behavior (Bjarehed et al., 2020). A systematic review on cyberbullying involvement also indicated that moral disengagement is a key mechanism through which individuals neutralize responsibility for harmful actions (Lo Cricchio et al., 2021). In another structural model, moral disengagement mediated the relationship between parent-child conflict and aggression, showing that conflictual relational experiences can influence harmful behavior through moral-cognitive mechanisms (Mohammadi Eini et al., 2020). Koay and colleagues also highlighted the role of moral disengagement in explaining unethical workplace behaviors such as cyberloafing under abusive supervision, demonstrating that moral disengagement can facilitate deviant behavior across contexts (Koay et al., 2022). Applied to marital infidelity, these findings imply that individuals who morally disengage

may experience less guilt and may justify extramarital involvement more easily.

Dark personality traits may be especially relevant to guilt because these traits are often characterized by low empathy, low remorse, emotional detachment, and self-serving moral reasoning. Individuals high in Machiavellianism may justify deception and manipulation as necessary or advantageous, while individuals high in psychopathy may experience limited emotional concern for the partner's suffering. Narcissistic individuals may rationalize infidelity through entitlement, admiration needs, or perceived inadequacy of the spouse. Therefore, dark personality traits may increase the tendency toward marital infidelity partly by weakening guilt and moral inhibition. Previous studies have shown that marital infidelity causes extensive psychological and relational damage in couples, including emotional distress, reduced trust, and impaired family functioning (Sarmadi & Ahmadi, 2021). Intervention studies with betrayed women also show that the aftermath of betrayal is associated with reduced distress tolerance and self-control, which require psychological intervention and recovery processes (Babakhani, 2020). These consequences emphasize the importance of identifying psychological mechanisms that may prevent infidelity before it occurs. If guilt functions as an internal inhibitory mechanism, then reduced guilt among individuals with dark personality traits may be a critical pathway through which such traits increase infidelity tendency.

Despite the growing literature on marital infidelity, dark personality traits, schemas, emotional divorce, attachment, and moral processes, the precise mediating role of guilt in the relationship between dark personality traits and tendency toward marital infidelity has received limited direct empirical attention. Existing studies have examined dark traits as predictors of infidelity attitudes, marital instability, extramarital relationships, and relational disturbances, while other studies have examined guilt, shame, moral disengagement, and self-conscious emotions in relation to unethical or harmful behavior. However, fewer studies have integrated these domains into a single structural model in which guilt is tested as a mediator between dark personality traits and marital infidelity tendency. Such a model is theoretically meaningful because dark traits may increase infidelity tendency not only directly through impulsivity, manipulation, entitlement, or low empathy, but also indirectly through reduced guilt and weakened moral self-regulation. Clarifying this mechanism can help counselors and family therapists identify individuals at higher relational

risk and design interventions that strengthen moral responsibility, empathy, emotional awareness, and commitment.

Considering the destructive consequences of marital infidelity and the importance of personality and moral-emotional mechanisms in marital functioning, the present study aimed to investigate the mediating role of guilt in the relationship between dark personality traits and tendency toward marital infidelity among married individuals.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study was conducted using a quantitative, descriptive-correlational design with the purpose of examining the mediating role of guilt in the relationship between dark personality traits and the tendency toward marital infidelity among married individuals. In terms of purpose, the study was fundamental, and in terms of data collection, it was carried out as a field study. The statistical population consisted of all married individuals residing in Neyshabur, Iran, in 2024. The study sample included 300 married individuals who were selected through convenience sampling. The sample size was estimated using G*Power software based on an alpha level of .05, statistical power of 95%, an anticipated effect size of .30, and six expected degrees of freedom. According to this calculation, the minimum required sample size was 281 participants; however, to compensate for possible attrition and incomplete responses, 300 participants were finally recruited. The inclusion criteria were being legally married and willingness to participate in the study. The exclusion criteria included incomplete, distorted, or unreliable questionnaire responses. Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were provided with explanations about the purpose and objectives of the study. Participants were assured that their participation was voluntary, that no identifying information would be collected, and that their responses would remain confidential. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. Data collection was conducted in May 2024. To access participants, several universities in Neyshabur, including Islamic Azad University, Payame Noor University, and Sama University, were visited after coordination with university authorities. Questionnaires were distributed among married students in selected classes, and additional questionnaires were administered to married individuals attending public

gatherings, including Friday prayer ceremonies and psychology workshops. All participants received instructions on how to complete the questionnaires and were encouraged to respond carefully and honestly.

