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The Mediating Role of Marital Infidelity Justification in the Relationship Between Cognitive Flexibility and Marital Burnout

Somayeh. Rezaee[1], Mohammadali. Mohammadyfar[2*], Mahmoud. Najafi[3]

[1] Department of Psychology, Se.C., Islamic Azad University, Semnan, Iran
[2] Department of Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Semnan, Semnan, Iran
[3] Department of Clinical Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Semnan, Semnan, Iran

*** Corresponding author email address**: alimohammadyfar@semnan.ac.ir

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A B S T R A C T

This study aimed to investigate the mediating role of marital infidelity justification in the relationship between cognitive flexibility and marital burnout. A descriptive-correlational research design with a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach was employed. The statistical population consisted of all married individuals who referred to counseling centers in Districts 3 and 11 of Tehran in 2024. A total of 373 participants were selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected using Pines' (1996) Marital Burnout Questionnaire, Dennis and VanderWal's (2010) Cognitive Flexibility Inventory, and Yenisari and Kokdemir's (2006) Marital Infidelity Justification Scale. Data analysis was performed using SEM. The results showed that the structural model had a good fit with the collected data. Cognitive flexibility was found to have a significant negative relationship with marital burnout. Additionally, justification of marital infidelity was positively and significantly related to marital burnout. Moreover, justification of infidelity significantly and negatively mediated the relationship between cognitive flexibility and marital burnout. Based on the findings, practical implications can be proposed to improve couple relationships by focusing on the key psychological variables explored in this study.

Keywords: *cognitive flexibility, marital infidelity, marital burnout.*

1. Introduction

Marriage is widely recognized as one of the most significant interpersonal systems shaping adult psychological well-being, emotional regulation, and social functioning. The quality and stability of marital relationships exert profound effects on mental health outcomes, life satisfaction, and adaptive coping across the lifespan. In recent decades, however, rapid social change, evolving gender roles, economic pressures, and shifting relational expectations have contributed to increasing strains within marital systems, making marital distress and burnout salient concerns in both clinical and research contexts. Marital burnout, conceptualized as a gradual process of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished relational efficacy, has emerged as a critical construct for understanding chronic marital dissatisfaction and relationship erosion (Hosseini et al., 2024; Sabetro et al., 2023). Unlike acute marital conflict, burnout reflects a cumulative depletion of emotional resources that undermines intimacy, commitment, and relational resilience, often persisting even in the absence of overt conflict.

Contemporary family psychology literature emphasizes that marital burnout is not merely the result of external stressors, but rather arises from complex interactions among individual psychological capacities, dyadic communication processes, cognitive-emotional regulation patterns, and relational belief systems (Beam et al., 2018; Mbwirire, 2017). Among these factors, growing attention has been directed toward the role of psychological flexibility as a core transdiagnostic mechanism influencing marital adaptation. Psychological flexibility refers to the capacity to remain present, open to experience, and committed to value-consistent action despite internal or external stressors (Soltani et al., 2013). Within marital contexts, flexibility enables partners to respond adaptively to relational challenges, regulate emotional reactivity, and sustain constructive engagement rather than resorting to avoidance, rigidity, or withdrawal (Körük et al., 2023).

Empirical evidence increasingly supports the centrality of psychological flexibility in predicting marital quality and resilience. Studies have demonstrated that higher flexibility is associated with greater marital adjustment, reduced emotional exhaustion, and improved dyadic functioning across diverse populations (Es-haqi Jardoui et al., 2021; Salehi et al., 2022). Conversely, inflexibility has been linked to maladaptive coping, heightened conflict sensitivity, and increased vulnerability to burnout (Teimoori & Ghamari, 2022). These findings align with broader cognitive-behavioral and acceptance-based models that conceptualize flexibility as a foundational process underpinning adaptive emotion regulation, interpersonal responsiveness, and stress tolerance (Fine et al., 2018; Rikhye et al., 2018).

Cognitive flexibility, as a closely related construct, further contributes to marital functioning by enabling individuals to shift perspectives, reappraise relational stressors, and disengage from rigid cognitive schemas. Research indicates that deficits in cognitive flexibility are associated with perseverative thinking, maladaptive attributional styles, and reduced problem-solving capacity, all of which exacerbate marital strain (Akbarzadeh & Zehrakar, 2022; Carbonella & Timpano, 2016). Within couples, cognitive flexibility facilitates empathy, negotiation, and mutual understanding, thereby buffering against emotional disengagement and relational stagnation (Salehi et al., 2022; Zanganeh Parsa & Hobbi, 2021). These mechanisms are particularly salient in long-term relationships, where accumulated stressors demand adaptive reinterpretation and behavioral adjustment.

