

Testing a Causal Model of Avoidant Insecure Attachment and Marital Conflict Through Self-Differentiation and Cognitive Emotion Regulation: The Moderating Role of Emotional Intelligence in Married Students

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to test a causal moderated mediation model explaining marital conflict based on avoidant insecure attachment, with self-differentiation and cognitive emotion regulation as mediators and emotional intelligence as a moderator among married university students. This descriptive-correlational study was conducted using structural equation modeling and conditional process analysis. The statistical population included married undergraduate students at Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz Branch, during the 2025–2026 academic year. A total of 720 married students, including 360 women and 360 men, were selected through multistage random sampling. Data were collected using the Adult Attachment Scale, Marital Conflict Questionnaire, Differentiation of Self Inventory–Short Form, Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire–Short Form, and Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale–Revised. Data were analyzed using SPSS, AMOS, and PROCESS Model 14. The results showed that avoidant insecure attachment had a significant positive direct effect on marital conflict in both tested models. Avoidant attachment significantly and negatively predicted self-differentiation and adaptive cognitive emotion regulation, while it significantly and positively predicted maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation. Self-differentiation and emotional intelligence had significant negative direct effects on marital conflict. Adaptive cognitive emotion regulation significantly and negatively predicted marital conflict, whereas maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation significantly and positively predicted marital conflict. The interaction between self-differentiation and emotional intelligence was significant in both models, indicating that emotional intelligence moderated the association between self-differentiation and marital conflict. The interaction between maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation and emotional intelligence was also significant, whereas the interaction involving adaptive strategies was not significant. Conditional indirect effects of avoidant attachment on marital conflict through self-differentiation and maladaptive strategies were significant across different levels of emotional intelligence.

Keywords: Avoidant insecure attachment; marital conflict; self-differentiation; cognitive emotion regulation; emotional intelligence; married students.

1. Introduction

Marital life is one of the most important interpersonal contexts in adulthood and constitutes a central domain in which emotional, cognitive, relational, and family-system processes are continuously activated. The quality of the marital relationship affects not only the psychological well-being of spouses but also the emotional climate of the family, the functioning of children, and the broader stability of the family system. Marital conflict, as one of the most common and clinically significant problems in intimate relationships, refers to recurring disagreement, tension, emotional reactivity, criticism, withdrawal, reduced cooperation, and ineffective conflict resolution between spouses. Although conflict is not inherently pathological and may occur in most marital relationships, persistent and poorly regulated conflict can undermine marital satisfaction, emotional intimacy, sexual functioning, family cohesion, and individual mental health. Studies on marital relationships have shown that marital conflict is associated with negative relational and developmental outcomes and can function as a pathway through which broader family stress affects psychological and behavioral problems in family members (Dorabi Ammari & Mahmoodi, 2025; Liu & Vazsonyi, 2024; Tasew & Getahun, 2021). In contemporary marital research, increasing attention has therefore been directed toward identifying the personal and interpersonal mechanisms that explain why some couples experience conflict as manageable and constructive, whereas others become trapped in repetitive, destructive, and emotionally exhausting interactional cycles.

One of the most influential psychological frameworks for understanding intimate relationships is attachment theory. Adult attachment styles shape how individuals perceive closeness, dependence, trust, emotional availability, and threat within romantic relationships. Among insecure attachment styles, avoidant insecure attachment is especially important in the context of marital conflict because it is characterized by discomfort with intimacy, excessive self-reliance, emotional distancing, suppression of attachment needs, and reluctance to depend on the partner. Individuals with avoidant attachment tendencies may appear independent and emotionally controlled, but this interpersonal stance often reflects defensive deactivation of attachment needs rather than genuine relational security. When conflict arises, avoidantly attached spouses are more likely to withdraw, minimize emotional expression, avoid open discussion, and distance themselves from the partner,

thereby reducing opportunities for repair and mutual understanding. Recent research has emphasized that attachment styles are associated with the development and maintenance of couple identity, partner responsiveness, and long-term relational patterns (Frydman & Tena, 2023; Kumar & Singh, 2024). In clinical and applied perspectives, understanding the partner's attachment style has also been introduced as a key route for defusing relational conflict and strengthening secure functioning in intimate bonds (Tatkin, 2024). Accordingly, avoidant insecure attachment can be considered a major vulnerability factor for marital conflict, particularly when it disrupts emotional openness, responsiveness, and collaborative problem solving.

The effect of avoidant attachment on marital conflict is unlikely to be only direct; rather, it may operate through internal regulatory and relational mechanisms. One such mechanism is differentiation of self, a core construct in Bowen family systems theory. Differentiation of self refers to the individual's capacity to maintain a balance between emotional and intellectual functioning and to preserve a clear sense of self while remaining emotionally connected to significant others. A highly differentiated person can think clearly under emotional pressure, tolerate intimacy without losing autonomy, and express personal positions without emotional cutoff or fusion. Conversely, low differentiation is associated with emotional reactivity, dependence on approval, difficulty maintaining boundaries, and vulnerability to relational anxiety. Research has supported the theoretical relevance of differentiation in family and couple functioning and has shown that differentiation is connected to triangulation, relational stability, and the quality of intimate relationships (Willis et al., 2021). Although the term differentiation has also been used in broader interdisciplinary contexts, in family psychology it specifically denotes a psychosocial capacity for balancing autonomy and emotional connectedness within relational systems (Schlosser, 2023). Within marriage, low differentiation may intensify conflict because spouses become more reactive, defensive, emotionally fused, or avoidant when faced with disagreement.