2.2. Measures

Dark personality traits were measured using the Dirty Dozen Scale developed by Jonason and Webster (2010). This self-report questionnaire consists of 12 items and assesses three dimensions of the Dark Triad: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Each dimension is measured through four items. The responses are scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1, indicating very low agreement, to 5, indicating very high agreement. Higher scores represent stronger dark personality traits. The psychometric properties of the Persian version of this scale were examined by Ghamarani et al. (2015), who reported significant item-total and subscale-total correlations at the .01 level. In their study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .92 for Machiavellianism, .40 for psychopathy, .68 for narcissism, and .81 for the total scale. These findings indicated acceptable validity and reliability for the instrument in the Iranian context. In the present study, the internal consistency of the total scale was acceptable, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .78. The alpha coefficients for the narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy subscales were .79, .85, and .77, respectively.

Guilt was assessed using the Guilt Inventory developed by Kugler and Jones (1988, 1992). This self-report instrument includes 45 items and measures three components of guilt: Trait Guilt, State Guilt, and Moral Standards. The items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1, indicating strongly disagree, to 5, indicating strongly agree. The total score ranges from 45 to 225, with higher scores indicating higher levels of guilt. The Persian version of the instrument was previously examined by Naziri (1995), who confirmed its content and face validity. The test-retest reliability coefficients over a 10-week interval were reported as .81 for Moral Standards, .72 for Trait Guilt, and .56 for State Guilt. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the total guilt scale was .84, demonstrating satisfactory internal consistency. The reliability coefficients for Trait Guilt, State Guilt, and Moral Standards were .78, .86, and .75, respectively.

The tendency toward marital infidelity was measured using the Marital Infidelity Tendency Questionnaire developed by Whatley (2006). This questionnaire consists of

12 items and evaluates individuals' inclination toward marital infidelity. Items are scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1, indicating strongly disagree, to 7, indicating strongly agree. The total score ranges from 12 to 84, and higher scores indicate a greater tendency toward marital infidelity. Whatley reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .80 and confirmed the face validity of the questionnaire. In Iran, Alitabar et al. (2014) reported a reliability coefficient of .71 for this instrument. In the present study, the questionnaire demonstrated strong internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .87.

2.3. *Data Analysis*

After data collection, the questionnaires were reviewed, and responses were prepared for statistical analysis. The data were analyzed using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 24. First, descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, were calculated to describe the demographic characteristics of the participants and the main study variables. Before conducting the main analyses, the data were screened for missing values and outliers. Missing values were replaced using the mean of the relevant variable. Univariate outliers were identified through boxplot analysis, and 16 outlying cases were removed from the dataset. The assumptions required for path analysis were then examined. Univariate normality was assessed using skewness and kurtosis indices, and the obtained values indicated acceptable normal distribution of the observed variables. Linearity among the study variables was also evaluated using scatterplot matrices, which confirmed acceptable linear relationships. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to examine the bivariate relationships

among dark personality traits, guilt, and tendency toward marital infidelity. Path analysis was then conducted in AMOS to test the hypothesized mediation model and to examine the direct and indirect effects of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy on marital infidelity tendency through guilt. Model fit was evaluated using standard fit indices, including chi-square, degrees of freedom, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation, Goodness-of-Fit Index, Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index, Normed Fit Index, Incremental Fit Index, and Comparative Fit Index. A significance level of .05 was considered for all inferential analyses.