Beyond individual cognitive-emotional capacities, relational belief systems and communication patterns play a decisive role in shaping marital trajectories. Dysfunctional communication beliefs, rigid expectations, and maladaptive interaction styles have been consistently associated with marital dissatisfaction and burnout (Alizadeh-Navaei et al., 2023; Sedaghatkhah & Behzadi-Pour, 2017). When partners interpret disagreements through inflexible cognitive frames or engage in emotionally avoidant communication, relational stress intensifies, accelerating the burnout process. Conversely, open communication, mindful awareness, and flexible response patterns contribute to sustained marital satisfaction and emotional closeness (Sabetro et al., 2023).

The relevance of psychological and cognitive flexibility extends beyond marital satisfaction to encompass broader relational risks, including attitudes toward infidelity and extradyadic involvement. Contemporary models of marital infidelity conceptualize unfaithfulness as a multistage decision-making process influenced by moral disengagement, cognitive justification, emotional regulation deficits, and relational dissatisfaction (Lişman & Holman, 2022; Perez et al., 2023). Empirical findings suggest that lower flexibility and reduced tolerance of distress increase susceptibility to infidelity by impairing adaptive coping and fostering escapist strategies (Belu & O'Sullivan, 2024; Nikmanesh & Amirimoghadam, 2020). In contrast, flexible individuals demonstrate greater capacity to tolerate

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relational discomfort, engage in problem-focused coping, and resist impulsive relational transgressions (Zanganeh Parsa & Hobbi, 2021).

Marital burnout has also been examined in relation to broader psychosocial and demographic variables, including gender dynamics, occupational stress, and family resource distribution. Gender-based analyses reveal structural differences in marital quality perceptions, emotional labor, and burnout trajectories, underscoring the importance of contextual and cultural factors (Beam et al., 2018). Occupational stressors and role overload further exacerbate marital exhaustion, particularly when psychological flexibility and emotional regulation capacities are compromised (Dheer & Lenartowicz, 2018; Körük et al., 2023). In family systems with limited psychosocial resources, rigid coping patterns amplify relational vulnerability, highlighting the intersection of individual traits and systemic constraints (Shirani et al., 2022).

Recent intervention-based research reinforces the clinical relevance of flexibility-oriented approaches in addressing marital burnout. Acceptance- and commitment-based therapies, mindfulness-integrated models, and enhanced cognitive-behavioral couple interventions have demonstrated efficacy in reducing emotional exhaustion, improving emotional regulation, and restoring relational engagement among distressed couples (Soltani et al., 2013; Vaslehchi et al., 2024). These findings support theoretical frameworks positioning psychological flexibility as a modifiable process amenable to targeted intervention, rather than a fixed personality trait.

Emerging structural and mediational models further elucidate the complex pathways through which flexibility influences marital outcomes. Studies employing structural equation modeling indicate that psychological flexibility operates indirectly through constructs such as self-compassion, forgiveness, marital intimacy, self-regulation, and sexual satisfaction to predict burnout and adjustment (Akbari et al., 2021; Najafi et al., 2025; Pouya et al., 2025; Sharifi et al., 2024). These integrative models underscore the multifaceted nature of marital burnout and the necessity of examining both direct and indirect mechanisms within comprehensive analytic frameworks.

Despite growing empirical attention, several gaps remain in the literature. First, existing studies often examine psychological flexibility in isolation, without integrating related cognitive, emotional, and relational variables into unified explanatory models. Second, many investigations focus on specific populations, limiting the generalizability of findings across cultural and relational contexts. Third, although evidence supports the mediating role of flexibility-related constructs, comparative analyses of their relative contributions to marital burnout remain limited (Karimi et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2018). Addressing these gaps requires theoretically grounded, methodologically rigorous research that synthesizes individual and dyadic processes within cohesive models.

In addition, sociocultural transformations and evolving marital norms necessitate renewed scholarly attention to marital burnout as a dynamic phenomenon influenced by contemporary relational challenges. Shifts in expectations regarding intimacy, autonomy, and emotional fulfillment place increased adaptive demands on couples, rendering psychological flexibility a critical resource for relational sustainability (Farhani & Ahmadi, 2019; Kamaljou et al., 2016). Understanding how flexibility interacts with communication patterns, moral cognition, and emotional regulation is therefore essential for advancing both theory and practice in marital and family psychology.

Accordingly, the present study is situated at the intersection of marital burnout research, psychological flexibility theory, and contemporary relational psychology, seeking to contribute to a more integrated understanding of the mechanisms underlying marital exhaustion and maladjustment.