Attachment style and differentiation of self are conceptually interconnected. Individuals with avoidant insecure attachment may attempt to maintain distance from the partner as a way of protecting themselves from perceived emotional threat; however, this defensive distancing is not equivalent to healthy differentiation. Healthy differentiation involves flexible autonomy and emotional connectedness, whereas avoidant attachment often involves emotional

cutoff, discomfort with dependence, and restricted emotional communication. Empirical studies have shown that attachment styles can predict marital outcomes through differentiation of self, suggesting that differentiation may mediate the relationship between insecure attachment and marital difficulties (Asadi et al., 2022). Studies on attachment, spousal support, and marital satisfaction have similarly indicated that insecure attachment patterns are associated with weaker relational support and poorer marital quality (Buttar et al., 2022). In addition, research on attachment-related adjustment has demonstrated that attachment styles play an important role in how individuals respond to emotionally stressful situations and relational loss (Sochos & Aleem, 2022). These findings support the assumption that avoidant attachment may reduce the capacity for adaptive self-other regulation and thereby increase vulnerability to marital conflict through lower differentiation of self.

Another central mechanism in the explanation of marital conflict is cognitive emotion regulation. Cognitive emotion regulation refers to the cognitive strategies people use to manage, interpret, and respond to emotionally arousing experiences. These strategies are commonly divided into adaptive and maladaptive forms. Adaptive strategies, such as positive reappraisal, acceptance, refocusing on planning, and perspective taking, help individuals reinterpret stressful events, reduce emotional arousal, and respond more constructively. Maladaptive strategies, such as rumination, catastrophizing, self-blame, and other-blame, tend to prolong distress, intensify negative interpretation, and maintain emotional dysregulation. Contemporary emotion regulation research has shown that regulation is not limited to broad self-reports but also appears in everyday emotional processes that influence behavior and interpersonal functioning (Koval et al., 2023). Moreover, frequency of emotion regulation and perceived self-efficacy in regulating emotions are differentially associated with affective symptoms, showing that how individuals regulate emotions and how competent they feel in doing so are both important for psychological adjustment (Ramos-Cejudo et al., 2024). In marital contexts, these processes are highly relevant because conflict often emerges not merely from disagreement but from the way spouses cognitively appraise, interpret, and regulate the emotions produced by disagreement.

Emotion regulation has been shown to play a significant role in mental health, relational functioning, and marital outcomes. Systematic evidence has indicated that emotion

regulation strategies are closely associated with mental health under stressful conditions, including widespread social stressors such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Bagheri-Sheikhangafsheh et al., 2022). In marital and family studies, emotion regulation strategies have been used to predict marital conflict, and maladaptive regulation has been associated with greater conflict and poorer relational functioning (Tarifi et al., 2022). Emotion regulation has also been examined in relation to sexual function and satisfaction, indicating that the ability to regulate emotions may be relevant to intimate and sexual aspects of couple relationships (Fischer et al., 2022). More recent work on negative emotion differentiation has further shown that the ability to distinguish and understand negative emotional states is linked to regulation traits, rumination, and depressive symptoms, highlighting the importance of precise emotional processing for adaptive regulation (Carolus & Starr, 2025). These findings collectively suggest that adaptive cognitive emotion regulation may reduce marital conflict by facilitating constructive interpretation and communication, whereas maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation may intensify conflict by maintaining negative emotional cycles.

The relationship between avoidant attachment and emotion regulation is also theoretically important. Avoidantly attached individuals often manage distress through suppression, emotional disengagement, and minimization of relational needs. While these strategies may reduce overt emotional expression in the short term, they may impair long-term emotional processing and increase relational dissatisfaction. Insecure attachment has been linked to changes in self-efficacy and adjustment across different contexts, suggesting that attachment-related patterns may shape how individuals manage risk, responsibility, and emotionally charged situations (Stuck et al., 2022). In marriage, avoidant attachment may decrease the use of adaptive regulation strategies and increase reliance on maladaptive strategies, thereby influencing the level of conflict between spouses. When a person avoids emotional engagement, the partner may perceive distance, rejection, or indifference, which may then trigger further conflict. In contrast, adaptive cognitive strategies may help individuals reframe disagreements, reduce defensiveness, and engage in problem-solving communication. Therefore, cognitive emotion regulation can be considered a plausible mediator in the relationship between avoidant insecure attachment and marital conflict.

In addition to mediating mechanisms, moderating variables may determine the strength and direction of the relationship between psychological vulnerabilities and marital conflict. Emotional intelligence is one of the most important candidates in this regard. Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to perceive, understand, use, express, and regulate emotions in oneself and others. In intimate relationships, emotionally intelligent individuals are more likely to recognize emotional cues, understand the partner's affective state, manage their own emotional reactions, and communicate needs more effectively. Research has demonstrated that emotional intelligence is associated with marital conflict and can be examined within dyadic frameworks that consider both actor and partner effects (Parsakia et al., 2023). Other studies have shown that self-knowledge, love, and emotional intelligence are significant predictors of marital conflict, indicating that emotional competencies are essential for relational stability and conflict management (Sadeghi et al., 2022). Furthermore, structural modeling research has identified emotional intelligence and differentiation of self as important predictors of marital stability through relational intimacy (Shahnoushfaroshani et al., 2022). These findings suggest that emotional intelligence may not only directly reduce marital conflict but also strengthen or weaken the effects of differentiation and emotion regulation on marital outcomes.

