

# Self-Criticism and Emotional Numbness: The Mediating Role of Self-Alienation

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to investigate whether self-alienation mediates the relationship between self-criticism and emotional numbness among adults.

**Methods and Materials:** A descriptive correlational design was employed with a sample of 415 adults from Mexico, selected based on the Krejcie and Morgan sample size table. Participants completed standardized self-report measures assessing self-criticism, self-alienation, and emotional numbness. Data were analyzed using SPSS-27 for descriptive and inferential statistics, including Pearson correlation, and AMOS-21 for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Assumptions of normality, linearity, and multicollinearity were tested and confirmed prior to analysis.

**Findings:** Pearson correlation results indicated significant positive associations between self-criticism and emotional numbness ( $r = .47, p < .001$ ), self-criticism and self-alienation ( $r = .58, p < .001$ ), and self-alienation and emotional numbness ( $r = .61, p < .001$ ). The SEM analysis demonstrated acceptable model fit indices ( $\chi^2/df = 2.35$ , GFI = 0.95, CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.057). Direct effects were significant for self-criticism on emotional numbness ( $\beta = .32, p < .001$ ), self-criticism on self-alienation ( $\beta = .51, p < .001$ ), and self-alienation on emotional numbness ( $\beta = .43, p < .001$ ). The indirect effect of self-criticism on emotional numbness via self-alienation was also significant ( $\beta = .22, p < .001$ ), confirming the partial mediating role of self-alienation.

**Conclusion:** The findings underscore the critical role of self-alienation as a mediating mechanism between self-criticism and emotional numbness. These results highlight the importance of addressing internal disconnection in interventions aimed at reducing affective disengagement in self-critical individuals. Targeting both self-criticism and self-alienation may enhance emotional re-engagement and psychological well-being.

**Keywords:** Self-criticism; Emotional numbness; Self-alienation.

## 1. Introduction

Emotional numbness is increasingly recognized as a pivotal emotional and psychological response to prolonged or unresolved distress, marked by a reduced capacity to experience feelings such as joy, sadness, empathy, or even physical sensations (Ferrarello, 2021). It is commonly linked to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and complex emotional regulation disturbances (Li et al., 2023). While emotional numbness often serves as a psychological defense mechanism to shield individuals from overwhelming emotional pain, its persistence can compromise interpersonal relationships, diminish life satisfaction, and impair functioning in daily activities (Gallegos & Gasper, 2018; Schuman et al., 2018). Research suggests that emotional numbness is not a stand-alone phenomenon but is embedded within broader emotional and cognitive processing deficits often shaped by one's inner self-dialogue and identity orientation (Greenberg, 2021; Kalogeropoulos & Papadopoulos, 2024).

One of the most consistent predictors of emotional numbness is self-criticism—a pervasive pattern of negative self-evaluation in which individuals harshly judge themselves, often feeling inadequate, defective, or morally flawed (McGuire et al., 2025). Self-criticism has been shown to not only exacerbate symptoms of depression and PTSD but also to correlate with emotional detachment and reduced affective responsiveness (Carlson et al., 2017; Carper et al., 2015). This self-critical orientation is frequently internalized from early relational experiences, particularly those involving punitive or invalidating caregivers (Kerig et al., 2016). In turn, individuals high in self-criticism may become increasingly estranged from their emotional experiences, leading to affect suppression, interpersonal withdrawal, and ultimately, emotional numbness (Engel-Rebitzer et al., 2016).

The mechanism linking self-criticism to emotional numbness, however, may be more complex than a direct association. A growing body of evidence points toward the role of self-alienation as a mediating psychological process. Self-alienation refers to a state in which individuals feel disconnected from their true self, experiencing their behaviors, emotions, and thoughts as foreign or inauthentic (Kocayörük & Şimşek, 2015). In the context of emotional disturbance, self-alienation can emerge when individuals chronically suppress their emotions or avoid confronting distressing aspects of the self—strategies often employed by highly self-critical individuals (Millard, 2015). Indeed,

empirical work has demonstrated that trauma survivors and those experiencing PTSD often report a profound sense of internal disconnection, which contributes to emotional numbing symptoms (Bhalla et al., 2022; Stappenbeck et al., 2016).