The aim of this study is to examine the structural relationships between psychological flexibility and marital burnout, considering relevant cognitive, emotional, and relational mediating variables among married individuals.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study, in terms of research methodology, falls within descriptive–correlational research using structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population included all married individuals who attended counseling centers in Districts 3 and 11 of Tehran in the year 2024. Determining the minimum sample size required for collecting data for SEM is highly important (MacQuitty, 2004). Although there is no general agreement regarding the necessary sample size for factor analysis and structural models (Schreiber et al., 2006), many researchers consider 200 participants as the minimum required sample size (Garver & Mentzer, 1999; Ho, 2008; Hoelter, 1983; Sivo et al., 2006). Studies indicate that in exploratory factor analysis, 10 to 20 samples per variable are needed; however, a minimum sample size of 200

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is typically acceptable and recommended (Kline, 2016). In the present study, 400 participants were selected through purposive sampling; of these, 27 were excluded from the research process due to incomplete questionnaire completion and fatigue resulting from responding to the items. Ultimately, the raw data from 373 participants were analyzed.

The inclusion criteria were: willingness to participate in the study, being married, age range of 20 to 60 years, at least five years of marital life, and no divorce or living separately. The exclusion criteria were: incomplete questionnaires and the presence of severe psychiatric disorders.

After visiting the centers and obtaining consent and coordination with the counseling center administrators, the study commenced. Given the large number of participants required, purposive sampling was employed. Before the start, the research objectives and the way to respond were explained to the participants. They were also informed that all research information would remain completely confidential and that there was no need to write their first and last names. The researcher's email address was included in the questionnaires so that, if participants wished to receive the study results, the information could be sent to them. After participants completed the questionnaires, the forms were collected, incomplete questionnaires were separated, and the data were analyzed.

In this study, the following ethical considerations were observed: (a) written informed consent was obtained from participants prior to the start of the study; ethical principles such as confidentiality, protection of participants' privacy, and assurance about the confidentiality of personal information were respected (participants were told that writing their first and last names was unnecessary). Participation in this study imposed no financial burden on participants. This study did not conflict with the religious and cultural norms of the participants or the community.

In this study, the variables were first analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and correlation matrix). Next, data preparation and preprocessing were conducted; in particular, the main assumptions of SEM—including missing values, normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity—were evaluated.

2.2. Measures

1. Marital Burnout: The Marital Burnout Questionnaire is a 20-item instrument designed to assess the level of marital burnout in couples and is derived from existing self-report scales in this area. This scale was first developed in 1996 and has been used and validated in subsequent research (Farhani & Ahmadi, 2019; Pines, 1996, 2007). The questionnaire comprises three main components: physical exhaustion (e.g., feelings of fatigue, lethargy, and sleep disturbances), emotional exhaustion (e.g., feelings of depression, hopelessness, and being trapped), and psychological exhaustion (e.g., feelings of worthlessness, frustration, and anger toward the spouse). Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates not experiencing the stated feeling and 7 indicates experiencing it intensely (Leece & Leece, 2001; Pines, 2007; Pines & Nunes, 2003). Evaluation of the reliability coefficient of the marital burnout scale has shown internal consistency ranging from 0.84 to 0.90. Its validity has been supported through negative correlations with positive communication characteristics such as positive views about communication, quality of conversation, sense of security, self-actualization, sense of purpose, emotional attraction to the spouse, and quality of sexual relationship. Translated versions of the marital burnout measure have been used successfully in cross-cultural studies in Norway, Hungary, Mexico, Spain, Portugal, Finland, and Israel (Leece & Leece, 2001; Pines & Nunes, 2003). A study conducted on 300 female students at Islamic Azad University, Karaj, indicated a significant negative correlation between Pines' Marital Burnout Questionnaire scores and marital satisfaction ($r = -0.41$, $p < 0.01$), reflecting desirable convergent validity of this instrument in the Iranian population (Farhani & Ahmadi, 2019). Test–retest reliability was reported as 0.89 for a one-month interval, 0.76 for a two-month interval, and 0.66 for a four-month interval. Internal consistency for most participants was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which ranged from 0.91 to 0.93 (Pines, 2007). In Iran, Navidi reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 for this questionnaire in a sample consisting of 120 nurses and 120 teachers (Navidi, 2005).