The moderating role of emotional intelligence is particularly meaningful when considered alongside self-differentiation. A person may possess some degree of autonomy and cognitive clarity, yet still experience marital difficulty if they lack the emotional skills needed to recognize, express, and regulate intense feelings. Conversely, high emotional intelligence may allow individuals to translate differentiation into healthier conflict management by reducing impulsive reactions and increasing empathic communication. Studies have shown that differentiation of self, attachment styles, and family functioning are associated with marital burnout through the mediating role of emotional intelligence, emphasizing the integrative role of emotional competencies in marital adjustment (Kohanmooei et al., 2022; Kohanmouei et al., 2022). Emotional intelligence has also been studied as a trainable psychological skill, with evidence suggesting that emotional intelligence training can improve psychological outcomes such as social anxiety and perfectionism (Shafiee Sourak & Shamsoddinpour, 2026). In developmental contexts, emotional intelligence has been linked to self-concept and emotional functioning, further supporting its

broad relevance for adaptive adjustment (Lusiyah Simanjuntak, 2022). Accordingly, emotional intelligence may buffer the adverse effects of low differentiation or maladaptive regulation and may enhance the protective effect of adaptive psychological capacities.

Recent studies have increasingly examined integrated models that connect differentiation of self, emotion regulation, and marital outcomes. For example, emotion regulation has been identified as a mediator in the relationship between differentiation of self and marital conflict, suggesting that individuals with stronger differentiation may experience less conflict partly because they regulate emotions more effectively (Joqratian et al., 2026). Similarly, research has shown that self-differentiation and emotion regulation can mediate the relationship between dyadic perfectionism and marital satisfaction, confirming the importance of these constructs in explaining couple adjustment (Falahzade & Sivandian, 2025). Emotion-based family therapy studies have also emphasized the relevance of self-differentiation and alexithymia in psychological functioning, especially in emotionally vulnerable populations (Ghanavati et al., 2025; Ghavanati et al., 2025). These findings support the need for models that do not examine marital conflict through a single predictor but instead consider the combined effects of attachment, differentiation, emotion regulation, and emotional intelligence.

Despite the growing body of evidence, several gaps remain. First, many previous studies have examined attachment, self-differentiation, emotion regulation, emotional intelligence, or marital conflict separately, while fewer studies have tested an integrated causal model including all these variables simultaneously. Second, cognitive emotion regulation is often treated as a single construct, whereas separating adaptive and maladaptive strategies can provide a more precise understanding of how each pathway contributes to marital conflict. Third, the role of emotional intelligence as a moderator has received less attention in models linking differentiation and cognitive emotion regulation to marital conflict. Fourth, the population of married university students represents a meaningful but understudied group, because these individuals often experience simultaneous academic, occupational, relational, and family pressures that may intensify marital tension. In the post-pandemic era, studies have also shown that marital conflict and negative emotions can affect student functioning, burnout, and relational adjustment, highlighting the importance of examining these processes among

university populations (Zhang et al., 2023). Moreover, modern relational stressors such as partner phubbing and reduced marital interaction have been shown to affect marital satisfaction through marital conflict, demonstrating that marital conflict remains a central mechanism in contemporary couple functioning (Wang & Zhao, 2023).

Therefore, the present study aimed to test a causal model of marital conflict based on avoidant insecure attachment style, with the mediating roles of self-differentiation and cognitive emotion regulation strategies, including adaptive and maladaptive strategies, and the moderating role of emotional intelligence among married students.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study was conducted using a descriptive-correlational design within the framework of structural equation modeling and a moderated mediation model. The statistical population consisted of all married undergraduate students at Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz Branch, during the 2025–2026 academic year. The research sample was selected through multistage random sampling. For this purpose, from among the five faculties of Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz Branch, three faculties were randomly selected. Then, three academic departments were randomly selected from the chosen faculties, and lists of married undergraduate students were prepared. Finally, 720 married students, including 360 women and 360 men, were randomly selected from these lists to participate in the study. Before data collection, the necessary research permission was obtained from the relevant research council. Participants were informed about the objectives of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality of information, protection of privacy, absence of identifying information, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. After obtaining informed consent, the questionnaires were distributed and collected after completion. The study was also reviewed and approved by the ethics committee, and an ethics approval code was obtained.

2.2. Measures

The Marital Conflict Questionnaire was developed by Barati and Sanaei-Zaker in 1996 and was used to assess marital conflict. This questionnaire consists of 42 items and measures six dimensions, including reduced cooperation, reduced sexual relationship, increased emotional reactions,

increased involvement of children for support, increased personal relationship with one's own relatives, and reduced family relationship. The items are scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1, meaning "always," to 5, meaning "never." The total score ranges from 42 to 210, with higher scores indicating greater marital conflict. Barati and Sanaei-Zaker reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.71 for the total scale, and Behzadpour et al. reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.92. In the present study, the reliability of the questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's alpha, which was 0.93. In addition, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to evaluate construct validity, and the fit indices indicated the acceptable fit of the measurement model.

The Differentiation of Self Inventory–Short Form was developed by Drake in 2011 and was used to assess self-differentiation. This inventory includes 20 items and evaluates four components: emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others. The items are scored on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1, meaning "very little," to 6, meaning "very much." The total score ranges from 20 to 120, with higher scores indicating greater differentiation of self. Initial studies reported test–retest reliability coefficients ranging from 0.72 to 0.85. Criterion validity evidence has shown that this construct is positively related to self-esteem and negatively related to depression, anxiety, and stress. In the Iranian validation study by Ghaedi et al., Cronbach's alpha coefficients were reported as 0.78 for the total scale, 0.48 for emotional reactivity, 0.67 for I-position, 0.73 for emotional cutoff, and 0.76 for fusion with others. In the present study, reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and the Spearman–Brown split-half method, yielding coefficients of 0.85 and 0.92, respectively. These values indicated good internal reliability. Confirmatory factor analysis also confirmed the acceptable fit of the measurement model.