The interplay between trauma, emotional regulation, and identity fragmentation has garnered significant attention in recent clinical psychology literature. Korem et al. (Korem et al., 2023) proposed the “High-Threshold-Low-Tolerance” model, which posits that individuals with PTSD develop emotional paradoxes, simultaneously avoiding affect while being hypersensitive to threat. Such maladaptive regulation tendencies mirror both the emotional shut-down observed in emotional numbness and the inner conflict central to self-alienation. Moreover, avoidance-based coping styles—especially cognitive avoidance—have been identified as mediators between trauma exposure and emotional numbness, reinforcing the role of disconnection as a core component (Kalogeropoulos & Papadopoulos, 2024). Similarly, Panjwani et al. (Panjwani et al., 2019) emphasize that poor emotional regulation strategies lead to increased detachment in caregivers, a pattern also observed in other high-burden populations.

Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies further reinforce the complex dynamics between emotional numbness and trauma symptoms. For instance, Hyland et al. (Hyland et al., 2016) found that emotional numbness predicts the chronic course of PTSD in sexual assault victims, while Carper et al. (Carper et al., 2015) noted that early emotional blunting was a precursor to long-term posttraumatic pathology. Doron-LaMarca et al. (Doron-LaMarca et al., 2015) traced the evolving nature of PTSD symptoms and highlighted the persistence of emotional detachment in U.S. veterans even years after trauma exposure. These findings suggest that emotional numbness is not merely a secondary symptom but a central feature of long-term psychopathology, one that is likely sustained through enduring patterns of negative self-referential processing and dissociation.

Notably, emotional numbness has also been explored in the context of somatic health. GÜrl er and Büyükceran (GÜrl er & Büyükceran, 2022) examined neuropathic symptoms in post-surgical patients and emphasized the psychological dimension of numbness, revealing its impact on recovery outcomes. This underscores the importance of understanding emotional numbness not only in psychiatric settings but also in broader health contexts. Ferrante et al. (Ferrante et al., 2022) conducted a national Italian survey during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing that emotional

numbness significantly mediated the link between pandemic-related stress and psychological distress. Similarly, Li et al. (Li et al., 2023) demonstrated that emotional numbness was one of the most robust indicators of mental health challenges during the global crisis, emphasizing its diagnostic utility in both clinical and community samples.

From a theoretical standpoint, emotional numbness represents a maladaptive endpoint of prolonged affect regulation efforts. According to Greenberg (Greenberg, 2021), effective emotion regulation involves awareness, acceptance, and flexible modulation of emotional states. When these capacities are impaired—often due to persistent self-criticism—individuals resort to suppression, denial, or disconnection, leading to a muted emotional life. This process is exacerbated by self-alienation, which not only distorts self-perception but also interferes with authentic emotional expression (Levi-Belz et al., 2015). Fujiwara et al. (Fujiwara et al., 2015) documented similar outcomes in children affected by natural disasters, where those with greater emotional suppression exhibited stronger signs of alienation and affective flatness.

The developmental trajectory of emotional numbness is also intertwined with early experiences of rejection or invalidation. Gallegos and Gasper (Gallegos & Gasper, 2018) found that rejection—particularly when chronic—can result in immediate feelings of emotional shock and numbing, followed by long-term detachment. In contrast, acceptance fosters emotional awareness and integration, buffering against numbness. These findings have important implications for understanding how early relational dynamics contribute to internalized self-criticism and alienation. The experience of persistent rejection can shape negative self-beliefs that become entrenched over time, eventually manifesting in affective disconnection.

Recent investigations into emotional numbing among military personnel and trauma survivors provide compelling evidence of its widespread effects. Schuman et al. (Schuman et al., 2018) conducted a systematic review highlighting the psychosocial burden of emotional numbing in U.S. combat veterans, particularly its impact on interpersonal intimacy, social functioning, and therapeutic outcomes. Similarly, Engel-Rebitzer et al. (Engel-Rebitzer et al., 2016) noted that peritraumatic emotional reactions predicted not only PTSD severity but also subsequent emotional disengagement. These findings reinforce the clinical relevance of emotional numbness as a key therapeutic target.

