




The Effect of Marital Relationships on the Tendency Toward Infidelity Based on Attachment Behavior in Married Women

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to examine the effect of marital relationships on the tendency toward infidelity based on attachment behavior in married women.

Methods: This study employed a descriptive-correlational design. The statistical population consisted of all married female students at the Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch, during the 2023–2024 academic year. The sampling method was multi-stage cluster random sampling, and a sample of 200 individuals was selected. Data were collected using the Attitudes Toward Infidelity Scale (ATIS) (Whatley, 2008) and the Adult Attachment Style Questionnaire by Collins and Read (1990). Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics (mean, median, measures of dispersion including standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis) and correlation tests.

Findings: The results indicated that attachment behavior in marital relationships predicts the tendency toward infidelity in married women. Marital relationships have a direct effect on the tendency toward infidelity based on attachment behavior.

Conclusion: This study confirms that marital relationship stability influences attachment behaviors, which in turn affect the tendency toward infidelity. Secure attachment reduces infidelity risk, while avoidant and ambivalent/anxious attachment increase it, highlighting attachment's critical role.

Keywords: tendency toward infidelity, attachment behavior, marital relationships.

1. Introduction

Marital infidelity encompasses a set of behaviors through which a spouse deviates from their usual relationship with their partner and engages in interactions with another individual outside the marital bond (Larki, 2025; Rokach & Chan, 2023). Movahedrad et al. (2024) classify marital infidelity into three types: sexual infidelity, emotional infidelity, and cyber infidelity (Movahedrad et al., 2024). Extramarital affairs often result in severe emotional distress for both parties involved. Such relationships can trigger symptoms resembling post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as emotions such as depression, anger, despair, low self-confidence, identity loss, and feelings of worthlessness in the betrayed spouse (Badanfiroz, 2025; Salehzadeh et al., 2024; Yousefpouri, 2024). Infidelity in marriage is defined as disloyalty and a lack of commitment to the marital bond, involving any form of emotional or sexual relationship with an extramarital partner (Azari & Ali Nia, 2019). Marital infidelity is a major factor contributing to marital dissatisfaction and serves as the primary cause of marital and sexual conflicts, incompatibilities, and one of the most significant issues leading to divorce (Pourhamidi et al., 2019). A spouse's marital infidelity significantly increases marital conflicts and divorce rates, particularly among women (Seyed Ali Tabar et al., 2015).

Furthermore, women who experience marital infidelity often blame themselves for the betrayal, leading to self-criticism, reduced self-esteem, diminished self-worth, and negative self-perception. The rejection from a beloved spouse, combined with lowered self-worth, can ultimately lead to feelings of loneliness among women affected by marital infidelity. Reports on the percentage of relationships that end due to extramarital affairs are inconsistent. Some researchers estimate that 45% to 77% of relationships dissolve due to infidelity (Moshrefi et al., 2022). Financial mismanagement, alcohol consumption, lack of communication, and anger have all been identified as causes of divorce. However, the power of infidelity to dissolve or transform a relationship depends on factors such as gender, power dynamics, and cultural context. Additionally, in a study by Snyder, Irons, and Carly (1999) involving 350 couples, 27% of couples in which the husband had committed infidelity and 35% of couples in which the wife had committed infidelity proceeded with divorce and separation. Psychologists argue that attachment behavior in marital relationships reduces the likelihood of infidelity and divorce (Ahramian et al., 2021).

Attachment styles are an essential intrapersonal factor that can modulate levels of arousal and distress in adverse situations and may serve as a predictor of psychological well-being. According to John Bowlby's attachment theory, attachment is an emotional bond formed between an infant and their primary caregiver during infancy, which significantly influences the child's social and emotional development throughout life. The characteristics of both normative and dysfunctional interpersonal relationships are deeply affected by individuals' attachment styles. Secure attachment is associated with positive relational attributes such as intimacy and satisfaction. Avoidant attachment correlates with lower levels of intimacy and commitment, while ambivalent attachment is linked to heightened tension and engagement in low-satisfaction relationships (Bayati Ashkeftaki et al., 2022). Attachment is a stable emotional bond characterized by seeking proximity to a specific person in times of distress. Within this framework, repeated interactions with primary caregivers shape beliefs, rules, expectations, thought patterns, and behaviors (Guo et al., 2023).

