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Self-Perception and Dark Triad Personality Traits as Predictors of Marital Burnout Among Married Adults

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A B S T R A C T

Marital burnout involves cumulative physical, emotional, and psychological exhaustion in an intimate partnership. Individual self-appraisals and socially aversive personality dispositions may be associated with this phenomenon, yet their simultaneous explanatory contributions require clarification, particularly in Iranian samples. This study examined whether self-perception and Dark Triad personality traits were associated with marital burnout among married adults in Isfahan, Iran. Methods: In a cross-sectional survey conducted in 2026, 300 married respondents were recruited by convenience sampling. They completed a self-perception measure developed by Pourhossein, the 12-item Dirty Dozen assessing Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, and Pines's Couple Burnout Measure. Pearson correlations and stepwise multiple linear regression were computed using SPSS 27. Self-perception was inversely associated with marital burnout ($r = -.421$, $p < .001$), whereas aggregate Dark Triad scores showed a positive association ($r = .317$, $p < .001$). Self-perception alone explained 17.7% of the outcome variance; adding Dark Triad traits increased the reported R^2 to .211 ($\Delta R^2 = .034$). In the two-predictor model, standardized coefficients were $\beta = -.354$ for self-perception and $\beta = .194$ for Dark Triad traits. In domain-specific analyses, material and social self-perception independently contributed to the final stepwise model ($\beta = -.43$ and $-.13$), while psychopathy-related and narcissistic traits were retained in the separate Dark Triad model ($\beta = .27$ and .12). More positive self-perception was associated with less marital burnout, whereas greater socially aversive personality tendencies were associated with greater burnout. The cross-sectional, self-report design precludes causal inference; prospective and partner-report studies are needed.

Keywords: *marital burnout; self-perception; Dark Triad; psychopathy; narcissism; marital relationships; Iran.*

1. Introduction

Marriage is one of the most significant and enduring interpersonal relationships in adulthood, providing a context in which individuals seek emotional intimacy, companionship, security, mutual support, and personal development. At the same time, marital relationships expose partners to recurring interpersonal demands, role expectations, disagreements, emotional vulnerabilities, and pressures originating both within and outside the family system. The quality of marital functioning therefore depends not only on external circumstances but also on the

psychological resources, personality characteristics, self-evaluations, and interpersonal behaviors that each partner brings to the relationship. Contemporary research increasingly conceptualizes marital functioning as the product of a complex interaction between individual characteristics and dyadic processes rather than as a simple consequence of relationship duration or isolated episodes of conflict. For example, recent evidence suggests that marital satisfaction is shaped by multiple personal and relational resources, including emotional exhaustion, work–family conflict, dyadic coping, and perceived partner support, indicating that relationship quality is embedded within a wider network of individual and contextual influences (Parsakia & Seyed Alitabar, 2026). Similarly, self-differentiation and mentalization have been identified as psychological mechanisms through which experiences rooted in the family of origin may become associated with adult marital satisfaction, further demonstrating that the ways individuals understand themselves and interpret interpersonal experiences can influence the functioning of intimate relationships (Kim & Woo, 2025). Within this multidimensional framework, marital burnout represents a particularly important negative relational outcome because it reflects not merely dissatisfaction with isolated aspects of a marriage but a more persistent state of physical, emotional, and psychological depletion associated with the marital relationship.

Marital burnout can develop when accumulated emotional demands, unresolved conflicts, unmet expectations, repetitive relational stress, and insufficient opportunities for psychological recovery gradually undermine a partner's emotional investment in the relationship. Individuals experiencing marital burnout may report exhaustion, diminished enthusiasm, disappointment, emotional distancing, reduced responsiveness toward the spouse, feelings of hopelessness regarding relationship improvement, and a growing sense that the psychological costs of marital interaction exceed its rewards. Although some level of conflict or dissatisfaction is common in long-term intimate relationships, burnout is conceptually important because it reflects a more pervasive erosion of relational vitality. Research among married women has shown that marital burnout is associated with a variety of demographic, interpersonal, and psychological factors, suggesting that it cannot be adequately understood through a single explanatory variable (Nejatian et al., 2021). This multifactorial character also has practical implications. Evidence showing that communication-skills training can significantly affect marital burnout indicates that relational exhaustion is responsive, at least in part, to interpersonal competencies and patterns of interaction (Jafari et al., 2021). Such findings support the view that marital burnout develops through the interaction of enduring personal dispositions and more modifiable relational processes. Consequently, identifying individual-level factors that may increase vulnerability to or protect against burnout remains an important objective for marital and family psychology.