The Adult Attachment Scale was developed by Hazan and Shaver in 1987 and was used to assess adult attachment styles. This inventory consists of 15 items and evaluates three attachment styles: secure attachment, avoidant insecure attachment, and ambivalent insecure attachment. The items are scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 0, meaning "never," to 4, meaning "almost always." The total score ranges from 0 to 60. Initial studies reported a test–retest reliability coefficient of approximately 0.81 and a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of approximately 0.78. Evidence of construct validity has indicated that the instrument has acceptable face, content, and construct

validity. In Iran, the validity and reliability of the Adult Attachment Scale were examined by Rahimian Bogar et al., who reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.75 for the total scale, 0.77 for secure attachment, 0.81 for avoidant insecure attachment, and 0.83 for ambivalent insecure attachment. In the present study, reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and the Spearman-Brown split-half method. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for secure, avoidant insecure, and ambivalent insecure attachment were 0.72, 0.66, and 0.66, respectively, and the corresponding Spearman-Brown coefficients were 0.71, 0.64, and 0.65. These findings indicated acceptable internal consistency. Confirmatory factor analysis also showed that the measurement model had an acceptable fit.

The Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale-Revised was developed by Schutte et al. in 1998 based on the emotional intelligence model of Salovey and Mayer. This scale contains 33 items and assesses three components: emotion regulation, utilization of emotion, and appraisal and expression of emotion. The items are scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1, meaning "strongly disagree," to 5, meaning "strongly agree." The total score ranges from 33 to 165, with higher scores indicating greater emotional intelligence. Initial studies reported a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.78 and a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.90. Construct validity evidence has indicated an acceptable factor structure for this instrument. In Iran, the reliability and validity of the scale were examined by Besharat and Yousefi, who reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.88 and 0.96, respectively. In the present study, reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and the Spearman-Brown split-half method. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.84, and the Spearman-Brown coefficient was 0.93, indicating good internal reliability. In addition, confirmatory factor analysis supported the acceptable fit of the measurement model.

The Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire-Short Form was developed by Garnefski and Kraaij in 2006 and was used to assess cognitive emotion regulation strategies. This questionnaire consists of 18 items and evaluates two general components: adaptive strategies and maladaptive strategies. The items are scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1, meaning "never," to 5, meaning "always." The score range is 10 to 50 for adaptive strategies and 8 to

40 for maladaptive strategies. Initial studies reported reliability coefficients of approximately 0.80 using test-retest and internal consistency methods. In Iran, the reliability and validity of this questionnaire were examined by Besharat et al., and Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales were reported to range from 0.67 to 0.89. In the present study, reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The alpha coefficient was 0.85 for adaptive strategies and 0.80 for maladaptive strategies, indicating good internal consistency. Confirmatory factor analysis also confirmed the acceptable fit of the measurement model.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. First, descriptive indices, including mean and standard deviation, were calculated for the main research variables. Before testing the final models, preliminary assumptions were examined. Outliers were assessed to ensure the accuracy of the dataset, and the results indicated that there were no problematic outliers. The normality of the data distribution was examined using skewness and kurtosis indices, and the obtained values were within the acceptable range. In addition, the possible effect of gender on the research variables was examined using multivariate analysis of variance. The results showed no significant differences between male and female participants in the study variables; therefore, gender was not included as a control variable in the final modeling. The conceptual model and the simultaneous mediating and moderating roles of the study variables were examined using structural equation modeling. Conditional process analysis was also applied to test moderated mediation effects. The data were analyzed using SPSS, AMOS, and PROCESS Model 14. The significance level was set at 0.05 for all statistical tests.

3. Findings and Results

A total of 720 married undergraduate students from Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz Branch, participated in the study. The sample was balanced by gender and included 360 women and 360 men. All participants were married students enrolled during the 2025-2026 academic year and were selected through multistage random sampling from selected faculties and academic departments of the university.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of the research variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Avoidant insecure attachment style	9.26	3.04
Self-differentiation	74.51	19.91
Emotional intelligence	99.23	21.38
Adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies	29.54	6.87
Maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies	24.63	5.04
Marital conflict	138.84	28.46

As shown in Table 1, the mean score of avoidant insecure attachment style was 9.26 with a standard deviation of 3.04. The mean score of self-differentiation was 74.51 with a standard deviation of 19.91, and the mean score of emotional intelligence was 99.23 with a standard deviation of 21.38. The mean scores of adaptive and maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies were 29.54 and 24.63, with standard deviations of 6.87 and 5.04, respectively. The mean score of marital conflict was 138.84 with a standard deviation of 28.46, indicating the overall distribution of marital conflict scores among the married student participants.

Before testing the final structural models, the required statistical assumptions were examined. First, outliers were assessed to ensure the accuracy of the dataset, and the results indicated that there were no problematic outliers. Then, the normality of the distribution of scores was examined using skewness and kurtosis indices, and the obtained values were within the acceptable range, confirming the normal distribution of the variables. In addition, the possible effect of gender on the research variables was examined using multivariate analysis of variance. The results showed no significant difference between male and female participants in the study variables; therefore, gender was not entered as a control variable in the structural modeling.

