

Explaining the Causal Relationship Between Existential Anxiety and Post-Traumatic Growth in Women and Men Affected by Infidelity: Assessing the Mediating Role of Resilience

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ABSTRACT

Marital infidelity, as one of the most severe emotional stressors, can lead to extensive psychological consequences, including existential anxiety and disruptions in individual adjustment. In recent years, researchers have increasingly focused on identifying mechanisms that influence psychological reconstruction and growth following such events. The purpose of this study was to explain the causal relationship between existential anxiety and post-traumatic growth in women and men affected by infidelity, and to assess the mediating role of resilience. The statistical population consisted of all women and men affected by infidelity who had sought services in counseling and psychological centers in Tehran during 2024. Using convenience sampling, 200 individuals affected by infidelity were selected as the sample. The research method was correlational with a structural equation modeling design. Data were collected using the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), the Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (Raimz et al., 2004), and the Connor–Davidson Resilience Scale (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Data analysis was performed using structural equation modeling (SEM). The results indicated that resilience negatively and significantly mediated the relationship between existential anxiety and post-traumatic growth in individuals affected by infidelity. It can be concluded that resilience plays a crucial role in reducing the negative effects of existential anxiety and facilitating post-traumatic growth among individuals who have experienced infidelity. Strengthening resilience skills may serve as an effective approach for enhancing their psychological adjustment.

Keywords: *existential anxiety, post-traumatic growth, marital infidelity, resilience.*

1. Introduction

Marital infidelity is widely regarded as one of the most disruptive interpersonal stressors in adult life, with potential to destabilize intimate bonds, threaten core assumptions about self and others, and shatter basic beliefs about trust, safety, and meaning (Abzug, 2016; Weiser et al., 2023). Conceptual and empirical models of extradyadic involvement have described infidelity not only as an individual moral transgression but also as a structurally embedded phenomenon, shaped by opportunity structures, cultural norms, and occupational contexts (Abzug, 2016; Selterman et al., 2019). Over the last two decades, an expanding body of research has examined prevalence, motivations, and psychosocial consequences of infidelity across diverse populations, highlighting its association with post-infidelity stress, relationship dissolution, and long-term emotional difficulties (Pichon et al., 2020; Roby, 2024; Weiser et al., 2023). Despite this growth, relatively fewer studies have focused on the deeper existential sequelae of betrayal, including anxiety related to death, meaninglessness, and guilt, and how these experiences might coexist with or even catalyze positive psychological transformations after trauma.

Existential anxiety has been defined, in Tillich's tradition, as a pervasive awareness of fundamental concerns about death, fate, meaninglessness, and guilt that emerges when individuals confront the fragility and contingency of existence (Kretschmer & Storm, 2018; Weems et al., 2004). Empirical work has shown that existential anxiety is conceptually and empirically distinct from general anxiety, with specific links to identity disturbance, depressive symptomatology, and maladaptive coping (Kretschmer & Storm, 2018; Weems et al., 2004). Contemporary research has further underscored the salience of death-related fears in a variety of clinical and non-clinical contexts, including health anxiety, chronic illness, and aging (Connery et al., 2025; Menzies et al., 2025). Meta-analytic evidence suggests robust associations between death anxiety and indicators of sleep disturbance and fear of disease progression, reinforcing the notion that existential threat permeates both psychological and somatic functioning (Connery et al., 2025; Menzies et al., 2025). In addition, studies in older adults indicate that death anxiety is shaped by perceived social support, loneliness, dysfunctional attitudes, and spiritual health, pointing to the role of interpersonal and spiritual resources in modulating existential concerns (Nasab et al., 2025).

From a humanistic perspective, existential anxiety is not solely destructive; it may also prompt an intensified search for meaning and spiritual anchoring, especially in religious or highly value-laden societies (Hasanah, 2025). Research grounded in existential-humanistic psychology has documented that religion and spirituality can function both as buffers against existential fear and as frameworks within which individuals reinterpret suffering and loss (Hasanah, 2025; Prieto-Ursúa & Jódar, 2020). During large-scale crises such as the coronavirus pandemic, meaning-making, religiosity, and spirituality have been identified as key mechanisms that foster post-traumatic growth (PTG), even amidst ongoing uncertainty and threat (Prieto-Ursúa & Jódar, 2020). Similarly, work on climate change, spirituality, and resilience has highlighted how existential themes of loss, finitude, and global risk can be reworked into narratives of agency, connection, and growth (Ramsay & Manderson, 2011). These findings suggest that existential distress may, under certain conditions, become the starting point for transformative adaptation rather than a purely debilitating outcome.