The cognitive-emotional profiles of individuals prone to emotional numbness often involve complex interactions between internal evaluative tendencies and self-perception constructs. In their study on trauma exposure in justice-involved youth, Kerig et al. (Kerig et al., 2016) showed that numbing of both positive and negative emotions was strongly related to depressive and posttraumatic symptoms. Importantly, they found that those reporting the highest levels of emotional numbing also endorsed higher levels of identity confusion and self-estrangement. This supports the proposition that self-alienation mediates the relationship between self-critical tendencies and emotional blunting. Furthermore, Presseau et al. (Presseau et al., 2018) examined veterans and found that emotional numbing partially explained the link between early maltreatment and later psychological distress, aligning with models that position self-alienation as a transdiagnostic mechanism.

In conclusion, there is growing consensus that emotional numbness arises from complex psychological processes rooted in self-criticism and internal disconnection. While self-criticism initiates a cycle of negative self-appraisal, self-alienation functions as a psychological bridge, deepening emotional disengagement and contributing to chronic affective dullness. The current study builds upon these insights by empirically testing a mediation model in which self-alienation explains the relationship between self-criticism and emotional numbness.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive correlational research design to examine the relationships between self-criticism, emotional numbness, and self-alienation among adult participants. A total of 415 participants were recruited from urban areas of Mexico using stratified random sampling. The sample size was determined based on the Morgan and Krejcie (1970) sample size determination table for a population of over 1,000,000, ensuring sufficient statistical power for correlational and structural modeling analyses. Participants included adults aged 18 to 60 years, with diverse educational and occupational backgrounds. Eligibility criteria included fluency in Spanish and no current diagnosis of severe mental illness. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their inclusion in the study.

## 2.2. Measures

### 2.2.1. Emotional Numbness

To measure emotional numbness, the Emotional Numbing subscale of the Clinician-Administered PTSD Scale for DSM-5 (CAPS-5) developed by Weathers et al. (2013) is often utilized. This subscale specifically assesses symptoms related to a diminished capacity to experience emotions, such as detachment from others and reduced responsiveness to external stimuli. It includes items embedded within a broader structured interview format, typically scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (absent) to 4 (extreme/incapacitating). The emotional numbing dimension is generally derived from several symptom items, including loss of interest and restricted affect. Although designed within the PTSD framework, the subscale has been employed in broader studies to assess emotional numbness as a transdiagnostic symptom. Numerous validation studies have confirmed the CAPS-5's strong inter-rater reliability ( $ICC > 0.90$ ) and internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha > 0.80$ ) for the emotional numbing items across both clinical and general populations.

### 2.2.2. Self-Criticism

Self-criticism in this study is measured using the Levels of Self-Criticism Scale (LOSC) developed by Thompson and Zuroff (2004). The LOSC is a 22-item self-report questionnaire that evaluates two distinct dimensions of self-critical thinking: comparative self-criticism (CSC) and internalized self-criticism (ISC). Respondents rate each item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true of me) to 7 (very true of me). The CSC subscale reflects self-evaluation relative to others, while the ISC subscale assesses internalized harsh self-evaluations based on personal standards. The LOSC has demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values typically exceeding 0.85 for both subscales. It also exhibits good convergent and discriminant validity, having been validated in diverse samples including clinical, student, and general populations.

### 2.2.3. Self-Alienation

Self-alienation is assessed using the Self-Alienation subscale of the Authentic Living Questionnaire, a

component of the Authenticity Scale developed by Wood et al. (2008). The Self-Alienation subscale consists of 4 items that evaluate the degree to which individuals feel out of touch with their true self or experience a sense of inner disconnect. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores reflect greater levels of self-alienation. The scale has been validated in various cultural contexts and populations, showing robust internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values typically  $> 0.70$ ) and solid construct validity. It has been widely used in psychological studies exploring authenticity, identity coherence, and emotional functioning.

