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The Effect of Avoidant Attachment Style on Marital Satisfaction with the Mediating Role of Fear of Intimacy

Seyed AliAsghar. SeyedEbrahimi^{1*}, Ata. Hojjati Hamedani²

¹ PhD Student in Clinical Psychology, Aras International Campus, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

² Master of Science in Clinical Psychology, Department of Psychology, West Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: merajeentezar@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the effect of avoidant attachment style on marital satisfaction, with fear of intimacy as a mediating variable in a sample of married individuals in Tehran. A descriptive correlational design was employed with a sample of 400 married adults selected based on Krejcie and Morgan's sample size table. Participants were recruited from various community centers across Tehran using convenience sampling. Standardized instruments were used to measure avoidant attachment (Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised), fear of intimacy (Fear of Intimacy Scale), and marital satisfaction (ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale). Data were analyzed using SPSS-27 for descriptive and correlational statistics, and AMOS-21 for structural equation modeling (SEM). Model fit was assessed using χ^2 , RMSEA, CFI, TLI, and other relevant indices. Pearson correlation analysis showed that avoidant attachment was positively correlated with fear of intimacy ($r = .62, p < .001$) and negatively correlated with marital satisfaction ($r = -.53, p < .001$). Fear of intimacy was also negatively associated with marital satisfaction ($r = -.47, p < .001$). SEM results confirmed a good model fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.01$, RMSEA = .051, CFI = .96, TLI = .95). Avoidant attachment significantly predicted fear of intimacy ($B = 0.78, \beta = .62, p < .001$) and marital satisfaction ($B = -0.46, \beta = -.38, p < .001$). Fear of intimacy also significantly predicted marital satisfaction ($B = -0.39, \beta = -.34, p < .001$), and the indirect effect of avoidant attachment on marital satisfaction via fear of intimacy was significant ($B = -0.30, \beta = -.21, p < .001$). These findings suggest that avoidant attachment style diminishes marital satisfaction both directly and indirectly through increased fear of intimacy. Addressing intimacy-related anxieties in therapy may improve relationship outcomes for avoidantly attached individuals.

Keywords: Avoidant attachment, fear of intimacy, marital satisfaction

1. Introduction

Attachment theory posits that early relational experiences with primary caregivers shape internal working models that guide adult attachment behavior. Individuals with an avoidant attachment style typically

display discomfort with closeness, emotional suppression, and self-reliance, often avoiding vulnerability in relationships. These behavioral patterns are detrimental to building secure bonds in romantic partnerships and have been consistently associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction (Giovazolias & Paschalidi, 2022; Han & ◊],

2022). Avoidantly attached individuals often fear emotional dependence and intimacy, which in turn inhibits mutual trust, responsiveness, and open communication—key components of a satisfying marital relationship (Finzi-Dottan, 2023; Sarhani & Homaei, 2023). In this context, fear of intimacy emerges as a psychological mechanism that may mediate the link between avoidant attachment and marital dissatisfaction.

Fear of intimacy refers to the tendency to avoid closeness due to anticipated psychological pain, rejection, or loss of autonomy. This fear may lead to emotional distancing, reduced disclosure, and conflict avoidance, all of which impair relationship satisfaction (Leite & Azevedo, 2025; Liu & Lopez, 2024). Empirical studies have confirmed the association between fear of intimacy and marital dissatisfaction. For instance, individuals with high levels of fear of intimacy report lower marital adjustment, reduced sexual satisfaction, and heightened interpersonal conflict (Agrawal, 2025; Qazi et al., 2023). It has also been shown that fear of intimacy significantly predicts relationship dysfunction across different life stages and populations, including those with histories of trauma or family dysfunction (Hassan et al., 2023; Kurniawan & Kusumaningrum, 2023).

The development of fear of intimacy is often rooted in early attachment disturbances. Individuals with avoidant attachment internalize the belief that expressing vulnerability is unsafe, leading to defensive strategies such as emotional disengagement and suppression of intimacy-related needs (Hamidikian et al., 2022; Han & o], 2022). Consequently, avoidant attachment may not directly reduce marital satisfaction, but instead influence it indirectly through psychological processes like fear of intimacy. This proposed mediational pathway has received growing empirical support. For example, research suggests that fear of intimacy mediates the relationship between insecure attachment and reduced relationship quality, indicating that those who fear closeness are less likely to derive satisfaction from their marriages (Finzi-Dottan & Abadi, 2024; Ścigala, Fabris, Badenes-Ribera, Zdankiewicz-Ścigala, & Longobardi, 2021).