The conceptual framework of post-traumatic growth provides a rich lens for understanding such transformations. PTG refers to positive psychological change that arises from the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances, and encompasses domains such as new possibilities, improved relationships with others, increased personal strength, deeper appreciation of life, and spiritual change (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2020). Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies in a variety of trauma-exposed samples, including people living with HIV, natural disaster survivors, and veterans, show that growth is not simply a return to baseline but an emergent restructuring of cognitive schemas and life priorities (Orayfig, 2018; Ramsay & Manderson, 2011; Seyed Mahmoudi et al., 2010; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2020). Recent large-scale survey work with U.S. military veterans has linked PTG to specific psychosocial and clinical correlates, reinforcing its relevance in populations exposed to chronic and repeated threats (Kang et al., 2024). At the same time, research on therapists and other helping professionals indicates that PTG can also emerge in those who are indirectly exposed to trauma, with factors such as attachment style and self-differentiation shaping the degree to which anxiety translates into empathic capacity and growth (Silvan-Grau, 2024).

In the context of intimate relationships, PTG has increasingly been examined following interpersonal traumas such as intimate partner violence, betrayal, and infidelity

(Ghareh Daqi & Seyed Mirzaei, 2020; Gonzalez, 2023; Pichon et al., 2020). Infidelity has been conceptualized as a form of relational trauma that generates symptoms resembling post-traumatic stress—intrusive thoughts, hypervigilance, emotional numbing, and avoidance—as well as profound disruptions in identity, trust, and relational expectations (Roby, 2024; Weiser et al., 2023). Studies with women affected by marital infidelity have documented the efficacy of acceptance and commitment therapy and cognitive-behavioral couples interventions in reducing PTSD symptoms and rebuilding a sense of safety and coherence (Ghareh Daqi & Seyed Mirzaei, 2020; Ghareh Gozlou et al., 2018). Emotion-focused couples therapy has similarly been shown to decrease the harm associated with spousal infidelity, by working directly with attachment injuries and unmet emotional needs (Soudani et al., 2012). These interventions implicitly recognize that the pain of betrayal is embedded in broader existential questions concerning worthiness, reliability of others, and the meaningfulness of relational commitments.

In many societies undergoing rapid social and cultural change, including Iran, shifts in family structures, gender roles, and expectations of romantic intimacy have contributed to evolving patterns of marital conflict and extramarital involvement (Chopani & Karami, 2019; Chopani et al., 2019). Epidemiological data from Iranian families across the family life cycle point to a growing burden of psychosocial disorders linked to relational stressors, highlighting the need for context-sensitive intervention and prevention strategies (Chopani & Karami, 2019). Qualitative research with unfaithful men has identified complex constellations of perceived causes, deterrents, and justifications for extramarital relationships, underscoring the interaction between individual vulnerabilities, relational dynamics, and societal norms (Chopani et al., 2019). Single-case and small-sample clinical studies using existential-humanistic approaches, such as Rollo May's framework, have further illustrated how concerns about freedom, responsibility, and authenticity shape men's willingness to engage in or desist from infidelity (Choupani et al., 2021). Together, these findings point to the salience of existential themes in both the emergence of infidelity and the process of recovery afterward.

