

Article history:
Received 23 June 2026
Revised 12 October 2026
Accepted 19 October 2026
Initial Publication 20 October 2026
Final Publication 01 January 2027

Explaining the Causal Relationship Between Self-Differentiation and Marital Burnout in Women Who Have Experienced Marital Infidelity: The Mediating Role of Psychological Distress

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E d i t o r	R e v i e w e r s
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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

In the Method section, the statement “The present study employed a descriptive-correlational research design” is appropriate, but it conflicts with later causal interpretations. The manuscript should explicitly state that structural equation modeling estimates theoretically specified directional paths but does not establish causality in cross-sectional data. This distinction should be added immediately after the design description to prevent readers from interpreting the fitted SEM as evidence of temporal or causal ordering.

Relatedly, the manuscript should justify the specification of “Self-Differentiation” as a single latent variable measured by Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Others. The sentence “the latent variable of self-differentiation was measured by the indicators of Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Others” assumes a reflective measurement structure. The authors should report confirmatory factor analytic evidence supporting this higher-order representation in the present sample, including standardized loadings, composite reliability, average variance extracted, and evidence that the four dimensions validly represent one overarching construct.

In the description of psychological distress, the DASS-21 is used to operationalize a single latent construct through Depression, Anxiety, and Stress. This is reasonable, but the manuscript should clarify whether a second-order factor model was tested or whether the three subscale totals were treated directly as indicators of a single latent variable. The current wording leaves the measurement structure ambiguous. Reporting the measurement model separately before the structural model would improve methodological transparency.

The Couple Burnout Measure section should be corrected for terminology and conceptual consistency. Earlier parts of the manuscript refer to “physical exhaustion, emotional exhaustion, and psychological exhaustion,” whereas the original Persian text appears to contain duplicated wording. The authors should verify each dimension against the original CBM scoring manual and ensure that the same terminology is used consistently in the instrument description, Table 1, Table 2, Figure 1, and the discussion.

Response: Revised and uploaded the manuscript.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

In the participant description, the sentence “The statistical population consisted of all married women with an experience of spousal infidelity in Tehran during the 2025–2026 academic year” requires clearer operationalization of eligibility. The authors should specify how “experience of spousal infidelity” was verified, whether infidelity was self-reported or clinically documented, whether emotional and sexual infidelity were both included, whether there was a minimum or maximum interval since disclosure, and whether participants were still living with their spouses. Without these criteria, the sample is insufficiently defined and difficult to replicate.

The sampling paragraph states that “252 eligible women completed the questionnaires,” but no inclusion and exclusion criteria are provided. The manuscript should explicitly report criteria such as age range, legal marital status, duration of marriage, confirmation of infidelity, ability to provide informed consent, concurrent severe psychiatric conditions, current psychosis or substance dependence, participation in couple therapy, and incomplete questionnaire responses. This information is essential because several of these factors could materially affect psychological distress and marital burnout.

The recruitment paragraph states that questionnaire links were posted “in groups and information channels associated with clients and women's support groups.” This procedure raises an important sampling-validity issue because it may have recruited participants beyond the formally defined clinical population. The authors should clarify whether all respondents were verified clients of the participating centers, whether duplicate responses were prevented, and whether any screening question was used to confirm eligibility before questionnaire completion.

The ethics paragraph is incomplete for a study dealing with highly sensitive experiences of marital betrayal. The sentence “participants were informed that their first and last names would not be recorded” should be supplemented with the name of the approving ethics committee, ethics approval code, date of approval, and procedures for informed consent, data security, anonymity, and referral in cases of severe distress. Given the emotionally charged nature of infidelity-related research, the authors should also explain whether participants were provided with psychological support information after participation.

In the section describing the Differentiation of Self Inventory, the manuscript states that higher total scores represent self-differentiation, yet the listed subscales include Emotional Reactivity, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Others, which are conceptually maladaptive dimensions. The authors should clarify whether these items were reverse-scored before computing the higher-order latent construct. This is especially important because the SEM figure shows positive factor loadings from self-differentiation to all four indicators; without reverse scoring or appropriate coding, the latent-variable interpretation may be psychometrically inconsistent.

Response: Revised and uploaded the manuscript.

2. Revised

Editor's decision after revisions: Accepted.

Editor in Chief's decision: Accepted.