## 2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 21. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage) were used to summarize demographic characteristics. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine the bivariate associations between emotional numbness (dependent variable) and the independent variables—self-criticism and self-alienation. To test the hypothesized mediating role of self-alienation in the relationship between self-criticism and emotional numbness, a Structural Equation Model (SEM) was estimated in AMOS. Model fit was evaluated using multiple indices, including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Chi-square statistics.

## 3. Findings and Results

Of the 415 participants, 238 were female (57.35%) and 177 were male (42.65%). The age distribution showed that 96 participants (23.13%) were aged between 18 and 25 years, 143 (34.46%) were aged between 26 and 35 years, 112 (26.99%) were aged between 36 and 45 years, and 64 (15.42%) were aged above 45 years. Regarding education level, 128 participants (30.84%) had completed secondary education, 174 (41.93%) held a bachelor's degree, and 113 (27.23%) had a postgraduate degree. Occupationally, 167 participants (40.24%) were employed full-time, 103 (24.82%) part-time, 72 (17.35%) were students, and 73 (17.59%) were unemployed or homemakers.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics for Research Variables*

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Self-Criticism	4.19	0.83
Self-Alienation	3.87	0.76
Emotional Numbness	4.03	0.81

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 indicate that participants reported moderately high levels of all three variables. The mean score for self-criticism was 4.19 (SD = 0.83), while self-alienation had a mean of 3.87 (SD = 0.76), and emotional numbness had a mean of 4.03 (SD = 0.81). These levels suggest a non-clinical but salient presence of each construct in the sample.

Before conducting the main analyses, all statistical assumptions were examined. The normality of the data was assessed using skewness and kurtosis values, which fell within the acceptable range of  $\pm 2$  for all study variables (e.g., emotional numbness: skewness = 0.41, kurtosis = -0.72; self-

criticism: skewness = -0.38, kurtosis = 0.96; self-alienation: skewness = 0.17, kurtosis = -0.48). Linearity was confirmed through inspection of scatterplots between variables, showing a roughly linear trend. Multicollinearity was checked using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, all of which were below 2.1, indicating no multicollinearity concerns. Homoscedasticity was confirmed through residual plots, and Mahalanobis distance identified no multivariate outliers exceeding the critical chi-square value ( $\chi^2(3) = 16.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These results confirmed that all statistical assumptions for Pearson correlation and SEM analyses were satisfactorily met.

**Table 2**

*Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Variables*

Variables	1	2	3
1. Self-Criticism	—		
2. Self-Alienation	.58** ( $p < .001$ )	—	
3. Emotional Numbness	.47** ( $p < .001$ )	.61** ( $p < .001$ )	—

As presented in Table 2, Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive associations among all research variables. Self-criticism was significantly correlated with self-alienation ( $r = .58$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and emotional numbness ( $r$

$= .47$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, self-alienation was strongly correlated with emotional numbness ( $r = .61$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating a potential mediating role in the model.

**Table 3**

*Goodness-of-Fit Indices for the Structural Model*

Fit Index	Value	Threshold
Chi-Square ( $\chi^2$ )	89.34	—
Degrees of Freedom (df)	38	—
$\chi^2/df$	2.35	< 3.00
GFI	0.95	> 0.90
AGFI	0.91	> 0.90
CFI	0.96	> 0.95
RMSEA	0.057	< 0.08
TLI	0.94	> 0.90

Table 3 illustrates that the structural model demonstrated acceptable to excellent fit. The chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio was 2.35, which is within the acceptable range.

Other key indices also met or exceeded their respective thresholds (e.g., GFI = 0.95; CFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.057), confirming that the model is suitable for interpretation.