3. **Findings and Results**

The demographic characteristics of the participants showed that the mean age of the married individuals participating in the study was 34.41 years, with a standard deviation of 9.24. The participants had an average of 1.59 children, with a standard deviation of 1.24, and the mean duration of marriage was 13.72 years, with a standard deviation of 9.36. In terms of gender distribution, 59 participants were male, accounting for 19.7% of the sample, and 241 participants were female, accounting for 80.3% of the sample. Regarding educational level, 42 participants had below high school diploma education, representing 14.0% of the sample; 113 participants had a high school diploma, representing 37.7%; 31 participants had an associate degree, representing 10.3%; 87 participants had a bachelor's degree, representing 29.0%; and 27 participants had a master's degree or higher, representing 9.0%. Therefore, most participants were female, and the largest educational group consisted of individuals with a high school diploma.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD
Marital infidelity tendency	39.86	6.84
Narcissism	7.60	1.72
Machiavellianism	5.88	2.21
Psychopathy	7.07	2.37
Guilt	138.10	11.18

As shown in Table 1, the mean score of marital infidelity tendency was 39.86 with a standard deviation of 6.84. Among the dark personality traits, the mean score of narcissism was 7.60 with a standard deviation of 1.72, the mean score of Machiavellianism was 5.88 with a standard deviation of 2.21, and the mean score of psychopathy was

7.07 with a standard deviation of 2.37. The mean score of guilt was 138.10 with a standard deviation of 11.18. These results provide an overview of the central tendency and dispersion of the main variables before testing the hypothesized structural model.

Before conducting path analysis, the required statistical assumptions were examined. The data were first screened for missing values and outliers. Missing values were replaced using the mean of the relevant variable, and univariate outliers were examined using boxplot analysis. Based on this procedure, 16 cases were identified as outliers and were removed from the analysis. Normality was assessed using skewness and kurtosis indices for the observed variables. The skewness values of all variables were within the acceptable range of ± 1.5 , indicating acceptable symmetry of the distributions, and the kurtosis values were within the acceptable range of ± 7 , indicating no serious deviation from normality. In addition, the assumption of linearity was examined using scatterplot matrices, and the results indicated acceptable linear relationships among the variables included in the model. Therefore, the data met the required assumptions for path analysis.

The initial structural model was tested using AMOS to examine the mediating role of guilt in the relationship between dark personality traits and tendency toward marital infidelity. In the initial model, the direct paths from narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy to guilt and to marital infidelity tendency, as well as the path from guilt to marital infidelity tendency, were examined. The initial model did not show an adequate fit to the data and was identified as a saturated model. The fit indices indicated that the model required modification, as RMSEA was .172, exceeding the acceptable threshold of .08, and several comparative fit indices, including GFI, AGFI, NFI, IFI, CFI, and RFI, were below the recommended value of .90. Therefore, based on the modification indices and the statistical non-significance of one path, the model was revised by removing the non-significant path to obtain a more parsimonious and better-fitting structural model.

Table 2

Fit Indices of the Final Revised Structural Model

Fit Index	Value	Recommended Criterion
χ^2	1.41	Lower values indicate better fit
df	1	—
RMSEA	.038	< .08
GFI	.99	> .90
AGFI	.98	> .90
NFI	.97	> .90
IFI	1.00	> .90
CFI	1.00	> .90

As presented in Table 2, the final revised model demonstrated a satisfactory and acceptable fit to the observed data. The chi-square value was 1.41 with 1 degree of freedom. The RMSEA value was .038, which is below the recommended cutoff of .08 and indicates a favorable approximation of the model to the data. In addition, the GFI value was .99, AGFI was .98, NFI was .97, IFI was 1.00, and

CFI was 1.00. Since all comparative and absolute fit indices exceeded the recommended threshold of .90, the revised model can be considered well fitted. These results indicate that the final structural model adequately explained the relationships among dark personality traits, guilt, and tendency toward marital infidelity.