Table 2

Correlation matrix of the research variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Avoidant insecure attachment style	1					
2. Self-differentiation	-0.49*	1				
3. Emotional intelligence	-0.47*	0.54*	1			
4. Adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies	-0.61*	0.68*	0.47*	1		
5. Maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies	0.57*	-0.41*	-0.35*	-0.48*	1	
6. Marital conflict	0.65*	-0.85*	-0.70*	-0.71*	0.76*	1

As shown in Table 2, avoidant insecure attachment style had significant negative correlations with self-differentiation, emotional intelligence, and adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies, and a significant positive correlation with maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies. Marital conflict was significantly and positively correlated with avoidant insecure attachment style and maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies, whereas it was significantly and negatively correlated with self-differentiation, emotional intelligence, and adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies. These findings indicate that higher levels of avoidant attachment and maladaptive emotion regulation were associated with greater marital conflict, while higher levels of self-differentiation, emotional intelligence, and adaptive emotion regulation were associated with lower marital conflict.

The proposed structural model was tested in two forms: the first model included adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies as the mediator, and the second model included maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies as the mediator. The model-fit evaluation indicated that the proposed structural models had acceptable fit with the observed data. Therefore, the hypothesized moderated mediation framework was considered appropriate for examining the direct, mediating, and moderating relationships among avoidant insecure attachment style, self-differentiation, cognitive emotion regulation strategies, emotional intelligence, and marital conflict. The final path analysis was then conducted to examine the direct and interaction effects in both models.