A related issue concerns how individuals perceive and evaluate themselves within the marital relationship. Self-perception represents an organized set of evaluations concerning one's characteristics, abilities, competencies, social position, psychological functioning, and personal worth. These evaluations can influence how people interpret interpersonal events, react to criticism, respond to disagreement, evaluate their capacity to manage relational difficulties, and seek validation from significant others. Self-perception is therefore relevant to marriage because intimate relationships continually confront individuals with feedback regarding attractiveness, competence, desirability, responsibility, social value, and emotional adequacy. A relatively positive and coherent perception of the self may enable individuals to approach relational challenges without interpreting every disagreement as evidence of personal inadequacy. In contrast, negative or unstable self-evaluations may increase sensitivity to rejection, criticism, comparison, and perceived failure, potentially amplifying emotional strain when marital difficulties occur. The assessment of self-perception has accordingly received attention within psychological measurement research, including the development and examination of instruments designed to capture multidimensional self-appraisals across physical or material, active, social, and psychological domains (Pourhossein & Ghasemi, 2007). The multidimensionality of self-perception is particularly important because individuals may evaluate themselves differently across personal domains, and these differentiated self-appraisals may have distinct implications for interpersonal adaptation.

The relevance of self-perception to marital burnout can be understood through several psychological pathways. Individuals who perceive themselves as competent, socially effective, and psychologically integrated may possess greater confidence when expressing needs, setting interpersonal boundaries, seeking support, and engaging in constructive problem solving. Favorable self-perception may also reduce excessive dependence on the spouse as the

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exclusive source of self-worth and validation, thereby decreasing the likelihood that ordinary relational disappointments will become generalized threats to personal identity. Conversely, individuals with unfavorable self-perceptions may become more vulnerable to self-blame, defensive reactions, withdrawal, reassurance seeking, or maladaptive interpretations of ambiguous partner behaviors. Repeated exposure to these patterns could eventually contribute to relational exhaustion. Marital relationships are also evaluated through culturally meaningful standards concerning closeness, commitment, reciprocity, and partner responsiveness. Research examining the psychometric structure of relationship satisfaction in Iranian samples has demonstrated that subjective evaluations of relationship quality can be reliably assessed within this sociocultural context (Sayed Alitabar et al., 2018). Such evidence is relevant because self-perception does not operate independently of relationship appraisal; rather, individuals' evaluations of themselves and of their intimate relationships may continually influence one another. Understanding marital burnout may therefore require simultaneous attention to how individuals experience their own personal worth and how they function within ongoing partner interactions.

Alongside potentially protective psychological resources such as favorable self-perception, personality characteristics associated with interpersonal antagonism may represent an important source of relational vulnerability. One influential framework in personality psychology is the Dark Triad, comprising Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. These constructs were originally conceptualized as related but distinguishable socially aversive personality traits that can occur at subclinical levels within the general population (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Machiavellianism is generally characterized by strategic manipulation, cynicism, interpersonal calculation, and a tendency to use others instrumentally to achieve personal goals. Narcissism involves self-enhancement, feelings of superiority or entitlement, heightened needs for admiration and recognition, and vulnerability to ego threat. Psychopathy, particularly when assessed dimensionally in nonclinical populations, includes callousness, low empathy, impulsivity, reduced remorse, and disregard for interpersonal consequences. Although these characteristics share an antagonistic interpersonal core, they differ in their motivational and behavioral expressions and therefore may influence intimate relationships through partially distinct mechanisms. The development of the Dirty Dozen provided a concise approach to assessing these three domains and facilitated research on their correlates in community and nonclinical samples (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Importantly, Dark Triad scores represent dimensional personality tendencies rather than clinical diagnoses, but even subclinical elevations may be consequential in relationships requiring reciprocity, trust, empathy, emotional responsiveness, and long-term commitment.