Table 3

Summary of Direct and Indirect Effects Based on Path Analysis

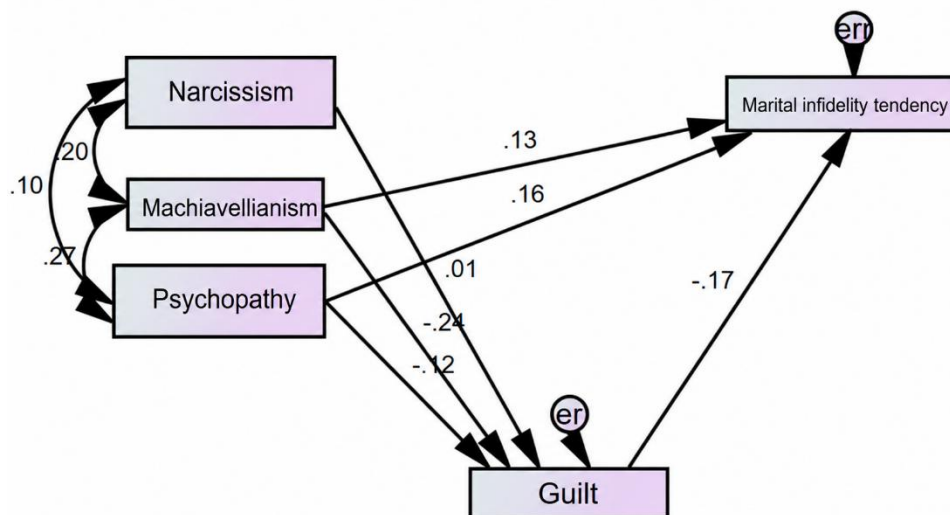
Path	Standardized Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	Critical Value	p-value
Direct Effects				
Machiavellianism → Guilt	-0.24	0.03	-4.08	0.001
Antisocial traits → Guilt	-0.56	0.28	-2.01	0.044
Narcissism → Guilt	0.07	0.38	0.18	0.855
Guilt → Tendency to Infidelity	-0.10	0.04	-2.83	0.005
Machiavellianism → Tendency to Infidelity	0.41	0.19	2.19	0.029
Antisocial traits → Tendency to Infidelity	0.47	0.17	2.77	0.006
Indirect Effects via Guilt				
Machiavellianism → Guilt → Tendency to Infidelity	0.04	—	—	0.006
Antisocial traits → Guilt → Tendency to Infidelity	0.02	—	—	0.033
Narcissism → Guilt → Tendency to Infidelity	-0.01	—	—	0.743

The results of the path analysis presented in Table 3 showed that Machiavellianism had a significant negative direct effect on guilt ($\beta = -0.24, p = 0.001$), and antisocial traits also had a significant negative direct effect on guilt ($\beta = -0.56, p = 0.044$). This indicates that higher levels of Machiavellianism and antisocial traits were associated with lower levels of guilt among married individuals. However, the direct effect of narcissism on guilt was not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.07, p = 0.855$). The direct effect of guilt on tendency toward marital infidelity was negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.10, p = 0.005$), indicating that higher guilt was associated with a lower tendency toward marital infidelity. In addition, Machiavellianism ($\beta = 0.41, p = 0.029$) and antisocial traits ($\beta = 0.47, p = 0.006$) had significant positive direct effects on tendency toward marital

infidelity. The indirect effects also showed that guilt significantly mediated the relationship between Machiavellianism and tendency toward marital infidelity ($\beta = 0.04, p = 0.006$), as well as the relationship between antisocial traits and tendency toward marital infidelity ($\beta = 0.02, p = 0.033$). In contrast, the indirect effect of narcissism on tendency toward marital infidelity through guilt was not significant ($\beta = -0.01, p = 0.743$). Therefore, the findings confirmed that guilt plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between some dark personality traits and tendency toward marital infidelity. Given that the direct effects of Machiavellianism and antisocial traits on marital infidelity tendency remained significant, the mediating role of guilt can be interpreted as partial mediation.