**Table 4**

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

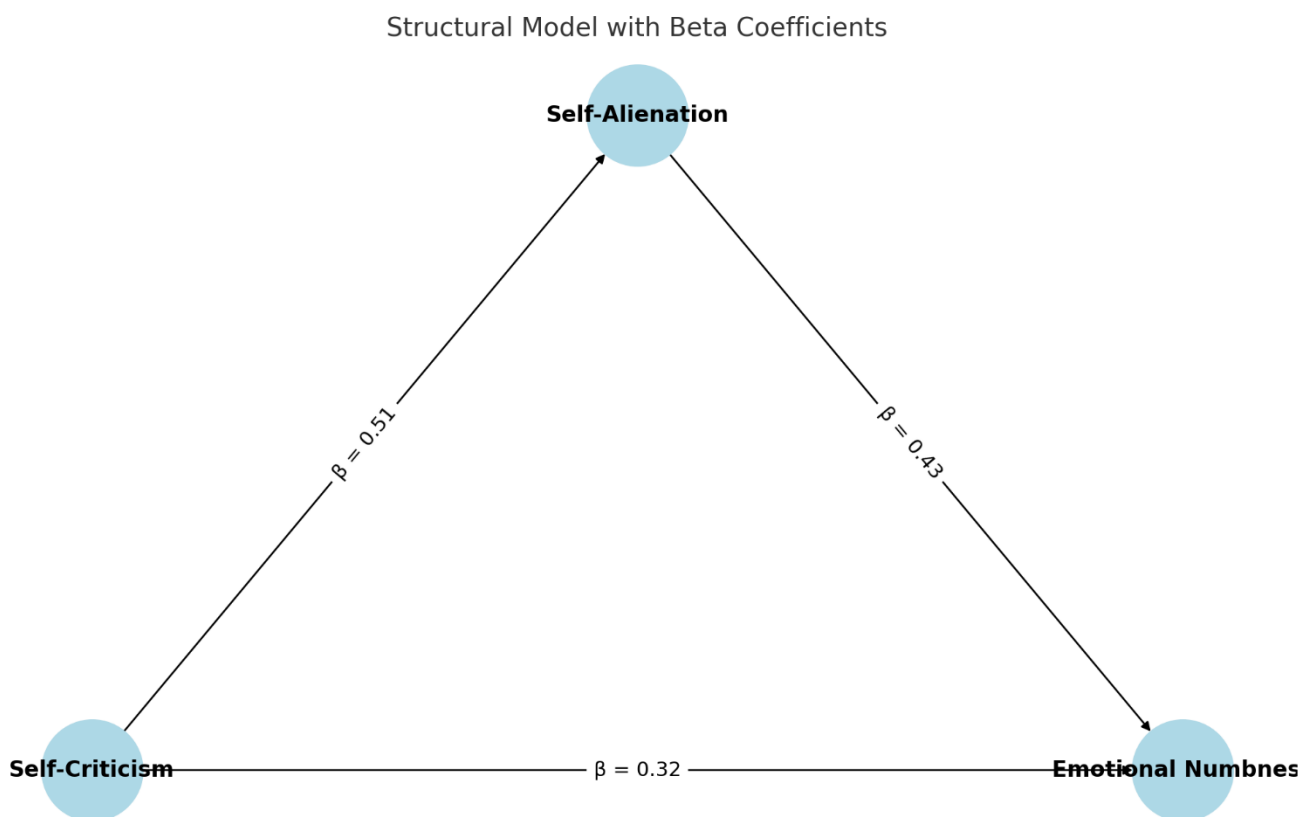
Path	b	S.E.	$\beta$	p
Self-Criticism → Emotional Numbness	0.27	0.06	.32	< .001
Self-Criticism → Self-Alienation	0.41	0.05	.51	< .001
Self-Alienation → Emotional Numbness	0.33	0.06	.43	< .001
Self-Criticism → Emotional Numbness (Indirect)	0.14	0.04	.22	< .001
Self-Criticism → Emotional Numbness (Total)	0.41	0.06	.54	< .001

As shown in Table 4, the direct path from self-criticism to emotional numbness was significant ( $\beta = .32$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as was the path from self-criticism to self-alienation ( $\beta = .51$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Self-alienation also significantly predicted emotional numbness ( $\beta = .43$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The indirect effect of self-criticism on emotional numbness via self-alienation

was statistically significant ( $\beta = .22$ ,  $p < .001$ ), confirming the mediating role. The total effect ( $\beta = .54$ ) further demonstrates the strength of the overall relationship between self-criticism and emotional numbness through both direct and indirect pathways.