Resilience has emerged as one of the most frequently cited protective factors in the literature on trauma and relational distress. It is commonly defined as the capacity to adapt positively and maintain or regain psychological

functioning in the face of significant adversity (Aydoğan & Dincer, 2020; Ramsay & Manderson, 2011). In marital and couple contexts, resilience is reflected in processes such as flexible problem-solving, emotional regulation, mutual support, and the willingness to sacrifice for the relationship when necessary (Aydoğan & Dincer, 2020). Empirical work has shown that resilience is closely related to relationship satisfaction, attachment security, and constructive conflict resolution (Dinç & İlgar, 2022; Najafizadeh & Hamzehpoor-Haghighi, 2022). For example, studies with married women and university students have found that higher levels of resilience, along with adaptive conflict resolution strategies and realistic sensation seeking, predict less favorable attitudes toward marital infidelity and better relational adjustment (Dinç & İlgar, 2022; Najafizadeh & Hamzehpoor-Haghighi, 2022). In couples therapy settings, interventions that foster resilience-related skills—such as perspective taking, emotional openness, and shared meaning-making—have been linked to improved outcomes following infidelity (Aydoğan & Dincer, 2020; Gonzalez, 2023; Soudani et al., 2012).

The intersection between existential anxiety, resilience, and PTG is receiving increasing attention, yet remains theoretically and empirically underdeveloped in the specific context of marital betrayal. On one hand, higher existential anxiety may exacerbate distress following infidelity by amplifying fears of abandonment, mortality, and meaninglessness (Connery et al., 2025; Kretschmer & Storm, 2018; Weems et al., 2004). On the other hand, when individuals have access to resilient coping resources—including spiritual frameworks, supportive relationships, and flexible cognitive styles—existential concerns may catalyze deeper reflection, re-evaluation of values, and growth (Hasanah, 2025; Prieto-Ursúa & Jódar, 2020; Ramsay & Manderson, 2011). Work on post-traumatic growth in multicultural and international samples has shown that cultural context importantly shapes how adversity is framed, how meaning is constructed, and which domains of PTG are most salient (Orayfig, 2018). In Iranian settings, validation studies of existential anxiety measures and PTG inventories have provided culturally relevant tools for assessing these constructs, confirming acceptable psychometric properties among older adults and trauma-exposed groups (Etemad et al., 2016; Seyed Mahmoudi et al., 2010).

Despite these advances, several gaps remain. First, while death anxiety and existential concerns have been studied in relation to physical illness, old age, and global crises, their

role in shaping psychological adjustment after interpersonal betrayal has rarely been addressed in a systematic way (Connery et al., 2025; Menzies et al., 2025; Nasab et al., 2025). Second, existing studies on infidelity and post-infidelity outcomes have often emphasized symptom reduction, relational satisfaction, or motivations for extradyadic involvement, rather than explicitly modeling causal pathways linking existential anxiety to post-traumatic growth (Roby, 2024; Selterman et al., 2019; Weiser et al., 2023). Third, although the literature on coping with mate poaching and infidelity-related threats points to the importance of attachment processes, vigilance, and gender differences, it has not fully integrated existential and growth-oriented constructs (Eindor et al., 2015; Silvan-Grau, 2024; Weiser et al., 2023). Finally, there is limited evidence from non-Western, family-centered societies in which religious and cultural norms surrounding marriage and betrayal may deeply influence both existential distress and opportunities for growth (Chopani & Karami, 2019; Ghareh Daqi & Seyed Mirzaei, 2020; Ghareh Gozlou et al., 2018; Najafzadeh & Hamzehpoor-Haghighi, 2022).

The Iranian context is particularly relevant in this regard, as marital infidelity is simultaneously stigmatized and increasingly reported, creating a complex environment in which betrayed spouses must navigate intense emotional pain, social judgment, and moral dilemmas (Chopani et al., 2019; Ghareh Daqi & Seyed Mirzaei, 2020; Pichon et al., 2020). Intervention studies in Iran have already demonstrated that structured psychological treatments can reduce post-traumatic symptoms and improve marital functioning in individuals affected by spousal infidelity (Chopani et al., 2021; Ghareh Gozlou et al., 2018; Soudani et al., 2012). However, the mechanisms through which existential anxiety interacts with resilience to shape post-traumatic growth in this population remain unclear. Clarifying these mechanisms may inform the design of culturally attuned therapeutic protocols that explicitly address existential concerns while harnessing resilience-related strengths and spiritual resources (Hasanah, 2025; Prieto-Ursúa & Jódar, 2020; Ramsay & Manderson, 2011).