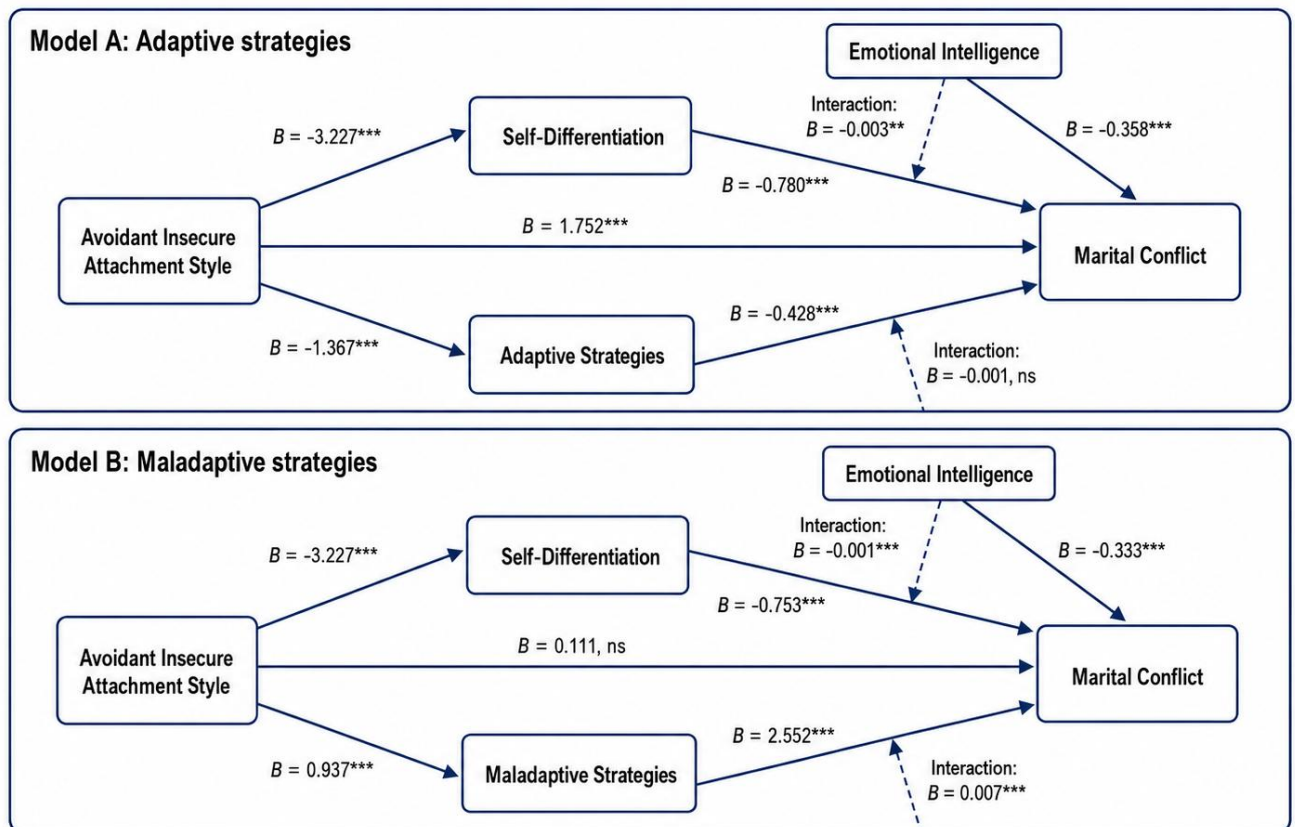
Table 3

Path analysis of the direct and interaction effects

Model	Path	B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Adaptive strategies model	Avoidant insecure attachment style → Marital conflict	1.752	0.178	9.842	.001	1.402	2.101
Adaptive strategies model	Self-differentiation → Marital conflict	-0.780	0.030	-25.860	.001	-0.839	-0.721
Adaptive strategies model	Adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies → Marital conflict	-0.428	0.091	-4.721	.001	-0.606	-0.250
Adaptive strategies model	Emotional intelligence → Marital conflict	-0.358	0.024	-14.931	.001	-0.405	-0.311
Adaptive strategies model	Self-differentiation × Emotional intelligence → Marital conflict	-0.003	0.001	-2.760	.005	-0.006	-0.001
Adaptive strategies model	Adaptive strategies × Emotional intelligence → Marital conflict	-0.001	0.003	-0.152	.879	-0.008	0.006
Adaptive strategies model	Avoidant insecure attachment style → Self-differentiation	-3.227	0.212	-15.185	.001	-3.644	-2.810
Adaptive strategies model	Avoidant insecure attachment style → Adaptive strategies	-1.367	0.067	-20.377	.001	-1.499	-1.236
Maladaptive strategies model	Avoidant insecure attachment style → Marital conflict	0.111	0.068	1.624	.104	-0.023	0.246
Maladaptive strategies model	Self-differentiation → Marital conflict	-0.753	0.010	-75.149	.001	-0.773	-0.733
Maladaptive strategies model	Maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies → Marital conflict	2.552	0.038	66.261	.001	2.477	2.628
Maladaptive strategies model	Emotional intelligence → Marital conflict	-0.333	0.009	-36.529	.001	-0.350	-0.315
Maladaptive strategies model	Self-differentiation × Emotional intelligence → Marital conflict	-0.001	0.001	-4.507	.001	-0.002	-0.001
Maladaptive strategies model	Maladaptive strategies × Emotional intelligence → Marital conflict	0.007	0.001	4.242	.001	0.003	0.010
Maladaptive strategies model	Avoidant insecure attachment style → Self-differentiation	-3.227	0.212	-15.185	.001	-3.644	-2.810
Maladaptive strategies model	Avoidant insecure attachment style → Maladaptive strategies	0.937	0.051	18.388	.001	0.837	1.037

Figure 1

Final Model of the Study



Solid arrows = direct effects; dashed arrows = moderating effects; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, ns = not significant.

The results of the path analysis showed that, in the adaptive strategies model, avoidant insecure attachment style had a significant positive direct effect on marital conflict, while self-differentiation, emotional intelligence, and adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies had significant negative direct effects on marital conflict. Avoidant insecure attachment style also had significant negative effects on self-differentiation and adaptive strategies. The interaction between self-differentiation and emotional intelligence was significant, indicating that emotional intelligence moderated the relationship between self-differentiation and marital conflict. However, the interaction between adaptive strategies and emotional intelligence was not significant. In the maladaptive strategies model, self-differentiation and emotional intelligence had significant negative effects on marital conflict, whereas maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies had a significant positive effect on marital conflict. Avoidant insecure attachment style had a significant negative effect on self-differentiation and a significant positive effect on maladaptive strategies. Moreover, both the interaction between self-differentiation and emotional intelligence and the interaction between maladaptive strategies and emotional intelligence were significant, indicating the moderating role of emotional intelligence in these paths.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to test a causal model of marital conflict based on avoidant insecure attachment style, with the mediating roles of self-differentiation and cognitive emotion regulation strategies and the moderating role of emotional intelligence among married students. The findings generally supported the proposed model and showed that marital conflict can be explained through an integrated network of attachment-related vulnerability, differentiation of self, cognitive emotion regulation, and emotional intelligence. The descriptive and correlational results indicated that avoidant insecure attachment was negatively associated with self-differentiation, emotional intelligence, and adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies, while it was positively associated with maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies and marital conflict. These findings are consistent with attachment-based perspectives, according to which avoidantly attached individuals tend to distance themselves emotionally, suppress relational needs, and use defensive autonomy when faced with intimacy or interpersonal stress (Kumar & Singh, 2024; Tatkin, 2024).

In marital relationships, such tendencies may reduce emotional openness and perceived partner responsiveness, leading to weakened couple identity and greater conflict escalation (Buttar et al., 2022; Frydman & Tena, 2023). The positive association between avoidant attachment and marital conflict is also aligned with studies showing that insecure attachment patterns are associated with lower marital satisfaction, weaker spousal support, and greater relational instability (Kumar & Singh, 2024; Stuck et al., 2022).

The first major finding showed that avoidant insecure attachment had a significant positive direct effect on marital conflict in the adaptive strategies model. This result indicates that married students with stronger avoidant attachment tendencies reported higher marital conflict. Theoretically, avoidant attachment is characterized by emotional deactivation, discomfort with dependence, and avoidance of vulnerability, all of which can impair conflict resolution. When spouses avoid emotional disclosure or respond to conflict with withdrawal, silence, or emotional distance, unresolved disagreements may accumulate and become chronic. This finding is consistent with research emphasizing the role of attachment styles in romantic and marital functioning (Kumar & Singh, 2024; Tatkin, 2024). It also corresponds with evidence that marital conflict is a central mechanism affecting emotional and family functioning across different populations (Liu & Vazsonyi, 2024; Tasew & Getahun, 2021). In the maladaptive strategies model, however, the direct effect of avoidant attachment on marital conflict became non-significant after maladaptive strategies and other predictors were entered into the model. This attenuation suggests that the effect of avoidant attachment on marital conflict may be transmitted largely through psychological and emotional mechanisms, especially maladaptive emotion regulation and reduced self-differentiation. Such a finding is theoretically meaningful because attachment insecurity often affects marital outcomes through the way individuals process emotions, interpret interpersonal threat, and regulate closeness and distance.