Attachment theory posits that attachment is a universal bond present in all individuals and significantly influences human behavior. Bowlby asserted that a person requires an emotional bond for healthy development (Maghfira et al., 2023). Parents' sensitivity and the sense of security they provide for a child establish the foundation for their psychological well-being. This attachment can either serve as the basis for marital happiness or, conversely, its deterioration (Ma et al., 2023). Based on the researcher's review of the literature, no study has specifically investigated the relationship between the tendency toward infidelity and attachment behavior in marital relationships. Therefore, the present study aims to address the fundamental question: Do marital relationships influence the tendency toward infidelity based on attachment behavior in married women?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a correlational research design based on structural equation modeling. The statistical population included all married female students at the Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch, during the 2023–2024 academic year. To determine the sample size based on regression analysis, a minimum of 200 participants was estimated. Considering a potential 10% attrition rate, the

final sample size was set at 220 participants. The sampling method was multi-stage cluster random sampling. Initially, four faculties were randomly selected from the available faculties at the university. Then, two groups were randomly chosen from each faculty, followed by four classes from each group. Finally, 20 students were randomly selected from each class.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Attitudes Toward Infidelity

The Attitudes Toward Infidelity Scale (ATIS) (Whatley, 2008) was designed and validated by Whatley (2008). It consists of 12 close-ended items rated on a five-point Likert scale. This questionnaire was validated by Seyed Ali Tabar et al. (2015) and is structured on a five-point Likert scale. The total score is obtained by summing all item scores, with a minimum of 12 and a maximum of 84. Higher scores indicate greater acceptance of infidelity and a more positive attitude toward infidelity. The Cronbach's alpha reliability of this questionnaire was confirmed as 0.84 in the study by Abdollahzadeh (2010). Whatley's (2006) findings also support the satisfactory validity of this attitude scale, with an internal consistency reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.80. The reliability of this scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and test-retest methods. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for marital infidelity attitudes was estimated at 0.71, while the test-retest reliability coefficient was reported as 0.87 (Seyed Ali Tabar et al., 2015).

2.2.2. Attachment Styles

The Collins and Read (1990) Adult Attachment Style Questionnaire consists of 18 five-option items assessing three components: secure attachment, avoidant attachment, and ambivalent/anxious attachment. This questionnaire can be administered individually or in groups, with the administration guidelines provided within the questionnaire itself. The test should be conducted in a calm environment with conditions ensuring the participant's comfort.

Participants record their personal information at the top of the response sheet. According to the questionnaire instructions, six items correspond to each subscale. The score for each subscale is determined based on the selected response to each item. Items are scored from 0 to 4 on a scale of 1 to 5. Items 1, 6*, 8*, 13, 12, and *17 measure secure attachment. Items 5, 2, 16, 14, 7, and *18 assess avoidant attachment, while items 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, and 15 measure ambivalent/anxious attachment. Items marked with an asterisk require reverse scoring (1 to 5 are assigned scores of 4, 3, 2, 1, and 0, respectively). The subscale score is obtained by summing the scores of the six items in each category. The reliability coefficient of this questionnaire was reported as 0.83 using Cronbach's alpha in the study by Rafiei et al. (2011) (Rafiei et al., 2011).

2.3. Data Analysis

For data analysis and hypothesis testing, structural equation modeling was performed using SPSS 25 and Smart PLS software.

3. Findings and Results

A total of 220 married female students from the Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch, participated in this study. The demographic data indicate that 28.1% of participants were under 30 years old, 43.6% were between 30 and 32 years old, 14.5% were between 32 and 35 years old, and 13.6% were above 35 years old. Additionally, demographic findings showed that 30.4% of participants were from the Faculty of Literature and Humanities, 22.2% from the Faculty of Economics and Accounting, 27.2% from the Faculty of Basic Sciences, and 20% from the Faculty of Engineering.

The descriptive statistics for the research variables are presented in Table 1. The mean score for secure attachment behavior was 11.8, for avoidant attachment behavior was 8.3, and for ambivalent/anxious attachment behavior was 7.9. The mean score for the tendency toward infidelity was found to be 24.3.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Secure Attachment	11.8	3.05
Avoidant Attachment	8.3	2.4
Ambivalent/Anxious Attachment	7.9	2.8

Tendency Toward Infidelity	24.3	3.4
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To further explore the relationships between the study variables, a correlation matrix was computed. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix of Research Variables

Variable	Secure Attachment	Avoidant Attachment	Ambivalent/Anxious Attachment	Tendency Toward Infidelity
Secure Attachment	1			
Avoidant Attachment	-0.42**	1		
Ambivalent/Anxious Attachment	-0.38**	0.55**	1	
Tendency Toward Infidelity	-0.31**	0.41**	0.36**	1

**p<0.05, *p<0.01

The results indicate that secure attachment behavior is negatively correlated with the tendency toward infidelity ($r = -0.31$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that individuals with higher levels of secure attachment are less likely to engage in infidelity. In contrast, avoidant attachment behavior shows a positive correlation with the tendency toward infidelity ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that individuals with higher avoidant attachment are more likely to be inclined toward

infidelity. Similarly, ambivalent/anxious attachment behavior is positively correlated with the tendency toward infidelity ($r = 0.36$, $p < 0.01$), demonstrating that individuals with higher levels of ambivalent/anxious attachment are more prone to infidelity. These findings provide empirical support for the hypothesis that attachment behaviors influence the tendency toward infidelity in married women.