Taken together, theoretical models of existential anxiety, empirical findings on resilience and marital adjustment, and the growing literature on post-traumatic growth after relational trauma all point to the need for integrated, culturally sensitive research in infidelity-affected populations (Aydoğan & Dincer, 2020; Dinç & İlgar, 2022; Gonzalez, 2023; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2020; Weiser et al., 2023). By examining not only the direct association between

existential anxiety and post-traumatic growth but also the mediating role of resilience, researchers can better understand why some betrayed spouses remain trapped in despair and existential paralysis, while others manage to reconstruct more coherent, meaningful, and growth-oriented life narratives (Orayfig, 2018; Seyed Mahmoudi et al., 2010; Silvan-Grau, 2024). Therefore, the aim of the present study was to explain the causal relationship between existential anxiety and post-traumatic growth among women and men affected by marital infidelity, with a specific focus on evaluating the mediating role of resilience.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a correlational design, and structural equation modeling (SEM) techniques were used to analyze the data. The statistical population consisted of women and men affected by infidelity who sought services at counseling and psychology centers in Tehran during 2024. These individuals were required to have reported experiencing infidelity in their marital relationships and to have volunteered to participate in the study. According to Kline, when structural equation modeling is used, approximately 20 participants are needed for each variable, and a minimum sample size of 200 is defensible (Kline, 1998). In this study, based on Kline's theoretical rationale for sample selection, if 20 participants were considered for each component, 180 participants were required; however, to account for potential sample attrition and to increase the validity of findings, the sample size was increased to 200 participants. The sampling method employed in this study was convenience sampling. In this method, individuals who visited counseling and psychology centers and met the inclusion criteria were selected as participants.

After the necessary coordination and determination of the research population, as well as conducting screening procedures, the required institutional permissions were obtained from the university, followed by coordination with counseling and psychology centers in Tehran in 2024. After explaining the research objectives to participants, ensuring confidentiality of information, and obtaining informed consent, participants were asked to complete the research questionnaires. The researcher explained the correct method of responding to items to the participants.

2.2. Measures

Post-Traumatic Growth Questionnaire (PTGQ): To assess post-traumatic growth, the Post-Traumatic Growth Questionnaire developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) was used. This questionnaire consists of 21 items and five components as follows: new possibilities, relating to others, personal strength, appreciation of life, and spiritual change. Items are scored on a six-point Likert scale. Scores range from 0 (I did not experience this change as a result of the stressful event) to 5 (I experienced this change to a very great degree as a result of the stressful event). The total score ranges from 0 to 105, with higher scores indicating greater post-traumatic growth. The components and their corresponding items are: new possibilities (5 items): 2, 13, 14, 19, 21; relating to others (7 items): 6, 7, 9, 12, 15, 18, 20; personal strength (4 items): 4, 8, 10, 17; appreciation of life (3 items): 1, 3, 11; spiritual change (2 items): 5, 16. In the study by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996), the overall Cronbach's alpha was reported as .90. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales ranged from .67 to .85. In Iran, Seyed-Mahmoodi, Rahimi, and Mohammadi Jaber (2013) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .92 for this questionnaire. The correlations between the three predictor scales and the total score of the post-traumatic growth questionnaire were positive and significant. In the present study, reliability assessed via Cronbach's alpha ranged from .76 to .79.

Existential Anxiety Questionnaire: This questionnaire was developed by Weems et al. (2004) and translated into Persian by Etemad et al. (2016). It contains 13 items and three components (death and fate, meaninglessness and emptiness, guilt and condemnation), and scoring is dichotomous: yes (1) and no (0). Scores may range from 0 to 13, which must be converted to norm scores. The norm score ranges from 20 to 80, with higher scores indicating greater existential anxiety. Weems et al. (2004) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .71 and a test-retest reliability of .72. Convergent validity with the Purpose in Life Scale and the Identity Distress Scale was .44 and .41, respectively. Etemad et al. (2016) reported significant convergent validity between the Existential Anxiety Questionnaire and Good's Existential Anxiety Questionnaire and Aronson's Spirituality Scale. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales of death and fate, meaninglessness and emptiness, and guilt and condemnation were .51, .41, and .51, respectively.