**Figure 1**

*Model with Beta Coefficients*



#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study investigated the mediating role of self-alienation in the relationship between self-criticism and emotional numbness among adults in Mexico. The findings

revealed a significant positive correlation between self-criticism and emotional numbness, supporting previous literature that highlights self-critical cognitive styles as key contributors to emotional detachment and affective blunting (Carlson et al., 2017; McGuire et al., 2025). Additionally,

self-alienation was shown to partially mediate this relationship, indicating that individuals who engage in persistent self-critical thinking are more likely to experience a fragmented sense of self, which in turn contributes to emotional numbing. These results align with theoretical models suggesting that self-disconnection is a critical intermediate step in the development of emotional disengagement (Ferrarello, 2021; Greenberg, 2021).

The direct path from self-criticism to emotional numbness corroborates prior empirical findings that have established negative self-evaluations as a precursor to affective dysregulation. Individuals high in self-criticism often exhibit reduced emotional expressivity and a diminished capacity for emotional intimacy, both of which are core features of emotional numbness (Carper et al., 2015; Kerig et al., 2016). This result supports McGuire et al. (McGuire et al., 2025), who demonstrated that self-critical response patterns reduce one's ability to engage positively with affective experiences, especially in populations with trauma exposure. Moreover, the finding is consistent with studies on trauma survivors, in which high levels of self-criticism were associated with chronic posttraumatic symptoms and difficulties accessing emotional states (Engel-Rebitzer et al., 2016; Levi-Belz et al., 2015).

The mediating role of self-alienation offers new insights into the mechanism through which self-criticism exerts its impact on emotional functioning. The present findings reinforce conceptualizations of self-alienation as a state of internal estrangement and psychological detachment, often resulting from sustained emotional suppression or invalidation (Millard, 2015). Individuals who perceive themselves as flawed or defective may begin to dissociate from their authentic emotions and internal experiences as a defensive adaptation to self-judgment (Kocayörük & Şimşek, 2015). This interpretation is supported by prior work demonstrating that trauma-exposed individuals often experience self-alienation as a transitory stage leading to full emotional detachment (Kalogeropoulos & Papadopoulos, 2024; Korem et al., 2023). In such models, self-alienation bridges the gap between negative internal attributions and externalized affective dullness, reinforcing the current study's path analysis.

Further, the model tested in this study is consistent with findings by Stappenbeck et al. (Stappenbeck et al., 2016), who identified that emotional numbing in trauma-exposed individuals was influenced not only by trauma symptoms themselves but also by cognitive distortions and dissociative tendencies—mechanisms closely related to self-alienation.

The mediation finding also echoes the work of Presseau et al. (Presseau et al., 2018), who noted that emotional numbing partially mediated the relationship between early life trauma and later psychological dysfunction, particularly in those with high levels of self-disconnection. By demonstrating a mediating function of self-alienation, this study expands on their findings and proposes a clearer path from self-criticism to emotional disengagement.

The results also validate broader emotion regulation models which emphasize flexibility and authenticity in emotional experience as protective against numbing. According to Greenberg (Greenberg, 2021), the regulation of affect hinges on one's capacity to stay emotionally connected while experiencing internal discomfort. When that capacity is impaired by self-criticism, individuals may resort to distancing themselves from their own feelings, resulting in emotional numbness and social detachment (Gallegos & Gasper, 2018). Li et al. (Li et al., 2023) observed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, emotional numbness emerged prominently among individuals with poor affective regulation strategies, including excessive self-monitoring and self-devaluation, consistent with the self-critical profile examined here.

The findings also hold significant relevance in the trauma literature. Bhalla et al. (Bhalla et al., 2022) identified emotional numbing as a predictor of functional impairment in burn survivors, and suggested that its presence may be worsened by internalized maladaptive beliefs, such as those stemming from self-criticism. Similarly, Doron-LaMarca et al. (Doron-LaMarca et al., 2015) and Hyland et al. (Hyland et al., 2016) highlighted that emotional numbing is a persistent and central symptom in chronic PTSD, and its severity often correlates with avoidance-based coping strategies—many of which are rooted in cognitive schemas related to self-worth. These findings lend strong empirical support to the mediational model demonstrated in this study.