2. Cognitive Flexibility: The Cognitive Flexibility Questionnaire was developed in 2010 and contains 20 items covering three main components (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010): the ability to perceive difficult situations (items 1, 2, 4, 7, 9, 11, 15, 17); the ability to perceive alternative explanations (items 3, 5, 6, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18, 19, 20); and the ability to generate multiple solutions to solve problems (items 8 and 10). Responses are recorded on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The total score ranges from 20 to 140, with higher scores indicating greater cognitive flexibility. The total score is

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calculated by summing the 20 items. If an individual's score is higher than 74, it indicates high flexibility; scores below 74 are interpreted as low flexibility or cognitive inflexibility. In the original study, the content validity of the instrument was examined and confirmed by experts in cognitive and clinical psychology (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010). In Iran, the Persian version was localized and, based on expert review, evaluated as culturally appropriate in terms of content alignment with Iranian family culture (Soltani et al., 2013). Construct validity has been established through confirmatory factor analysis, identifying three distinct factors with acceptable factor loadings (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010). Convergent validity has also been supported through positive correlations with related questionnaires such as the Cognitive Emotion Regulation scale ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.01$) and logical problem-solving styles ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$) (36). In one study, Cronbach's alpha for the total scale was reported as 0.74, and two-week test–retest reliability was reported as 0.81 (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010). In Iran, reliability was evaluated and Cronbach's alpha was reported as 0.74 for the total scale and 0.73, 0.62, and 0.67 for the subscales, respectively; moreover, the test–retest coefficient for the total instrument was reported as 0.90 (Soltani et al., 2013).

3. Justification of Marital Infidelity: The Marital Infidelity Justification Questionnaire was developed and contains 24 items across six main components (Yeniseri & Kokdemir, 2006). Responses are given on a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = not important at all to 5 = very important). The total score ranges from 24 to 120, with higher scores indicating greater justification of marital infidelity. The questionnaire includes six subscales, each assessed by four items: legitimacy (items 1–4), reflecting the belief that infidelity may be permissible under certain conditions; seduction (items 5–8), referring to the role of sexual desires or attraction to the other person in justifying the behavior; normalization (items 9–12), viewing infidelity as natural or downplaying its importance; sexual tendencies/needs (items 13–16), referring to inability to meet sexual needs within the current relationship; social context (items 17–20), reflecting the influence of culture, media, or friends on infidelity-related behavior; and sensation-seeking (items 21–24), reflecting tendencies toward novelty, variety-seeking, and excitement in extramarital relationships. In one study, the face and content validity were confirmed by the opinions of 10 psychology experts, and content analysis supported the items. Construct validity was examined using confirmatory factor analysis, and the six-factor structure was confirmed with factor loadings ranging from 0.65 to 0.82 (Yeniseri & Kokdemir, 2006). In Iran, this questionnaire was translated, localized, and validated; content validity of the Persian version was examined and confirmed by a group of psychology professors and family counselors, and confirmatory factor analysis also supported the six-factor structure in the Iranian population. Reliability of the subscales using Cronbach's alpha was reported as 0.83 for legitimacy, 0.80 for seduction, 0.74 for normalization, 0.84 for sexual tendencies, 0.73 for social context, and 0.83 for sensation-seeking (7). In the Iranian study, Cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire was estimated to be above 0.70, and the overall reliability coefficient was reported as 0.91 (Karimi et al., 2019).

2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic characteristics and baseline scores. Prior to inferential analysis, assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances were examined. Inferential analyses were performed using repeated measures analysis of variance to assess the effects of time, group, and their interaction on vaginismus components and the total score, followed by Bonferroni post-hoc tests to identify pairwise differences between measurement stages. The significance level was set at 0.05 for all statistical tests.

3. Findings and Results

In the present study, 373 married participants (279 women and 94 men) took part, with a mean age and standard deviation of 31.37 and 5.98 years, respectively. Regarding education level, 92 participants (24.7%) had a high-school diploma or less, 8 participants (2.1%) had an associate degree, 207 participants (55.5%) held a bachelor's degree, and 66 participants (11.7%) had a master's degree or higher. The mean and standard deviation of years since marriage were 11.96 and 6.06 years, respectively. In addition, 21 participants (5.6%) had no children, 109 participants (29.2%) had one child, 232 participants (62.2%) had two children, and 11 participants (2.9%) had more than two children. Table 1 presents the correlation coefficients among the study variables. The direction of correlations was consistent with the researcher's expectations and with theoretical perspectives in the field. To evaluate the assumption of univariate normality, skewness and kurtosis were examined for each variable. To assess

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multicollinearity, the variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance values were inspected; the results are shown in Table 2.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlation Matrix Among Study Variables