Connor–Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC): This questionnaire was developed by Connor and Davidson (2003) through a review of research from 1979–1991 in the field of resilience. It consists of 25 items and measures the level of resilience in individuals. Responses are scored on a Likert scale, and the total score is obtained by summing all item scores. Total scores range from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating greater resilience. A cut-off score of 50 is used; scores above 50 indicate resilient individuals, and higher scores reflect stronger resilience. In a study by Basharat et al. (2007), validity and reliability were reported as .89. In a study by Haq-Ranjbar et al. (2011), reliability using Cronbach's alpha was .84. In the present study, reliability assessed via Cronbach's alpha was .78.

2.3. Data analysis

Data Analysis Method: Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used, and SPSS and AMOS software packages were employed for data analysis.

3. Findings and Results

In the present study, 215 participants affected by infidelity (38 men and 177 women) were included, with a mean age of 32.11 years and a standard deviation of 4.56 years. Regarding educational level, 32 participants (14.9%) had less than a high school diploma, 56 (26%) had a high school diploma, 15 (7%) held an associate degree, 63 (29.3%) held a bachelor's degree, and 49 participants (22.8%) had a master's degree or higher. Among the participants, 97 individuals (45.1%) had no children, and 118 individuals (54.9%) had children. It is noteworthy that the mean and standard deviation of the duration of marriage were 8.36 years and 4.13 years, respectively, and the mean and standard deviation of the duration since discovering the spouse's infidelity were 19.41 months and 7.53 months, respectively.

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients among existential anxiety (death / fate, meaninglessness / emptiness, guilt / condemnation), resilience (personal competence, trust in instincts, positive acceptance, control, and spiritual influences), and post-traumatic growth (new possibilities, relating to others, personal strength, appreciation of life, and spiritual change).

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlation Matrix of the Study Variables

Research Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Existential Anxiety – Death/Fate	-												
2. Existential Anxiety – Meaninglessness/Emptiness	.60	-											
3. Existential Anxiety – Guilt/Condemnation	.46	.52	-										
4. Resilience – Personal Competence	-.27	-.30	-.24	-									
5. Resilience – Trust in Instincts	-.25	-.23	-.21	.57	-								
6. Resilience – Positive Acceptance	-.33	-.31	-.32	.59	.44	-							
7. Resilience – Control	-.23	-.26	-.13	.68	.41	.50	-						
8. Resilience – Spiritual Influences	.01	-.10	-.03	.32	.17	.18	.27	-					
9. Post-Traumatic Growth – New Possibilities	-.40	-.37	-.29	.54	.32	.40	.46	.15	-				
10. Post-Traumatic Growth – Relating to Others	-.31	-.28	-.25	.57	.38	.46	.37	.17	.68	-			
11. Post-Traumatic Growth – Personal Strength	-.34	-.32	-.30	.53	.41	.48	.35	.19	.63	.59	-		
12. Post-Traumatic Growth – Appreciation of Life	-.24	-.21	-.12	.45	.32	.39	.32	.15	.54	.65	.62	-	
13. Post-Traumatic Growth – Spiritual Change	-.32	-.30	-.26	.47	.28	.33	.41	.18	.61	.52	.66	.57	-
Mean	2.93	2.06	1.68	17.44	15.59	11.76	7.34	4.73	14.71	19.30	11.83	8.47	5.61
Standard Deviation	1.55	1.18	1.13	3.25	3.38	2.27	2.60	1.12	3.36	4.58	2.94	2.11	1.38

Note. **P** < .01, *P* < .05

Based on the results in Table 1, the correlation coefficients among the variables were in the expected direction and aligned with theoretical frameworks in this field of research. Table 1 indicates that the correlations among variables were consistent with expectations and theoretical assumptions in the domain of study.