Further evidence for this mediational model is found in dyadic studies that highlight the reciprocal impact of intimacy fears within couples. Finzi-Dottan and Abadi (2024) demonstrated that fear of intimacy mediates the effects of emotional abuse and rejection sensitivity on relational outcomes in both partners (Finzi-Dottan & Abadi, 2024). Similarly, studies have shown that individuals with

heightened fear of intimacy are more likely to interpret their partners' behaviors as threatening or invasive, leading to maladaptive coping strategies that erode relational satisfaction over time (Proctor et al., 2023; Zdankiewicz-Ścigala et al., 2024). Thus, fear of intimacy functions as a central psychological filter through which attachment styles impact relational outcomes.

Research has also documented the cultural and contextual relevance of fear of intimacy. For instance, Leite and Azevedo (2025) found that sociosexual orientation and cultural values significantly modulate how fear of intimacy is experienced and expressed, highlighting the need for culturally validated measures (Leite & Azevedo, 2025). This is especially important in collectivist cultures such as Iran, where interdependence and family cohesion are highly valued, but emotional expressiveness may be discouraged. In such contexts, avoidant attachment may be reinforced by social norms that stigmatize vulnerability, thereby heightening the fear of intimacy (Körün & Satici, 2025; Riazi & Manouchehri, 2024).

Several psychological variables have been found to exacerbate or buffer the fear of intimacy. For instance, alexithymia—difficulty identifying and expressing emotions—has been strongly linked to fear of intimacy and reduced relationship satisfaction (Lyvers et al., 2021; Ścigala, Fabris, Badenes-Ribera, Zdankiewicz-Ścigala, Hintertan, et al., 2021). Individuals with alexithymic traits often struggle to communicate emotional needs, leading to relational misunderstandings and a decline in satisfaction. Moreover, rejection sensitivity has been shown to moderate the relationship between attachment and fear of intimacy, such that individuals who anticipate rejection are more likely to avoid closeness (Giovazolias & Paschalidi, 2022; İyaydin et al., 2023). These findings underscore the multi-layered nature of intimacy fear as a product of both dispositional and contextual factors.

Recent studies have also emphasized the role of gender and family dynamics in the manifestation of fear of intimacy. For example, women who experience emotional abuse or low psychological well-being are more prone to intimacy fears and relational difficulties (Hamidikian et al., 2022; Shishefar et al., 2024). Similarly, men's fear of intimacy has been linked to neuropsychological functioning and mental toughness, particularly in challenging life situations such as infertility or chronic illness (Hassan et al., 2023; Proctor et al., 2023). These gendered patterns highlight the importance of addressing emotional regulation and vulnerability within marital counseling and psychoeducation programs.

The mediating role of fear of intimacy in marital relationships has also been explored through therapeutic interventions. For instance, psychological treatments that focus on emotional expression and acceptance have demonstrated significant reductions in intimacy fears and improvements in relationship quality (Rahmatabadi et al., 2023). These interventions often aim to restructure maladaptive beliefs about vulnerability, increase emotional literacy, and promote secure attachment behaviors. Therefore, identifying the pathways through which attachment influences marital outcomes can inform targeted interventions that enhance relational satisfaction and emotional well-being. Given these considerations, the present study aims to investigate the effect of avoidant attachment style on marital satisfaction, with fear of intimacy as a mediating variable, among married individuals in Tehran.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive correlational design to investigate the relationship between avoidant attachment style and marital satisfaction, with fear of intimacy as a potential mediating variable. The statistical population consisted of married individuals residing in Tehran in 2024. Based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, a sample of 400 participants was deemed appropriate for the study. Participants were selected using convenience sampling from community centers, counseling clinics, and family support organizations across Tehran. Inclusion criteria included being married for at least one year, aged between 20 and 60, and willingness to participate voluntarily. Exclusion criteria included diagnosed severe psychological disorders or currently undergoing couples therapy.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Marital Satisfaction

To assess marital satisfaction, the Enrich Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS) developed by Olson, Fournier, and Druckman (1983) was used. This standardized questionnaire is designed to evaluate various dimensions of marital quality and satisfaction. The full version contains 115 items, but the commonly used short version includes 47 items, covering areas such as communication, conflict resolution, financial management, and sexual relationship. Responses are

recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." Higher scores indicate greater marital satisfaction. Numerous studies have confirmed the high internal consistency of the scale, with Cronbach's alpha values typically above 0.80. Its construct validity has been supported through factor analysis and its predictive validity confirmed in clinical and non-clinical samples.