Study Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Cognitive Flexibility – Alternatives	—											
2. Cognitive Flexibility – Control	0.56**	—										
3. Cognitive Flexibility – Alternatives for Human Behavior	0.63**	0.65**	—									
4. Infidelity Justification – Legitimacy	−0.21**	−0.20**	−0.24**	—								
5. Infidelity Justification – Seduction	−0.27**	−0.28**	−0.30**	0.38**	—							
6. Infidelity Justification – Normalization	−0.29**	−0.23**	−0.26**	0.49**	0.50**	—						
7. Infidelity Justification – Sexual Tendencies	−0.23**	−0.22**	−0.25**	0.53**	0.42**	0.40**	—					
8. Infidelity Justification – Social Context	−0.16**	−0.24**	−0.19**	0.55**	0.44**	0.45**	0.48**	—				
9. Infidelity Justification – Sensation Seeking	−0.17**	−0.18**	−0.22**	0.52**	0.38**	0.47**	0.43**	0.47**	—			
10. Marital Burnout – Physical	−0.33**	−0.32**	−0.29**	0.32**	0.19**	0.26**	0.32**	0.24**	0.30**	—		
11. Marital Burnout – Psychological	−0.33**	−0.36**	−0.25**	0.37**	0.25**	0.34**	0.33**	0.35**	0.39**	0.48**	—	
12. Marital Burnout – Emotional	−0.35**	−0.27**	−0.28**	0.39**	0.22**	0.31**	0.33**	0.36**	0.34**	0.63**	0.67**	—
Mean	52.08	36.03	8.05	9.82	9.01	9.39	9.81	9.65	10.73	21.03	26.31	22.43
SD	8.70	3.96	2.75	2.45	3.49	2.20	2.50	2.91	3.30	4.95	6.23	6.16

*p < .05, **p < .01.

Descriptive indices related to testing the assumptions of normality and multicollinearity are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Assessment of Univariate Normality and Multicollinearity Assumptions

Variable	Skewness	Kurtosis	Tolerance	VIF
Cognitive Flexibility – Alternatives	−1.15	0.77	0.28	3.63
Cognitive Flexibility – Control	−0.59	−0.14	0.48	2.08
Cognitive Flexibility – Alternatives for Human Behavior	−0.71	−0.27	0.30	3.19
Infidelity Justification – Legitimacy	−0.28	−0.64	0.52	1.94
Infidelity Justification – Seduction	0.20	−1.01	0.58	1.73
Infidelity Justification – Normalization	−0.09	−0.13	0.56	1.79
Infidelity Justification – Sexual Tendencies	0.18	−0.14	0.60	1.66
Infidelity Justification – Social Context	−0.06	−0.79	0.56	1.80
Infidelity Justification – Sensation Seeking	−0.42	−0.87	0.59	1.69
Marital Burnout – Physical	0.02	−0.11	—	—
Marital Burnout – Psychological	0.23	−0.52	—	—
Marital Burnout – Emotional	−0.10	−0.39	—	—

Based on Table 2, the skewness and kurtosis values of all components fell within ±2. This indicates that the assumption of univariate normality was satisfied (Kline, 2016). Table 2 also shows that the multicollinearity

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assumption was met, because tolerance values for the predictor variables were greater than 0.10 and all VIF values were less than 10. According to researchers, tolerance values below 0.10 and VIF values above 10 indicate violation of the multicollinearity assumption (O'Brien, 2007). To evaluate whether the multivariate normality assumption was met, information from the Mahalanobis distance was analyzed. The skewness and kurtosis values for Mahalanobis distance were 0.87 and 1.17, respectively, indicating multivariate normality. Finally, to assess homogeneity of variances, the scatterplot of standardized error variances was examined, and the results indicated that this assumption was also satisfied.

After evaluating the assumptions, the data were analyzed using structural equation modeling. For this purpose, AMOS version 24.0 with maximum likelihood estimation was applied. The study model assumed that cognitive flexibility is related to marital burnout through the mediating role of marital infidelity justification. As shown in Figure 1, Alternatives, Control, and Alternatives for Human Behavior served as indicators of the latent variable cognitive flexibility; Legitimacy, Seduction, Normalization, Sexual Tendencies, Social Context, and Sensation Seeking served as indicators of the latent variable infidelity justification; and Physical Burnout, Psychological Burnout, and Emotional Burnout served as indicators of the latent variable marital burnout. Table 3 presents the model fit indices.