In this study, to evaluate the assumption of univariate normality, skewness and kurtosis indices were examined. To assess the assumption of multicollinearity, the variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance values were reviewed. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Examination of Normality and Multicollinearity Assumptions

Variable	Skewness	Kurtosis	Tolerance	Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)
Attachment Styles – Anxiety	-0.29	-0.91	.57	1.76
Attachment Styles – Closeness	-0.21	-1.02	.53	1.90
Attachment Styles – Dependence	.50	-0.43	.65	1.54
Resilience – Personal Competence	-0.42	-0.40	.33	3.06
Resilience – Trust in Instincts	.99	1.08	.62	1.62
Resilience – Positive Acceptance	.77	-0.23	.51	1.95
Resilience – Control	.34	-1.19	.48	2.07
Resilience – Spiritual Influences	-0.45	-0.83	.89	1.13
Post-Traumatic Growth – New Possibilities	-0.67	-0.20	-	-
Post-Traumatic Growth – Relating to Others	.78	.15	-	-
Post-Traumatic Growth – Personal Strength	.76	.22	-	-
Post-Traumatic Growth – Appreciation of Life	.92	.48	-	-
Post-Traumatic Growth – Spiritual Change	.59	-0.37	-	-

According to the findings in Table 2, the skewness and kurtosis values of all variables fall within the ±2 range. This indicates that the assumption of univariate normality was met (see Kline, 2016). Table 2 further shows that the

assumption of multicollinearity was also met in this study, as the tolerance values for predictor variables were greater than .10 and all VIF values were less than 10. Based on the perspective of Meyers et al. (2006), tolerance values below

.10 and VIF values above 10 indicate a violation of the multicollinearity assumption.

In this study, to assess the assumption of multivariate normality, Mahalanobis distance values were analyzed. The skewness and kurtosis of the Mahalanobis distance values were .51 and .28, respectively, indicating that both indices were within the ± 2 range; therefore, the assumption of multivariate normality was met. Additionally, to evaluate the homogeneity of variances assumption, the scatterplot of standardized error variances was examined, and the results confirmed that this assumption was also satisfied.

After assessing the assumptions, data analysis was performed using structural equation modeling. AMOS 24.0 software and maximum likelihood estimation were used. In

the research model, it was hypothesized that resilience mediates the relationship between existential anxiety and post-traumatic growth in women and men affected by infidelity. As shown in Figure 1, the latent variable existential anxiety was measured through indicators of death/fate, meaninglessness/emptiness, and guilt/condemnation; the latent variable resilience was measured by indicators of personal competence, trust in instincts, positive acceptance, control, and spiritual influences; and the latent variable post-traumatic growth was measured via indicators of new possibilities, relating to others, personal strength, appreciation of life, and spiritual change. Table 3 presents the model fit indices.

Table 3

Model Fit Indices

Fit Indices	Research Model	Cut-off Value
Chi-square	99.45	–
Degrees of Freedom	62	–
χ^2/df	1.60	< 3
GFI	.937	> .90
AGFI	.908	> .85
CFI	.976	> .90
RMSEA	.053	< .08

Table 3 shows that all fit indices supported an acceptable model fit with the collected data. Table 4 presents the structural path coefficients.

Table 4

Total and Direct Path Coefficients Between Research Variables in the Model

Paths	b	S.E.	β	p
Existential Anxiety → Resilience	–2.138	.450	–.426	.001
Resilience → Post-Traumatic Growth	.369	.059	.584	.001
Direct Path: Existential Anxiety → Post-Traumatic Growth	–.613	.260	–.193	.015
Indirect Path: Existential Anxiety → Post-Traumatic Growth	–.790	.219	–.249	.001
Total Effect: Existential Anxiety → Post-Traumatic Growth	–1.403	.307	–.442	.001

Table 4 shows that the total path coefficient between existential anxiety and post-traumatic growth was negative and significant ($\beta = -.442, p = .001$). The path coefficient between resilience and post-traumatic growth was positive and significant ($\beta = .584, p = .001$). Table 4 also indicates that the indirect path between existential anxiety and post-

traumatic growth was negative and significant ($\beta = -.249, p = .001$). Accordingly, it was concluded that resilience negatively and significantly mediates the relationship between existential anxiety and post-traumatic growth in individuals affected by infidelity. Figure 1 displays the research model using standardized data.