Self-alienation, in this context, appears to function similarly to dissociative processes identified in both civilian and military trauma studies. For example, Schuman et al. (Schuman et al., 2018) reported that combat veterans who displayed signs of self-alienation also reported the highest levels of emotional numbing and interpersonal dysfunction. These observations reinforce the current study's conclusion that disconnection from the self is both a product of and contributor to emotional numbness. Fujiwara et al. (Fujiwara et al., 2015) found parallel patterns in children exposed to natural disasters, suggesting that early emotional

suppression can lead to enduring alienation and flattened affective experiences.

Moreover, the correlation between self-criticism and self-alienation may be understood through the lens of identity development and moral reasoning. McGuire et al. (McGuire et al., 2025) argued that trauma survivors often confront deeply moralized self-appraisals, leading to rigid self-blame and emotional self-rejection. Similarly, Ferrarello (Ferrarello, 2021) emphasized that emotional numbness reflects not only affective suppression but also a profound withdrawal from one's moral and emotional self. In this study, such dynamics were observed in participants who exhibited high scores in both self-criticism and self-alienation, supporting these theoretical models.

In addition, the broader psychosocial impact of emotional numbness was echoed in the findings of Ferrante et al. (Ferrante et al., 2022), who reported that individuals exhibiting emotional numbing during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced lower levels of community engagement and psychological resilience. These consequences may be indirectly amplified by self-critical thinking patterns, which foster disengagement from social roles and relational bonds. GÜrl er and Büyükceran (GÜrl er & Büyükceran, 2022) also underscored the behavioral implications of numbness in a medical context, linking psychological numbness with diminished physical recovery after knee surgery, suggesting wide-ranging functional impairments.

The present findings collectively support a conceptual framework in which self-criticism initiates a negative evaluative cycle, self-alienation deepens internal disconnection, and emotional numbness emerges as the experiential outcome of this progression. The use of structural equation modeling in this study allowed for the empirical validation of this tripartite model, confirming prior theoretical claims while offering novel statistical evidence. These findings emphasize the clinical relevance of targeting both self-criticism and self-alienation in interventions designed to address emotional disengagement, particularly among trauma-affected populations.

## 5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite its valuable contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causal relationships among variables. While the mediation model is statistically supported, longitudinal data would be necessary to confirm temporal ordering between

self-criticism, self-alienation, and emotional numbness. Second, the reliance on self-report measures may introduce response biases, including social desirability or recall distortion, especially given the introspective nature of constructs like self-alienation. Third, the sample was drawn exclusively from Mexican adults, which may limit generalizability to other cultural contexts where expressions of emotional distress, self-concept, and interpersonal norms may differ. Additionally, although SEM was employed to test the mediation model, other latent variables potentially influencing the relationships—such as trauma severity or emotional intelligence—were not controlled for in this study.

Future studies should consider adopting longitudinal or experimental designs to better examine the causal pathways linking self-criticism, self-alienation, and emotional numbness. Including clinical populations with formally diagnosed PTSD, major depression, or dissociative disorders could further illuminate how these constructs operate under more extreme psychopathological conditions. Research should also explore cultural variations in the experience and expression of self-alienation and numbness, potentially incorporating qualitative methodologies to capture subjective narratives. Finally, investigating potential protective factors—such as self-compassion, secure attachment, or social support—may offer insight into resilience pathways that disrupt the self-criticism to numbness trajectory.

The findings of this study have direct implications for clinical interventions targeting emotional dysregulation. Therapeutic modalities that emphasize reconnection with the authentic self—such as Emotion-Focused Therapy, Internal Family Systems, or Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy—may be especially effective for individuals experiencing emotional numbness. Clinicians should assess not only the presence of self-critical thoughts but also the degree of self-alienation, as interventions that foster self-compassion and identity integration may help mitigate emotional disengagement. Psychoeducation on the cyclical relationship between negative self-appraisal, self-disconnection, and affective flattening can also be integrated into trauma-informed care protocols. Tailoring interventions to reduce both self-criticism and alienation may ultimately restore emotional responsiveness and improve psychological well-being.

## Authors' Contributions



Authors contributed equally 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

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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