Table 3

Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Model	Cutoff
χ^2	109.96	—
df	51	—
χ^2/df	2.16	< 3
GFI	0.955	> 0.90
AGFI	0.932	> 0.85
CFI	0.971	> 0.90
RMSEA	0.056	< 0.08

The Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons presented in Table 3 indicated significant reductions from pretest to posttest and from pretest to follow-up for all components of vaginismus and the total score in the experimental group. For example, sexual pain and intercourse inability decreased significantly from pretest to posttest (mean difference = 2.21, p = .004) and from pretest to follow-up (mean difference = 2.65, p = .002). Similar significant patterns were observed for negative emotional experience, inappropriate contextual conditions, fear and avoidance of sexual intercourse, and the total vaginismus score, with all corresponding p-values below .01. In contrast, comparisons between posttest and follow-up measurements were not statistically significant across any component or the total score, indicating stability of treatment gains over time. These findings suggest that emotion-focused couple therapy produced significant and sustained improvements in vaginismus symptoms among the participants in the experimental group.

Table 3 indicates that all fit indices supported an acceptable fit of the model to the collected data. Accordingly, it was concluded that the proposed model demonstrated adequate fit. Table 4 presents the path coefficients among variables in the structural model.

Table 4

Total, Direct, and Indirect Path Coefficients in the Structural Model

Path	b	S.E.	β	p
Cognitive Flexibility → Infidelity Justification	−0.083	0.014	−0.363	0.001
Infidelity Justification → Marital Burnout	0.900	0.136	0.473	0.001
Cognitive Flexibility → Marital Burnout (Direct)	−0.117	0.029	−0.267	0.001
Cognitive Flexibility → Marital Burnout (Indirect)	−0.075	0.016	−0.171	0.001
Cognitive Flexibility → Marital Burnout (Total)	−0.191	0.028	−0.439	0.001

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Table 4 shows that the total path coefficient between cognitive flexibility and marital burnout (β = −0.439, p = 0.001) was negative and significant. The path coefficient between infidelity justification and marital burnout (β = 0.473, p = 0.001) was positive and significant. The indirect path coefficient between cognitive flexibility and marital burnout (β = −0.171, p = 0.001) was also negative and significant. Therefore, it was concluded that marital infidelity justification significantly mediated the relationship between cognitive flexibility and marital burnout in a negative direction.

Figure 1

The standardized parameters in the structural model

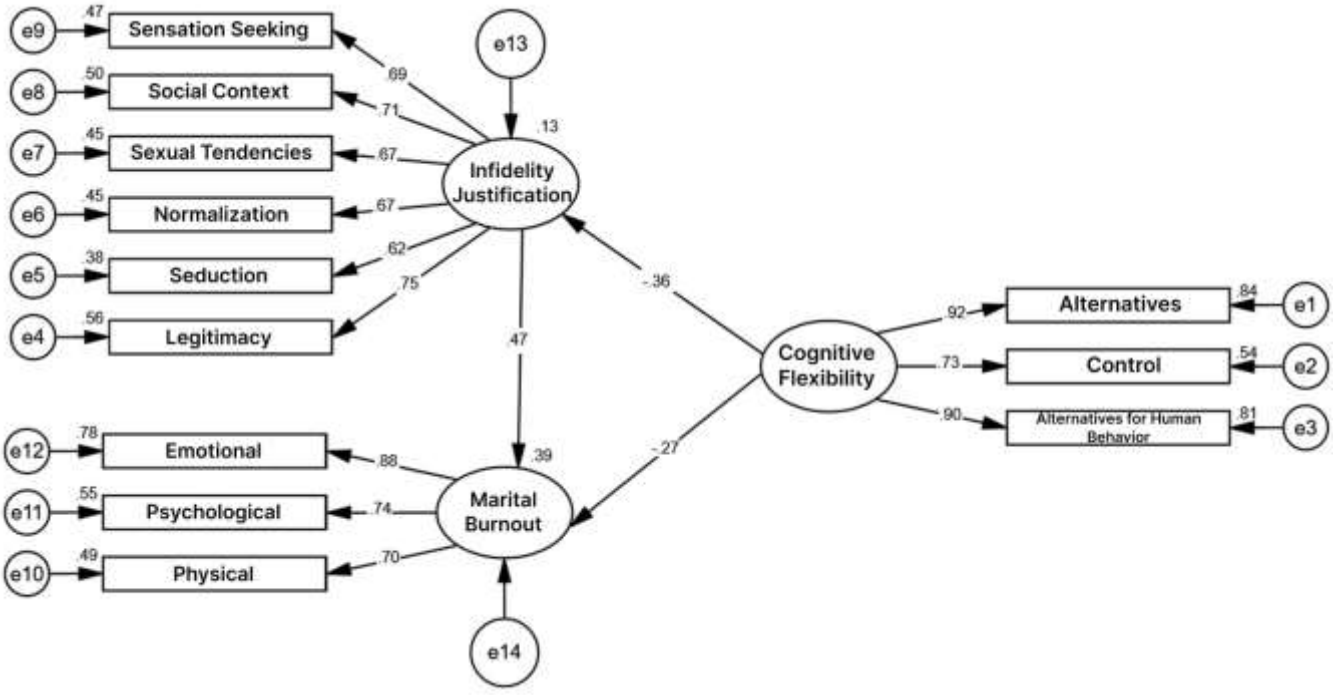

Figure 1 indicates that the squared multiple correlations for marital burnout were 0.39, meaning that cognitive flexibility and marital infidelity justification together explained 39% of the variance in marital burnout.