The findings also showed that avoidant insecure attachment negatively predicted self-differentiation. This result supports the assumption that avoidantly attached individuals may show apparent independence but not necessarily healthy differentiation. Self-differentiation refers to the ability to maintain emotional connectedness while preserving autonomy and cognitive clarity under relational stress. Avoidant attachment, by contrast, is often

based on defensive emotional cutoff rather than flexible self-regulation. Therefore, individuals with avoidant attachment may distance themselves from the partner not because they are highly differentiated, but because they experience emotional closeness as threatening. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that attachment styles are related to differentiation of self and marital outcomes (Asadi et al., 2022; Kohanmoei et al., 2022; Kohanmoei et al., 2022). It also aligns with Bowenian perspectives indicating that differentiation is a key component of family and relational functioning and is associated with reduced triangulation and healthier interpersonal boundaries (Willis et al., 2021). In this regard, low self-differentiation may explain why avoidantly attached individuals experience greater difficulty in managing marital disagreements; when emotional closeness activates threat, the individual may rely on withdrawal and distancing, thereby intensifying the relational cycle of conflict.

Another important finding was that self-differentiation had a significant negative direct effect on marital conflict in both models. This result indicates that higher differentiation of self was associated with lower marital conflict. Individuals with greater self-differentiation are more capable of separating thought from emotion, expressing their needs without excessive reactivity, and remaining emotionally connected without becoming fused or defensive. Such individuals can tolerate disagreement without interpreting it as rejection or threat, which may reduce destructive conflict patterns. This finding is consistent with studies showing that self-differentiation is closely related to marital stability, marital intimacy, and lower marital burnout (Asadi et al., 2022; Shahnoushfaroshani et al., 2022). It is also supported by recent evidence indicating that emotion regulation mediates the relationship between differentiation of self and marital conflict (Joqratian et al., 2026). The present results extend these findings by showing that self-differentiation remained a strong negative predictor of marital conflict even when attachment style, emotion regulation strategies, emotional intelligence, and interaction effects were considered simultaneously. This emphasizes the protective function of differentiation in marital functioning and suggests that the ability to remain emotionally balanced in close relationships is central to reducing conflict.

The results further showed that avoidant insecure attachment negatively predicted adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies and positively predicted maladaptive

cognitive emotion regulation strategies. This pattern indicates that individuals with stronger avoidant attachment tendencies are less likely to use constructive cognitive strategies, such as reappraisal and planning, and more likely to rely on maladaptive strategies that sustain negative emotions. This finding is consistent with emotion regulation research showing that regulation strategies differ in their consequences for mental health and interpersonal functioning (Koval et al., 2023; Ramos-Cejudo et al., 2024). It is also compatible with evidence that emotion regulation strategies are associated with psychological well-being, especially under stressful conditions (Bagheri-Sheikhangafsheh et al., 2022). From an attachment perspective, avoidant individuals often suppress or minimize emotional experiences rather than process them adaptively. Although this deactivation strategy may reduce immediate emotional discomfort, it prevents constructive emotional processing and can contribute to relational misunderstanding. Findings from studies on attachment and adjustment also indicate that attachment patterns shape how individuals respond to stressful and emotionally demanding contexts (Sochos & Aleem, 2022; Stuck et al., 2022). Therefore, the present finding suggests that avoidant attachment may create vulnerability to marital conflict through reduced adaptive regulation and increased maladaptive regulation.

The direct effects of cognitive emotion regulation strategies on marital conflict were also significant and theoretically coherent. Adaptive strategies negatively predicted marital conflict, whereas maladaptive strategies positively predicted marital conflict. These findings indicate that how spouses cognitively regulate emotional experiences plays an important role in the intensity and persistence of marital conflict. Adaptive strategies may help individuals reinterpret disagreements, reduce emotional arousal, and engage in more constructive communication. In contrast, maladaptive strategies such as rumination, catastrophizing, self-blame, and other-blame may intensify negative emotions, increase hostile interpretations, and prolong conflict cycles. These results are consistent with previous studies showing that emotion regulation strategies predict marital conflict and relational functioning (Fischer et al., 2022; Tarifi et al., 2022). They also align with findings that negative emotion differentiation is related to regulation traits, rumination, and depressive symptoms, suggesting that the ability to process emotional experience precisely can reduce maladaptive emotional responses (Carolus & Starr, 2025). Furthermore, research on everyday emotion

regulation demonstrates that regulation strategies are not abstract traits alone but are reflected in daily affective processes that shape interpersonal behavior (Koval et al., 2023). Thus, the present results confirm that cognitive emotion regulation is a major explanatory mechanism in marital conflict.

Another key finding was that emotional intelligence had a significant negative direct effect on marital conflict in both models. This result indicates that higher emotional intelligence was associated with lower marital conflict. Emotionally intelligent individuals are better able to identify their own emotions, understand the emotional signals of their spouse, regulate emotional arousal, and communicate emotional needs in a constructive manner. These capacities are essential in marital conflict because conflicts often escalate not simply because of disagreement, but because of emotional misinterpretation, poor affect regulation, and impulsive responses. This finding is consistent with studies showing that emotional intelligence is related to marital conflict and marital stability (Parsakia et al., 2023; Sadeghi et al., 2022; Shahnoushfaroshani et al., 2022). It is also compatible with research suggesting that emotional intelligence is associated with adaptive psychological outcomes and can be improved through training (Shafiee Sourak & Shamsoddinpour, 2026). In addition, developmental evidence has shown that emotional intelligence is associated with self-concept and emotional functioning, confirming its broad relevance for adjustment (Lusiyah Simanjuntak, 2022). Therefore, emotional intelligence appears to function as a protective factor that reduces marital conflict by improving emotional awareness, empathy, and regulation.