2.2.2. Avoidant Attachment

Avoidant attachment was measured using the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) Questionnaire developed by Fraley, Waller, and Brennan (2000). This tool consists of 36 items divided into two subscales: Attachment Anxiety and Attachment Avoidance, with 18 items each. For the purposes of this study, only the Avoidance subscale was utilized. Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." Higher scores on the avoidance dimension reflect a greater tendency to suppress attachment needs and maintain emotional distance in close relationships. The ECR-R has demonstrated excellent psychometric properties, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients above 0.90 and solid convergent and discriminant validity across diverse populations.

2.2.3. Fear of Intimacy

The Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS) developed by Descutner and Thelen (1991) was used to assess participants' fear of emotional closeness in intimate relationships. The scale includes 35 items that examine discomfort with close emotional interaction and vulnerability in romantic contexts. Responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Not at all characteristic of me" to "Extremely characteristic of me." Higher scores indicate greater fear of intimacy. The scale has demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients generally exceeding 0.90. Its validity has been supported through correlations with measures of attachment styles, relationship satisfaction, and interpersonal functioning.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 21. First, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage) were calculated to describe the participants' demographic

characteristics and variable distributions. Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the bivariate relationships between marital satisfaction (dependent variable) and each independent variable (avoidant attachment and fear of intimacy). To test the hypothesized mediation model, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted using the maximum likelihood estimation method in AMOS-21. Prior to SEM analysis, all assumptions related to normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and outliers were tested and confirmed.

3. Findings and Results

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Research Variables (N = 400)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Avoidant Attachment	4.92	1.13
Fear of Intimacy	3.87	1.25
Marital Satisfaction	3.41	0.94

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the main research variables. The mean score for avoidant attachment was 4.92 (SD = 1.13), suggesting a moderate-to-high level of emotional distancing among participants. Fear of intimacy had a mean of 3.87 (SD = 1.25), indicating a moderate tendency to avoid closeness in relationships. Marital satisfaction showed a mean of 3.41 (SD = 0.94), reflecting moderate satisfaction levels across the sample.

Before conducting the main analyses, the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and the absence of outliers were assessed. Skewness and kurtosis values for all

The sample consisted of 400 married individuals from Tehran. Among them, 234 participants (58.5%) were female and 166 (41.5%) were male. Regarding age, 91 participants (22.8%) were between 20 and 30 years old, 143 (35.8%) were aged 31 to 40, 109 (27.3%) were in the 41–50 age range, and 57 participants (14.3%) were above 50 years old. In terms of education, 83 participants (20.8%) held a diploma or less, 117 (29.3%) had an associate or bachelor's degree, and 200 participants (50%) held a master's degree or higher. The mean length of marriage was 11.46 years (SD = 6.72), ranging from 1 to 32 years.

variables were within the acceptable range of -2 to +2 (e.g., marital satisfaction: skewness = -0.31, kurtosis = 0.74; avoidant attachment: skewness = 0.47, kurtosis = -0.65). The linearity of relationships was confirmed through scatterplots. Multicollinearity was not a concern, as Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values ranged between 1.13 and 1.42, below the threshold of 5. Additionally, Mahalanobis distance analysis revealed no multivariate outliers beyond the critical chi-square value ($\chi^2(3) = 16.27, p < .001$), ensuring the data's suitability for SEM.

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Coefficients and p-values Between Variables (N = 400)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Avoidant Attachment	—	.62** (p < .001)	-.53** (p < .001)
2. Fear of Intimacy	.62** (p < .001)	—	-.47** (p < .001)
3. Marital Satisfaction	-.53** (p < .001)	-.47** (p < .001)	—

As shown in Table 2, avoidant attachment was significantly positively correlated with fear of intimacy ($r = .62, p < .001$), indicating that higher avoidant tendencies were associated with greater fear of closeness. Additionally, avoidant attachment was negatively correlated with marital

satisfaction ($r = -.53, p < .001$), as was fear of intimacy ($r = -.47, p < .001$). These results support the hypothesis that both avoidant attachment and fear of intimacy are inversely related to marital satisfaction.