Figure 1

Final Model of the Study with Standardized Coefficients



4. Discussion

The present study was conducted to examine the mediating role of guilt in the relationship between dark personality traits and the tendency toward marital infidelity among married individuals. The findings showed that the revised structural model had an acceptable and strong fit with the observed data, indicating that the proposed model appropriately explains the relationships among dark personality traits, guilt, and marital infidelity tendency. The final model fit indices, including RMSEA = .038, GFI = .99, AGFI = .98, NFI = .97, IFI = 1.00, and CFI = 1.00, confirmed that the revised model was statistically adequate. The path

coefficients further indicated that Machiavellianism and psychopathy had significant negative effects on guilt and significant positive direct effects on tendency toward marital infidelity. Guilt also had a significant negative effect on marital infidelity tendency. In addition, the indirect effects of Machiavellianism and psychopathy on marital infidelity tendency through guilt were significant, whereas the direct and indirect effects of narcissism were not significant. Therefore, the main hypothesis of the study was confirmed, and guilt was identified as a partial mediator in the relationship between some dark personality traits and the tendency toward marital infidelity.

The finding that Machiavellianism and psychopathy positively predicted the tendency toward marital infidelity is consistent with previous evidence showing that dark personality traits are associated with permissive attitudes toward infidelity, weaker marital commitment, and greater vulnerability to extramarital involvement. Bilal and colleagues found that Dark Triad traits were significantly related to attitudes toward infidelity among married individuals, indicating that people with stronger dark personality characteristics are more likely to normalize or justify extramarital behavior (Bilal et al., 2021). Similarly, Hasheminejad showed that dark personality traits, along with early maladaptive schemas, predicted tendency toward marital infidelity, suggesting that infidelity tendency may be rooted in relatively stable personality and cognitive patterns (Hasheminejad, 2020). The present finding is also aligned with Yousefi Moridani and colleagues, who reported that dark personality dimensions were related to couples' attitudes toward infidelity (Yousefi Moridani et al., 2020). Furthermore, international findings have shown that dark personality traits are associated with marital instability and reduced marital quality, which may create a relational context in which infidelity becomes more likely (Yu et al., 2020). In this sense, the present study extends previous findings by demonstrating that dark traits not only have direct effects on infidelity tendency but also operate indirectly through reduced guilt.

The positive role of Machiavellianism in predicting marital infidelity tendency can be explained by the core features of this trait. Machiavellian individuals tend to be strategic, manipulative, emotionally detached, and highly oriented toward personal benefit. In marital relationships, these characteristics may weaken honesty, reciprocity, and emotional accountability. Because Machiavellian individuals often evaluate relationships instrumentally, they may be more willing to engage in extramarital involvement when it serves personal, sexual, emotional, or ego-related goals. This explanation is compatible with evidence indicating that dark personality traits are associated with antisocial and exploitative behaviors in interpersonal contexts (Moor & Anderson, 2019). It also corresponds with findings that dark personality tendencies are associated with marital disturbances and dysfunctional couple dynamics (Khaksari, 2021). When manipulation and self-interest become dominant interpersonal strategies, the marital relationship may lose its moral and emotional boundaries, thereby increasing the likelihood of infidelity-related cognitions and intentions.

The significant positive effect of psychopathy on marital infidelity tendency is also theoretically expected. Psychopathy is characterized by impulsivity, emotional coldness, lack of remorse, low empathy, sensation seeking, and disregard for interpersonal consequences. These characteristics may increase the probability of risky relational behavior, including extramarital involvement. Individuals with psychopathic tendencies may be less sensitive to the emotional suffering of their spouse and less inhibited by the moral consequences of betrayal. This finding is consistent with research showing that dark personality characteristics are relevant to infidelity-related responses and threats in romantic relationships (Yasaran, 2023). It is also supported by Grigoropoulos, who showed that intrapersonal personality factors, including dark personality traits, contribute to infidelity-related tendencies (Grigoropoulos, 2023). Likewise, Domanik's work on Dark Triad women suggests that moral and religious moderators may influence the connection between dark traits and infidelity, implying that dark personality traits may increase infidelity risk particularly when internal or external moral restraints are weak (Domanik, 2023).