Table 3

Relationship Between Marital Relationships and Tendency Toward Infidelity Based on Attachment Behavior

Variable	Path	Variable	β	Significance Level (p)
Secure Attachment Behavior	→	Tendency Toward Infidelity	0.12	0.005
Avoidant Attachment Behavior	→	Tendency Toward Infidelity	0.121	0.005
Ambivalent/Anxious Attachment Behavior	→	Tendency Toward Infidelity	0.09	0.005

The results in Table 3 indicate a significant relationship between marital relationships and the tendency toward infidelity based on attachment behavior. The impact coefficient of marital relationship stability on the tendency toward infidelity was found to be 0.16. Furthermore, the impact coefficient of marital relationship stability on secure attachment behavior was 0.84, on avoidant attachment behavior was 0.52, and on ambivalent/anxious attachment behavior was 0.62. Additionally, the effect of secure attachment behavior on the tendency toward infidelity was 0.12, avoidant attachment behavior was 0.12, and ambivalent/anxious attachment behavior was 0.09.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the effect of marital relationships on the tendency toward infidelity based on

attachment behavior in married women. This study employed a correlational research design using structural equation modeling. The results indicated a significant relationship between marital relationships and the tendency toward infidelity based on attachment behavior, with the impact coefficient of marital relationship stability on the tendency toward infidelity being 0.16. Additionally, the impact coefficient of marital relationship stability on secure attachment behavior was 0.84, on avoidant attachment behavior was 0.52, and on ambivalent/anxious attachment behavior was 0.62. Furthermore, the effect of secure attachment behavior on the tendency toward infidelity was 0.12, the effect of avoidant attachment behavior was also 0.12, and the effect of ambivalent/anxious attachment behavior on the tendency toward infidelity was 0.09. Based on the above evidence, the research hypothesis is confirmed.

In a comparative analysis of the first subsidiary hypothesis, the findings of this study align with the results of both domestic and international researchers (Aminiha et al., 2015; Estebsari & Abolghasemi, 2024; Khezrlou et al., 2024; Pourhamidi et al., 2019; Salehzadeh et al., 2024) examined the factors influencing the formation of marital infidelity. Their findings indicated that multiple factors contribute to the occurrence of marital infidelity, with a consensus and prioritization of these factors emerging in their study. These findings can be utilized in planning educational programs for couples and in preventing marital infidelity.

Aminiha et al. (2015) conducted a study aimed at identifying the coping strategies of spouses after the disclosure of infidelity (Aminiha et al., 2015). The results demonstrated that spouses employ both individual and interactive strategies. Individual strategies involve managing negative emotions and engaging in spirituality, whereas interactive strategies include competition, avoidance, agreement, and cooperation. These findings contribute to a better understanding among counselors and relationship therapists regarding the strategies that spouses adopt following the disclosure of infidelity, enabling them to develop treatment interventions aligned with the couple's specific situation. Particularly in the early stages of therapy, spouses should be guided toward managing negative emotions and adopting cooperative strategies that are beneficial for both partners. Furthermore, schema-focused therapy was identified as an effective and beneficial strategy for reducing secondary trauma symptoms and emotion regulation in children with post-traumatic stress disorder.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

The present study was also subject to several limitations. The study was limited to all married female students at the Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch, during the 2023–2024 academic year. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings to other students and different cities. Due to the cross-sectional nature of this study, follow-up of the participants was not feasible. The obtained results are limited to the specific instruments (questionnaires) used in this study. Therefore, employing similar instruments in other studies may yield different results. Given the significance and novelty of the research topic, it is recommended that similar studies be conducted on other social groups.

Future research should consider using therapeutic interventions relevant to the study's topic. It is also recommended that future studies expand the literature review and include a greater number of variables in the conceptual model to provide a more comprehensive assessment of the relationships between variables.

Based on the findings of this study, it is suggested that educational workshops be held to improve attachment behavior in marital relationships among students, thereby enhancing maladaptive schemas and addressing childhood trauma. Additionally, it is recommended to develop and distribute brochures on websites and in publications regarding the direct and indirect effects of attachment behavior in marital relationships, maladaptive schemas, and childhood trauma, with the mediating role of human agency in the tendency toward infidelity among married women.

Authors' Contributions

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

Declaration

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

Transparency Statement

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

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

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

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