Table 3

Fit Indices for the Structural Equation Model

Fit Index	Value	Recommended Threshold
Chi-Square (χ^2)	134.62	—
Degrees of Freedom (df)	67	—
χ^2/df	2.01	< 3.00
GFI	.94	≥ .90
AGFI	.91	≥ .90
CFI	.96	≥ .90
TLI	.95	≥ .90
RMSEA	.051	≤ .08

The model fit indices presented in Table 3 indicate a good overall fit of the structural model. The chi-square value was 134.62 with 67 degrees of freedom, resulting in a χ^2/df ratio of 2.01, well within the acceptable range. Other indices also

supported model adequacy: GFI = .94, AGFI = .91, CFI = .96, TLI = .95, and RMSEA = .051. These values suggest that the hypothesized model fits the data satisfactorily.

Table 4

Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects in the Structural Model

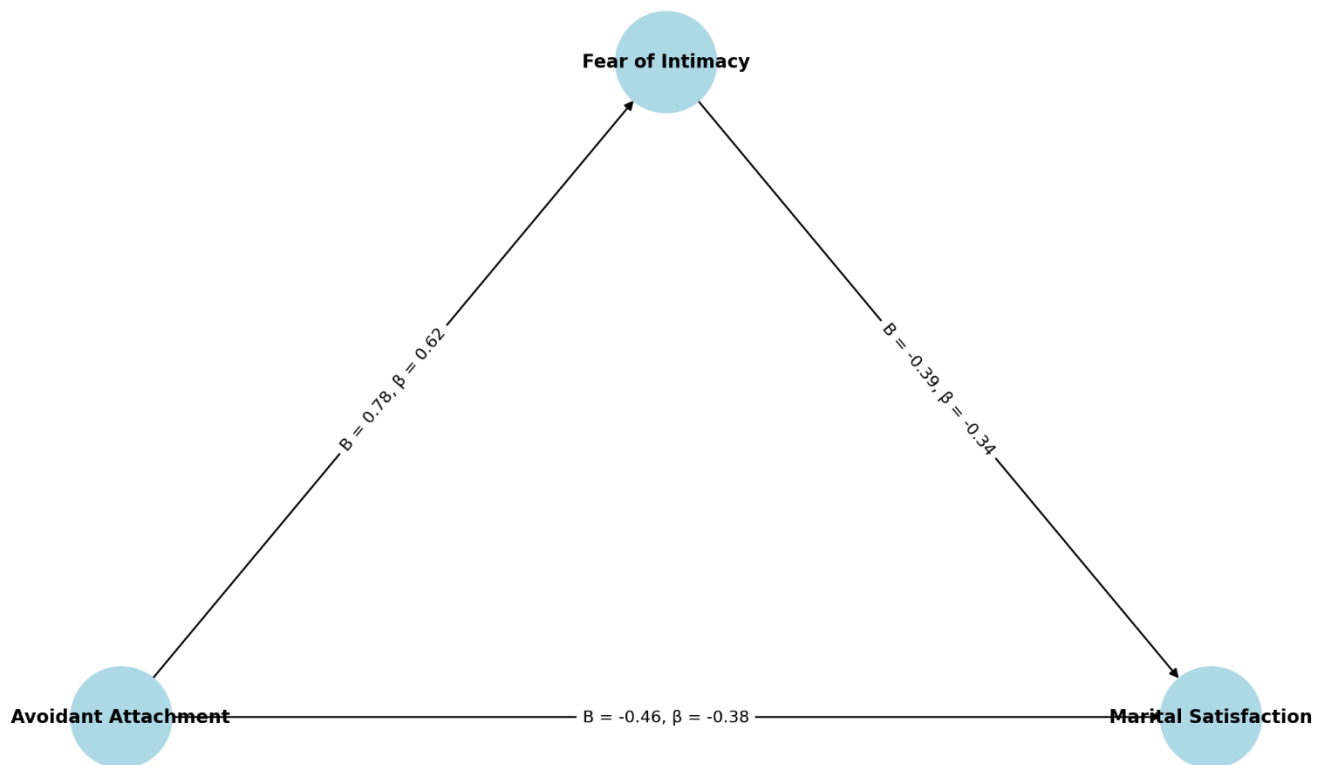
Path	B	S.E.	β	p
Avoidant Attachment → Fear of Intimacy	0.78	0.07	.62	< .001
Fear of Intimacy → Marital Satisfaction	-0.39	0.06	-.34	< .001
Avoidant Attachment → Marital Satisfaction (Direct)	-0.46	0.08	-.38	< .001
Avoidant Attachment → Marital Satisfaction (Indirect via Fear of Intimacy)	-0.30	0.05	-.21	< .001
Avoidant Attachment → Marital Satisfaction (Total Effect)	-0.76	0.09	-.59	< .001