Another important finding was that guilt had a significant negative effect on the tendency toward marital infidelity. This result means that individuals who experience higher levels of guilt are less likely to show a tendency toward marital infidelity. This finding is consistent with studies emphasizing the role of guilt and shame in reducing permissive perceptions of infidelity. Kaplanova and Gregor showed that guilt- and shame-proneness were related to perceptions of dating infidelity, indicating that self-conscious moral emotions can shape how individuals evaluate betrayal-related behaviors (Kaplanova & Gregor, 2019). Similarly, Palizgir reported a relationship between guilt and extramarital relationships, supporting the idea that guilt is an important emotional factor in the context of infidelity (Palizgir, 2020). From a psychological perspective, guilt functions as a self-regulatory moral emotion. It arises when individuals recognize that their behavior may harm another person or violate internalized moral standards. In marriage, guilt may prevent infidelity by increasing awareness of the spouse's emotional pain, strengthening responsibility, and inhibiting self-serving impulses.

The mediating role of guilt provides the most important contribution of the present study. The results showed that Machiavellianism and psychopathy reduced guilt, and lower guilt, in turn, increased the tendency toward marital

infidelity. This finding suggests that dark personality traits may promote infidelity not only because they directly increase manipulation, impulsivity, and self-centeredness, but also because they weaken the internal moral emotion that normally inhibits betrayal. In other words, guilt operates as a psychological bridge between dark personality traits and infidelity tendency. This interpretation is compatible with the literature on moral disengagement. Moral disengagement allows individuals to justify harmful behaviors, minimize responsibility, and reduce self-condemnation. Studies have shown that moral disengagement is associated with harmful interpersonal behaviors, including aggression, bullying, and unethical behavior (Bjarehed et al., 2020; Lo Cricchio et al., 2021). Structural research has also demonstrated that moral disengagement can mediate the relationship between relational conflict and aggression (Mohammadi Eini et al., 2020). Similarly, Koay and colleagues showed that moral disengagement can facilitate deviant behavior by weakening moral self-regulation (Koay et al., 2022). In the context of the present study, reduced guilt may represent a moral-emotional pathway similar to disengagement, through which individuals with dark traits become more able to consider or justify infidelity.

The non-significant role of narcissism was another notable finding. Unlike Machiavellianism and psychopathy, narcissism did not significantly predict guilt and did not have a significant indirect effect on marital infidelity tendency through guilt. This result is not entirely inconsistent with the literature, because narcissism is a multidimensional construct that may include both maladaptive and relatively adaptive aspects. While narcissistic entitlement and admiration-seeking may increase vulnerability to infidelity in some contexts, other components of narcissism, such as self-presentation concerns and the desire to preserve a socially favorable image, may inhibit overt infidelity tendencies. Moreover, the use of a brief Dark Triad measure may capture subclinical narcissistic features that are not severe enough to produce significant guilt reduction or infidelity tendency. Previous research has shown that personality traits and marital satisfaction jointly predict infidelity attitudes, meaning that the effect of personality may depend on relational and contextual conditions (Isma & Turnip, 2019). Therefore, narcissism may require moderators such as marital dissatisfaction, emotional deprivation, attachment insecurity, emotional divorce, or retaliatory motives to become a stronger predictor of infidelity tendency.

The findings can also be interpreted in relation to broader structural and relational models of infidelity. Recent studies have shown that marital infidelity can be predicted by maladaptive schema modes, incompatible mental schemas, and emotional divorce, particularly among women referring to counseling centers (Shoa Kazemi et al., 2025; Shoa Kazemi et al., 2026). These findings suggest that infidelity tendency is not merely a behavioral impulse but is embedded in deeper emotional and cognitive structures. Similarly, Khazraloo and colleagues found that attitudes toward marital infidelity can be predicted based on attachment with the mediating role of coping strategies, indicating that attachment patterns and coping responses are central to infidelity-related attitudes (Khazraloo et al., 2026). The present study complements these findings by highlighting guilt as another important mediating mechanism. While schemas, attachment, and coping explain how individuals perceive relationships and respond to distress, guilt explains how they morally evaluate potential betrayal and regulate harmful impulses.