4. Discussion

The present study sought to clarify the structural relationships between psychological flexibility and marital burnout by examining the mediating roles of cognitive, emotional, and relational variables within a comprehensive explanatory model. The findings provide robust empirical support for the central role of psychological flexibility as a protective factor against marital burnout and offer important insights into the mechanisms through which flexibility operates in intimate relationships. Overall, the results indicate that higher levels of psychological flexibility are associated with lower levels of marital burnout, both directly and indirectly, through improvements in emotional regulation, communication processes, and relational cognitions. These findings are theoretically consistent with acceptance-based and contextual behavioral frameworks, which conceptualize flexibility as a core process enabling adaptive functioning under relational stress (Fine et al., 2018; Soltani et al., 2013).

The direct negative association observed between psychological flexibility and marital burnout aligns with prior empirical evidence demonstrating that individuals who are more flexible in their internal experiences exhibit greater tolerance of distress, reduced emotional exhaustion, and higher relational engagement (Körük et al., 2023; Sabetro et al., 2023). Marital burnout is characterized by chronic emotional depletion and a sense of relational inefficacy, and psychological flexibility appears to buffer against these processes by allowing individuals to remain engaged with marital challenges without excessive avoidance or cognitive rigidity. This finding is consistent with studies showing that

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inflexible coping patterns amplify emotional fatigue and accelerate disengagement in long-term relationships (Hosseini et al., 2024; Teimoori & Ghamari, 2022).

Beyond the direct effects, the mediational pathways identified in the present study underscore the multifaceted nature of marital burnout. One of the most salient findings concerns the mediating role of emotional regulation processes. Psychological flexibility was found to be associated with more adaptive emotional responses, which in turn predicted lower levels of burnout. This result is in line with prior research demonstrating that flexible individuals are better able to observe negative emotions without overidentifying with them, thereby preventing the escalation of emotional exhaustion within marital interactions (Akbari et al., 2021; Sharifi et al., 2024). Emotional dysregulation, by contrast, has been consistently linked to marital dissatisfaction and burnout, particularly in couples experiencing chronic conflict or unmet relational expectations (Beam et al., 2018).

The role of cognitive flexibility as a mediating variable further enriches the interpretation of the findings. Cognitive flexibility enables partners to shift perspectives, reframe relational stressors, and disengage from rigid attributional patterns that often sustain marital distress. The present results corroborate earlier studies indicating that cognitive inflexibility contributes to perseverative negative thinking, maladaptive blame attributions, and reduced problem-solving capacity, all of which intensify marital burnout (Akbarzadeh & Zehrakar, 2022; Carbonella & Timpano, 2016). Conversely, cognitively flexible individuals are more likely to interpret relational difficulties as manageable and context-dependent, thereby reducing emotional overload and sustaining relational commitment (Salehi et al., 2022).

Communication-related variables also emerged as significant mediators in the model. The findings suggest that psychological flexibility fosters healthier communication beliefs and interaction patterns, which in turn mitigate marital burnout. This result is consistent with prior evidence indicating that rigid communication beliefs and maladaptive interaction styles undermine relational satisfaction and accelerate emotional disengagement (Alizadeh-Navaei et al., 2023; Sedaghatkhah & Behzadi-Pour, 2017). Flexible individuals appear better equipped to tolerate disagreement, listen nondefensively, and engage in constructive dialogue, thereby preventing the cumulative erosion of marital quality. These findings reinforce the notion that marital burnout is not solely an individual phenomenon but is deeply embedded in dyadic communication dynamics.

Importantly, the present study also sheds light on the broader relational implications of psychological flexibility, particularly in relation to marital vulnerability and infidelity-related attitudes. Previous research has shown that marital burnout is closely associated with permissive attitudes toward infidelity and increased susceptibility to extradyadic involvement (Belu & O'Sullivan, 2024; Nikmanesh & Amirimoghadam, 2020). The current findings suggest that psychological flexibility may indirectly reduce such risks by enhancing distress tolerance and reducing the need for avoidance-based coping strategies. This interpretation aligns with stage-based models of infidelity decision-making, which emphasize the role of emotional exhaustion, cognitive justification, and moral disengagement in facilitating unfaithful behavior (Lişman & Holman, 2022; Perez et al., 2023).