Table 4 summarizes the path coefficients in the structural model. Avoidant attachment significantly predicted fear of intimacy ($B = 0.78$, $\beta = .62$, $p < .001$), and fear of intimacy negatively predicted marital satisfaction ($B = -0.39$, $\beta = -.34$, $p < .001$). The direct effect of avoidant attachment on marital satisfaction was also significant ($B = -0.46$, $\beta = -.38$,

$p < .001$). Additionally, an indirect path from avoidant attachment to marital satisfaction via fear of intimacy was significant ($B = -0.30$, $\beta = -.21$, $p < .001$), resulting in a total effect of -0.76 ($\beta = -.59$, $p < .001$). These findings support the proposed mediating role of fear of intimacy.

Figure 1

Model with Beta Coefficients



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between avoidant attachment style and marital satisfaction, with fear of intimacy proposed as a mediating variable, among married individuals in Tehran. Using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), the results indicated that avoidant attachment significantly and negatively predicted marital satisfaction. Furthermore, fear of intimacy was found to mediate this relationship, such that individuals with a more avoidant attachment style exhibited greater fear of intimacy, which in turn predicted lower marital satisfaction. These findings provide empirical support for the theoretical assumption that attachment insecurity undermines relationship quality indirectly through psychological barriers to closeness and emotional connection.

The negative relationship found between avoidant attachment and marital satisfaction is consistent with the substantial body of research indicating that individuals who are emotionally distant, self-reliant, and uncomfortable with closeness tend to experience reduced quality in romantic relationships (Finzi-Dottan, 2023; Han & ◊, 2022). Avoidantly attached individuals typically suppress emotional needs and avoid vulnerability, which may inhibit emotional intimacy and disrupt healthy communication patterns with their partners. This leads to mutual

dissatisfaction and a lack of relational fulfillment. The current findings also align with earlier studies suggesting that attachment avoidance hinders the development of trust, empathy, and effective conflict resolution—all of which are central to marital satisfaction (Hamidikian et al., 2022; Sarhani & Homaei, 2023).

Moreover, the mediating role of fear of intimacy confirmed by the data underscores its central function as a psychological mechanism that translates attachment insecurity into relational dysfunction. The positive association between avoidant attachment and fear of intimacy supports the view that individuals who are uncomfortable with emotional closeness are likely to harbor anxieties about vulnerability, rejection, and enmeshment (Leite & Azevedo, 2025; Liu & Lopez, 2024). These individuals may defensively avoid disclosing feelings or seeking support, thereby reinforcing emotional distance and dissatisfaction within the relationship. This mediational pattern has been previously reported by Finzi-Dottan and Abadi (2024), who found that attachment style significantly predicted fear of intimacy, which in turn influenced relationship satisfaction (Finzi-Dottan & Abadi, 2024).

The findings are further corroborated by the work of Giovazolias and Paschalidi (2022), who demonstrated that rejection sensitivity—closely tied to avoidant attachment—elevated fear of intimacy and contributed to lower

satisfaction in romantic partnerships (Giovazolias & Paschalidi, 2022). Similarly, Lyvers et al. (2021) emphasized that emotional inhibition and alexithymia, both common features among avoidantly attached individuals, intensify fear of intimacy and diminish relationship quality (Lyvers et al., 2021). These patterns appear to be culturally robust, as similar associations have been observed across diverse samples, including college students, clinical populations, and couples in therapy.

In the current study, fear of intimacy was not only shaped by attachment avoidance but also served as a direct predictor of marital dissatisfaction. This finding aligns with research indicating that fear of intimacy negatively affects emotional expression, sexual satisfaction, and mutual support in romantic relationships (Agrawal, 2025; Qazi et al., 2023). Individuals with high levels of intimacy fear may struggle to establish the emotional closeness needed to sustain long-term relational satisfaction. As noted by Hassan et al. (2023), intimacy fears can also impact neuropsychological functioning, reducing individuals' resilience and coping mechanisms within the relational context (Hassan et al., 2023).

The relationship between fear of intimacy and marital dissatisfaction may also be influenced by socio-cultural factors. For example, Riazi and Manouchehri (2024) found that early experiences of trauma and disruptions in mentalization could predispose individuals to intimacy fears and relational instability in adulthood (Riazi & Manouchehri, 2024). Similarly, Körün and Satıcı (2025) reported that in post-trauma family systems—such as those recovering from disasters—fear of intimacy mediates the link between family cohesion and well-being (Körün & Satıcı, 2025). These findings reinforce the notion that intimacy fear is a transdiagnostic process with deep developmental roots and wide-ranging relational consequences.