The results are also meaningful in light of studies on the consequences and motives of infidelity. Infidelity is associated with extensive psychological and relational damage, including loss of trust, emotional pain, conflict, and destabilization of the family system (Sarmadi & Ahmadi, 2021). Qualitative findings have shown that marital infidelity is shaped by multiple background and revealing factors, including relational dissatisfaction, emotional needs, and contextual pressures (Nasiri et al., 2022). Meta-synthesis evidence in Iran has also emphasized that marital infidelity is a multifactorial phenomenon influenced by individual, relational, cultural, and social conditions (Sharifi-Saei & Azad-Armaki, 2021). The finding that guilt mediates the effect of dark traits on infidelity tendency fits within this multifactorial view because it identifies one specific intrapersonal mechanism among many possible determinants. Furthermore, retaliatory infidelity after betrayal shows that infidelity may sometimes emerge from perceived injustice and revenge motivation (Hajjhasani, 2026). In individuals with dark personality traits, such motivations may be stronger because of lower empathy, weaker moral inhibition, and greater readiness to justify harmful relational responses.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the findings indicate that marital infidelity tendency is partly rooted in the interaction between

personality pathology and moral-emotional regulation. Dark personality traits, especially Machiavellianism and psychopathy, appear to increase the tendency toward marital infidelity by weakening guilt and reducing moral inhibition. This interpretation is compatible with the broader understanding of personality dysfunction, in which maladaptive personality patterns impair emotional awareness, empathy, responsibility, and interpersonal functioning (Chattardar et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2020). It is also consistent with intervention-related evidence showing that betrayed individuals may require psychological support to strengthen distress tolerance and self-control after infidelity-related harm (Babakhani, 2020). Therefore, prevention and intervention programs for marital infidelity should not focus only on communication skills or conflict resolution, but should also address personality-based risk factors, guilt regulation, empathy, responsibility, and moral self-awareness.

6. Limitations & Suggestions

The present study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study used a cross-sectional descriptive-correlational design; therefore, causal conclusions cannot be drawn from the observed relationships among dark personality traits, guilt, and marital infidelity tendency. Second, the sample was selected through convenience sampling from married individuals in Neyshabur, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other cities, cultural groups, and marital populations. Third, the data were collected using self-report questionnaires, which may be affected by social desirability, response bias, and participants' reluctance to report sensitive attitudes related to infidelity. Fourth, the study examined tendency toward marital infidelity rather than actual infidelity behavior, and these two constructs, although related, are not identical. Finally, the model included guilt as the only mediator, while other relevant variables such as shame, empathy, attachment style, marital satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, emotional divorce, and religious commitment were not included.

Future studies are suggested to use longitudinal and prospective designs to examine the temporal and causal relationships among dark personality traits, guilt, and marital infidelity tendency. Researchers should also replicate the model in larger and more diverse samples, including both men and women from different geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Future research could compare

clinical and nonclinical couples, betrayed and non-betrayed spouses, and individuals with different levels of marital satisfaction. It is also recommended that future studies include additional mediators and moderators, such as empathy, shame, moral disengagement, attachment style, coping strategies, emotional divorce, religious commitment, sexual satisfaction, and marital conflict. The use of mixed-methods designs, including interviews and couple-based assessments, may also provide a deeper understanding of how dark personality traits and guilt are experienced within real marital interactions.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that couple therapists, family counselors, and marital educators should pay attention to dark personality traits and guilt regulation when assessing risk factors for marital infidelity. Screening for Machiavellian and psychopathic tendencies may help identify individuals who are more vulnerable to infidelity-related attitudes because of lower empathy, reduced guilt, and weaker responsibility toward the spouse. Preventive programs should include components that strengthen moral responsibility, empathy, emotional awareness, commitment, and accountability in marital relationships. In counseling settings, therapists should help couples recognize manipulative interaction patterns, emotional detachment, and justifications for harmful behavior. Psychoeducational workshops for married individuals may also focus on the consequences of betrayal, the role of guilt in relational repair, and the importance of maintaining trust, honesty, and commitment in marital life.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

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

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