The moderating role of emotional intelligence was one of the most important findings of the study. In both models, the interaction between self-differentiation and emotional intelligence significantly predicted marital conflict. This means that emotional intelligence changed the strength of the relationship between self-differentiation and marital conflict. Specifically, the conflict-reducing effect of self-differentiation was stronger at higher levels of emotional intelligence. This finding suggests that differentiation alone may not be sufficient for optimal marital functioning unless it is accompanied by emotional competencies that allow individuals to use their differentiated capacities effectively. A person may be able to maintain autonomy and cognitive clarity, but without emotional intelligence, this autonomy may be expressed as emotional distance or rigidity rather than constructive engagement. Emotional intelligence may

help differentiated individuals express themselves with empathy, understand their partner's emotional state, and prevent disagreement from becoming hostility. This result is aligned with studies showing that differentiation of self and emotional intelligence jointly contribute to marital stability and burnout-related outcomes (Kohanmooei et al., 2022; Kohanmouei et al., 2022; Shahnoushfaroshani et al., 2022). It also supports the idea that self-differentiation and emotion-related competencies operate together in explaining marital functioning (Falahzade & Sivandian, 2025; Joqratian et al., 2026).

The moderation findings differed across adaptive and maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies. In the adaptive model, the interaction between adaptive strategies and emotional intelligence was not significant, although adaptive strategies had a significant negative direct effect on marital conflict. This suggests that adaptive strategies may have a generally protective function regardless of the level of emotional intelligence. In other words, using constructive cognitive strategies may reduce marital conflict even among individuals with different levels of emotional intelligence. However, in the maladaptive model, the interaction between maladaptive strategies and emotional intelligence was significant, indicating that emotional intelligence modified the relationship between maladaptive regulation and marital conflict. This result may reflect the complex role of emotional intelligence in emotionally charged relationships. Individuals with high emotional intelligence may be more aware of emotional experiences, but if they rely on maladaptive strategies, this heightened awareness may intensify emotional processing unless accompanied by constructive regulation. Alternatively, emotional intelligence may change the way maladaptive strategies are expressed in marital interactions. This finding is consistent with the broader literature showing that emotion regulation frequency, self-efficacy, and regulation type may have different associations with psychological symptoms and relational outcomes (Koval et al., 2023; Ramos-Cejudo et al., 2024). It also supports the need to distinguish adaptive from maladaptive emotion regulation rather than treating cognitive emotion regulation as a single undifferentiated construct.

The conditional indirect effects showed that avoidant insecure attachment influenced marital conflict indirectly through self-differentiation across levels of emotional intelligence. This finding indicates that avoidant attachment may undermine differentiation of self, which in turn increases marital conflict, and that this indirect pathway is

shaped by emotional intelligence. This result is consistent with research showing that differentiation of self mediates the relationship between attachment styles and marital outcomes (Asadi et al., 2022). It also aligns with recent evidence that emotion regulation can mediate the association between differentiation and marital conflict (Joqratian et al., 2026). In addition, the conditional indirect pathway through maladaptive strategies was significant, indicating that avoidant attachment increased maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation, which then increased marital conflict, with emotional intelligence moderating the pathway. This pattern supports studies showing that emotion regulation strategies are important predictors of marital conflict and marital satisfaction (Falahzade & Sivandian, 2025; Tarifi et al., 2022).

5. Conclusion

Overall, the findings show that marital conflict among married students is best understood through a combined model in which attachment-related insecurity shapes internal differentiation and emotional regulation, while emotional intelligence determines how strongly these mechanisms affect marital outcomes. This is particularly relevant for married students, who may face simultaneous academic, relational, economic, and family pressures, making emotional regulation and relational differentiation especially important. Studies on student and family contexts have shown that marital conflict and negative emotions can affect academic and psychological functioning, particularly in stressful social periods (Wang & Zhao, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). Therefore, the present study contributes to the literature by presenting a moderated mediation model that integrates attachment, differentiation, adaptive and maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation, emotional intelligence, and marital conflict.

The present study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study used a descriptive-correlational design; therefore, although the proposed model was tested statistically, causal conclusions should be made with caution. Second, the data were collected through self-report questionnaires, which may be influenced by social desirability, response bias, and participants' willingness to disclose marital difficulties. Third, the sample consisted only of married undergraduate students from Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz Branch, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other universities, age groups, educational levels, and non-student

married populations. Fourth, the study examined individual-level psychological variables, while dyadic data from both spouses were not collected. As a result, the mutual and partner-based effects of attachment, emotional intelligence, and emotion regulation could not be fully examined.

Future research is suggested to use longitudinal and experimental designs to examine the temporal and causal relationships among avoidant attachment, self-differentiation, emotion regulation, emotional intelligence, and marital conflict. Future studies should also collect dyadic data from both spouses and apply actor-partner interdependence models to clarify how each partner's psychological characteristics affect both their own and their spouse's marital conflict. It is also recommended that future research compare different groups, such as newly married couples, couples with long-term marital conflict, non-student couples, and couples from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, future studies may examine other potential mediators and moderators, such as marital intimacy, communication patterns, perceived partner responsiveness, forgiveness, family functioning, and stress coping styles.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that marital counseling and couple therapy programs should focus on strengthening self-differentiation, improving emotional intelligence, and modifying maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies. Interventions for married students should help individuals recognize avoidant relational patterns, increase emotional awareness, express needs more directly, and replace withdrawal or suppression with constructive communication. Training in adaptive cognitive emotion regulation, such as positive reappraisal, acceptance, planning, and perspective taking, may reduce emotional escalation during marital disagreements. University counseling centers can also design preventive workshops for married students that combine attachment-based education, emotional intelligence training, and conflict-management skills to reduce marital tension and promote healthier couple functioning.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

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

Transparency Statement

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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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