The current findings also resonate with studies emphasizing the gendered and developmental dimensions of intimacy fear. For instance, women who have experienced emotional breakdowns in relationships show significantly higher levels of fear of intimacy, which in turn predicts psychological pain and distress (Shishefar et al., 2024). Among men, similar fears have been found to influence their psychological flexibility and ability to adapt to emotionally demanding situations such as infertility or illness (Proctor et al., 2023). These dynamics further illustrate that fear of intimacy functions across personal histories and current

relational contexts, acting as a powerful inhibitor of satisfaction and connection.

A particularly novel contribution of the present study lies in its cultural context. While much of the existing literature has been conducted in Western populations, this study provides evidence from a Middle Eastern sample, offering insight into how attachment and intimacy dynamics function in non-Western marital systems. Cultural validation efforts such as those by Leite and Azevedo (2025) underscore the need to adapt psychometric tools to specific socio-cultural environments to ensure accurate measurement and interpretation (Leite & Azevedo, 2025). In collectivist societies where emotional expression is often restrained, and familial roles are rigidly defined, the intersection between avoidant attachment and intimacy fear may be particularly potent and underreported (İyiyaydin et al., 2023).

Importantly, these results have clinical implications. Therapists working with couples should assess attachment styles and intimacy fears as part of the treatment process. Interventions that target emotional regulation, self-disclosure, and secure bonding could help mitigate the effects of avoidant attachment and reduce intimacy-related anxieties. Programs focused on enhancing emotional literacy and vulnerability—such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)—have shown promise in reducing fear of intimacy and improving relational satisfaction (Rahmatabadi et al., 2023).

The current findings are also consistent with broader theoretical frameworks suggesting that early relational patterns shape adult interpersonal behavior. For example, the internal working models of avoidantly attached individuals often center around distrust and emotional self-sufficiency. This model restricts their ability to seek or offer comfort, particularly in emotionally intense situations such as conflict, loss, or transition. The resulting fear of intimacy acts as a reinforcing loop that sustains emotional detachment and relational dissatisfaction (Ścigała, Fabris, Badenes-Ribera, Zdankiewicz-Ścigała, & Longobardi, 2021; Zdankiewicz-Ścigała et al., 2024). These insights are crucial for designing preventive interventions that promote emotional openness and relational resilience in couples.

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. First, the use of a cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causality. While the mediation model is theoretically grounded, longitudinal research is needed to validate the temporal sequencing of avoidant attachment, fear of intimacy, and marital dissatisfaction. Second, the reliance on self-report instruments may have introduced

social desirability bias, particularly in a cultural context where discussing relational problems is often stigmatized. Third, the sample consisted solely of individuals from Tehran, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to rural or more diverse populations across Iran. Lastly, the study did not examine potential moderating variables such as gender, socioeconomic status, or personality traits, which may influence the observed relationships.

Future studies should employ longitudinal or mixed-method designs to better understand the causal pathways between attachment, fear of intimacy, and marital satisfaction. Incorporating qualitative data could provide deeper insight into the lived experiences of emotionally avoidant individuals and their relational patterns. Researchers are also encouraged to explore potential protective factors—such as emotional intelligence, self-differentiation, and psychological flexibility—that may buffer the effects of attachment insecurity. Expanding the sample to include couples from various regions, ethnic backgrounds, and marital durations would enhance the ecological validity of the findings. Furthermore, examining the impact of therapeutic interventions aimed at reducing intimacy fears and enhancing secure attachment could have practical relevance for marital counseling programs.

Practitioners working with couples should prioritize the assessment of attachment styles and intimacy fears as part of relational diagnostics. Treatment plans should include interventions that promote emotional awareness, secure communication, and vulnerability. Psychoeducational workshops on healthy intimacy and emotional safety could benefit both partners in the relationship. Culturally sensitive approaches that consider societal norms around emotional expression and gender roles are essential. Couples therapy models that focus on repairing attachment injuries and fostering mutual understanding—such as Emotionally Focused Therapy—may be particularly effective in addressing the patterns highlighted in this study. Finally, public mental health initiatives should aim to normalize discussions around intimacy and emotional closeness in relationships to reduce stigma and promote relational 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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