Figure 1

Standardized Parameters in the Research Model



The figure shows that the total squared multiple correlations (R^2) for post-traumatic growth was .47, indicating that existential anxiety and resilience together explained 47% of the variance in post-traumatic growth among individuals affected by infidelity.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the causal relationship between existential anxiety and post-traumatic growth (PTG) in women and men affected by marital infidelity, with particular attention to the mediating role of resilience. The findings demonstrated that existential anxiety exerted a significant negative direct effect on PTG, while resilience exerted a positive and strong predictive effect on PTG. Moreover, the indirect path from existential anxiety to PTG through resilience was also significant, indicating that resilience partially mediated this relationship. These results collectively suggest that existential anxiety—characterized by concerns about death, fate, meaninglessness, and guilt—acts as a psychological burden that interferes with the capacity for positive transformation following betrayal trauma. Simultaneously, higher resilience appears to reduce this burden and facilitate the emergence of growth-oriented cognitive and emotional processes.

The negative association between existential anxiety and PTG is consistent with earlier theoretical and empirical work asserting that existential concerns disrupt psychological equilibrium and hinder adaptive coping (Kretschmer & Storm, 2018; Weems et al., 2004). Individuals affected by infidelity often experience the event as a violation of core existential assumptions, triggering crises of meaning, heightened fear of abandonment, and intensified mortality awareness. Prior studies have emphasized that betrayal trauma can undermine basic worldviews, leading to pervasive uncertainty and feelings of existential threat (Roby, 2024; Weiser et al., 2023). These existential reactions may obstruct the cognitive restructuring required for PTG, as suggested in frameworks derived from trauma-related growth models (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2020). The findings align closely with research highlighting that existential anxiety is associated with diminished meaning-making capacity, emotional dysregulation, and reduced psychological flexibility (Connery et al., 2025; Weems et al., 2004). Thus, the current results reinforce conceptualizations of existential anxiety as a potent inhibitor of post-traumatic transformation following intimate relationship disruptions.

In contrast, the strong positive association between resilience and PTG found in this study mirrors extensive

literature demonstrating resilience as a key protective factor during traumatic recovery. Resilience has long been conceptualized as the ability to maintain or regain psychological stability in the face of profound adversity, and the present study's findings confirm its relevance in the context of marital infidelity (Aydogan & Dincer, 2020; Ramsay & Manderson, 2011). Prior studies in couples and marital contexts have shown that higher resilience is associated with adaptive conflict resolution strategies, emotional regulation, and enhanced relational functioning (Dinç & İlgar, 2022; Najafzadeh & Hamzehpoor-Haghighi, 2022). Furthermore, resilience has been identified as a mediator of growth processes in individuals exposed to various forms of trauma, including relational betrayal, psychological violence, and large-scale crises (Orayfig, 2018; Prieto-Ursúa & Jódar, 2020). The present study extends this body of work by demonstrating that resilience not only predicts PTG but also counteracts the detrimental influence of existential anxiety on growth outcomes.

The mediation results indicate that resilience transforms existential distress into an opportunity for growth. This resonates with research suggesting that existential crises can become catalysts for meaning reconstruction when individuals have adequate psychological resources (Hasanah, 2025; Silvan-Grau, 2024). Spirituality, cognitive flexibility, and emotion-focused meaning-making are key processes that help individuals reinterpret betrayal trauma and integrate it into a coherent life narrative (Kang et al., 2024; Prieto-Ursúa & Jódar, 2020). The present results suggest that the presence of resilience allows individuals to engage in such processes rather than remain immobilized by existential fear. These findings support theoretical arguments that resilience provides the psychological scaffolding necessary for trauma survivors to reassess values, deepen relational understanding, and cultivate new life directions (Ramsay & Manderson, 2011; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2020).

The findings also align with research conducted in Iranian contexts, underscoring the cultural sensitivity of resilience and PTG following marital betrayal. Studies with Iranian populations have found that acceptance and commitment therapy, cognitive-behavioral interventions, and existential-humanistic approaches help reduce PTSD symptoms and facilitate growth in individuals impacted by infidelity (Ghareh Daqi & Seyed Mirzaei, 2020; Ghareh Gozlou et al., 2018; Soudani et al., 2012). These interventions often cultivate resilience-related capacities—such as emotional acceptance, spiritual grounding, and expanded

perspective—which may help individuals navigate existential suffering and rebuild meaning. The results of this study reaffirm the theoretical and empirical premise that resilience functions as a bridge between existential anxiety and the possibility of positive transformation after a relational trauma.