The integration of relational and contextual factors further supports the ecological validity of the findings. Occupational stress, role overload, and broader psychosocial demands have been shown to exacerbate marital burnout, particularly when psychological resources are limited (Dheer & Lenartowicz, 2018; Körük et al., 2023). The present results suggest that psychological flexibility may function as a cross-contextual resilience factor, enabling individuals to navigate both external stressors and relational challenges without excessive emotional depletion. This interpretation is consistent with research highlighting the protective role of flexibility in diverse domains, including work-family balance and interpersonal adaptation (Shirani et al., 2022; Xie et al., 2018).

The findings also align with emerging structural models that conceptualize marital burnout as the outcome of interacting psychological and relational processes rather than isolated predictors. Prior studies employing structural equation modeling have demonstrated that flexibility-related constructs exert their effects through interconnected pathways involving self-compassion, intimacy, self-regulation, and satisfaction (Najafi et al., 2025; Pouya et al., 2025). The present study extends this literature by providing additional empirical support for these complex pathways and highlighting the central positioning of psychological flexibility within the broader relational system.

From a clinical perspective, the results reinforce the theoretical foundations of acceptance- and commitment-based couple interventions. Intervention studies have shown that enhancing psychological flexibility through mindfulness, values clarification, and acceptance strategies leads to significant reductions in marital burnout and

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improvements in emotional regulation (Soltani et al., 2013; Vaslehchi et al., 2024). The current findings provide empirical justification for these approaches by demonstrating the structural mechanisms through which flexibility influences burnout. Rather than targeting symptoms alone, interventions that focus on increasing flexibility may produce more durable relational change by addressing underlying processes of emotional and cognitive rigidity.

Culturally, the findings are particularly relevant in contexts where marital roles and expectations are undergoing rapid transformation. Changes in gender norms, intimacy expectations, and family structures place increased adaptive demands on couples, making psychological flexibility a critical resource for marital sustainability (Farhani & Ahmadi, 2019; Kamaljou et al., 2016). The present study contributes to this discourse by highlighting how flexibility-related processes can mitigate the relational strain associated with contemporary marital challenges.

5. Conclusion

Taken together, the results of this study support a process-oriented understanding of marital burnout, emphasizing psychological flexibility as a central mechanism that operates through emotional regulation, cognitive adaptability, and relational communication. These findings not only replicate and extend prior research but also provide a more integrated framework for understanding the complex pathways leading to marital exhaustion and disengagement.

Despite the strengths of the present study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference, and the observed relationships should be interpreted as associative rather than strictly causal. Second, reliance on self-report measures may introduce response biases, including social desirability and shared method variance. Third, the sample characteristics may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or demographic groups, particularly unmarried individuals or couples in nontraditional relationship structures. Finally, although the model incorporated multiple mediators, other potentially relevant variables such as personality traits or attachment insecurity were not examined.

Future studies would benefit from longitudinal designs to clarify the temporal ordering of psychological flexibility and marital burnout and to examine how these processes evolve over time. Experimental and intervention-based research could further test the causal role of flexibility-enhancing strategies in reducing burnout. Additionally, future research should explore cross-cultural comparisons to assess the generalizability of the model across diverse sociocultural contexts. Incorporating partner-reported data and dyadic analytic approaches may also provide a more comprehensive understanding of reciprocal processes within couples.

From a practical standpoint, the findings highlight the importance of incorporating flexibility-focused components into couple counseling and marital enrichment programs. Clinicians may consider emphasizing acceptance, mindfulness, and values-based action to help couples manage relational stress more adaptively. Training programs for counselors and therapists should prioritize psychological flexibility as a core therapeutic target. At a broader level, educational and preventive interventions aimed at strengthening emotional and cognitive flexibility may contribute to the long-term sustainability of marital relationships and reduce the prevalence of marital burnout.

Authors' Contributions

S.R. contributed to the conceptualization of the study, development of the theoretical framework, and formulation of the research hypotheses. M.M. was responsible for the research design, sampling strategy, data collection supervision, and coordination with counseling centers. M.N. conducted the statistical analyses using structural equation modeling, interpreted the results, and prepared the findings section. All authors jointly contributed to drafting the discussion and conclusion, critically reviewed the manuscript for scientific accuracy and intellectual content, approved the final version of the article, and take collective responsibility for the integrity of the research.

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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