The study's findings are also consistent with global research on infidelity and psychological adjustment. Research examining motivations for extradyadic involvement and its consequences has indicated that infidelity is often embedded in complex relational, personal, and cultural factors (Abzug, 2016; Selterman et al., 2019). Individuals who have experienced marital betrayal frequently report symptoms such as hypervigilance, intrusive thoughts, fear of abandonment, and diminished self-worth (Roby, 2024; Weiser et al., 2023). Such experiences can evoke profound existential concerns related to meaninglessness and broken trust. However, when individuals engage in adaptive coping and possess strong resilience, they may reinterpret betrayal as an opportunity for psychological reconstruction rather than solely a source of enduring harm (Choupani et al., 2021; Gonzalez, 2023). The current findings fit well within this broader conceptualization, positioning resilience as the pivotal mechanism enabling individuals to transition from existential collapse to post-traumatic growth.

Another important point is the consistency of the findings with research emphasizing cultural and spiritual factors in coping with trauma. In societies where marriage is highly valued and infidelity carries strong moral implications, the existential consequences of betrayal may be especially intense (Chopani & Karami, 2019; Pichon et al., 2020). However, these same societies often provide spiritual or community frameworks that help individuals reconstruct meaning and foster resilience. Research suggests that meaning-making, religious engagement, and spiritual coping can significantly enhance PTG and reduce existential distress (Hasanah, 2025; Prieto-Ursúa & Jódar, 2020). Thus, the interaction between existential anxiety and resilience may be further influenced by cultural factors that shape how individuals interpret betrayal and how they mobilize internal and external resources to rebuild their lives.

5. Conclusion

Taken together, the present study contributes to the literature by providing empirical support for a theoretically grounded model integrating existential anxiety, resilience,

and PTG in a culturally relevant population. It extends previous work by demonstrating that resilience plays a crucial mediating role in transforming existential distress into growth after marital infidelity. The results underscore the importance of attending to existential dimensions in therapeutic interventions and highlight the value of strengthening resilience as a central component of recovery.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of cross-sectional data does not allow for conclusions regarding temporal causality, even though the structural model is theoretically grounded. Second, the reliance on self-report measures may introduce response biases, such as social desirability or recall bias, particularly in a sensitive domain like infidelity. Third, the sample was limited to individuals who sought counseling services in Tehran, which may limit generalizability to other regions or individuals who do not engage in help-seeking behaviors. Fourth, the cultural context may influence the expression of existential anxiety and resilience, and findings may not fully translate to populations with different sociocultural norms. Finally, although the study incorporated multiple indicators of existential anxiety, resilience, and PTG, other potentially relevant constructs—such as attachment style, forgiveness, or spiritual coping—were not included in the structural model.

Future studies would benefit from employing longitudinal designs to better capture the dynamic evolution of existential anxiety, resilience, and PTG following marital infidelity. Qualitative or mixed-method approaches may provide deeper insight into the lived experiences of betrayal and the nuanced processes through which individuals reconstruct meaning. Expanding research to include different cultural contexts could enhance understanding of how sociocultural values shape responses to infidelity. Investigating gender differences, attachment patterns, and the role of therapeutic interventions may also offer valuable extensions to the present findings. Additionally, future work might examine the influence of partner behavior, relationship duration, and severity of betrayal on the interplay between existential anxiety and growth outcomes.

Practitioners working with individuals affected by marital infidelity should incorporate strategies that address existential concerns while simultaneously strengthening resilience. Interventions may focus on helping clients articulate and explore existential fears, reconstruct meaning, and cultivate psychological flexibility. Enhancing resilience through cognitive, emotional, relational, and spiritual pathways may assist clients in transforming distress into

growth. Therapists should provide a supportive and nonjudgmental environment that acknowledges the profound psychological impact of betrayal and helps clients rebuild trust, identity, and life direction.

Authors' Contributions

A. Z., S. A. Z., and A. D. collaboratively participated in designing the study and developing the conceptual framework. A. Z. managed participant recruitment, coordinated data collection, and oversaw administration of the research instruments. S. A. Z. performed the statistical analyses, including structural equation modeling, and contributed to interpreting the mediating role of resilience. A. D. conducted the literature review, prepared the initial manuscript draft, and integrated theoretical foundations into the final model. All authors reviewed, edited, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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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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