There are strong theoretical grounds for expecting Dark Triad characteristics to be related to marital burnout. Marriage requires repeated negotiation between individual needs and shared responsibilities, and these negotiations can become particularly difficult when partners adopt manipulative, exploitative, entitled, impulsive, or emotionally insensitive interpersonal styles. Machiavellian tendencies may undermine relationship security by increasing strategic behavior, concealment, distrust, and instrumental treatment of the spouse. Narcissistic tendencies may create difficulty when relationship circumstances require compromise or when a partner experiences criticism, insufficient admiration, or threats to an idealized self-image. Psychopathic tendencies may be especially disruptive because reduced empathic concern and impulsive behavior can interfere with emotional repair after conflict and may increase the likelihood of recurrent hurtful interactions. Iranian research has reported associations between Dark Triad traits and marital adjustment, suggesting that socially aversive personality tendencies are relevant to the quality of marital adaptation (Kazemi & Saadatkhah, 2017). Subsequent work addressing the relationship between narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and marital adjustment has likewise reinforced the importance of examining these traits within marital contexts (Kazemi & Saadatkhah, 2022). Together, these findings support a conceptual model in which Dark Triad characteristics may increase the interpersonal strain that, when chronic and insufficiently resolved, contributes to emotional and psychological exhaustion in marriage.

Evidence from related marital outcomes further strengthens this expectation. Dark personality characteristics have been associated with lower marital commitment, suggesting that individuals who score higher on these socially aversive traits may differ in their willingness or capacity to sustain the behaviors necessary for stable long-term partnerships (Rabiei et al., 2023). Dark Triad characteristics have also been incorporated into models of emotional divorce, with marital burnout functioning as an important mediating construct between personality

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tendencies and severe relational disengagement (Sadeghkhani et al., 2023). Emotional divorce represents a condition in which a legal or formal marital bond may remain intact while intimacy, emotional connection, and mutual investment substantially deteriorate; therefore, the association of Dark Triad traits with emotional divorce through burnout is theoretically consistent with the proposition that antagonistic personality tendencies can contribute to a progressive depletion of relationship resources. Further evidence has linked Dark Triad traits to attitudes toward infidelity among women experiencing marital conflict, with marital frustration playing a mediating role (Honarpisheh & Hashemi, 2024). Such findings suggest that the effects of aversive personality traits may become particularly salient under conditions of existing relational strain, when frustration, dissatisfaction, and reduced emotional connection can interact with dispositional tendencies to influence attitudes and behaviors that further threaten marital stability.

International evidence also indicates that Dark Triad traits should be considered alongside subjective relationship experience rather than in isolation. Research on marital infidelity has shown that Dark Triad traits, marital dissatisfaction, and moral disengagement can operate together in explaining greater propensity toward infidelity (Lișman & Holman, 2023). This pattern is particularly relevant to marital burnout because it illustrates how dispositional characteristics can combine with deteriorating relationship evaluations and cognitive mechanisms that reduce adherence to interpersonal norms. A person with elevated antagonistic personality tendencies may not necessarily experience marital burnout, and a person with marital burnout may not necessarily display Dark Triad characteristics; nevertheless, when aversive dispositions coexist with dissatisfaction, frustration, or prolonged unresolved conflict, the probability of maladaptive relational responses may increase. This distinction is essential because it avoids deterministic interpretations of personality. Dark Triad traits should be understood as probabilistic correlates of interpersonal behavior whose expression depends on situational demands, partner characteristics, relationship history, and broader social circumstances. Their examination in conjunction with self-perception is therefore particularly informative: self-perception concerns the individual's evaluation and organization of the self, whereas Dark Triad traits concern relatively enduring interpersonal tendencies that can influence how the individual pursues needs and responds to others.

Examining self-perception and Dark Triad personality traits simultaneously may provide a more comprehensive account of individual differences in marital burnout than studying either construct alone. The two domains represent theoretically different aspects of personality functioning. Self-perception primarily concerns how individuals evaluate their own qualities, competencies, social position, and psychological characteristics, whereas Dark Triad traits characterize interpersonal orientations involving manipulation, entitlement, self-enhancement, emotional coldness, or impulsivity. A person may possess a relatively favorable self-perception without exhibiting aversive interpersonal traits, or may endorse aspects of narcissism, Machiavellianism, or psychopathy while maintaining confidence in several self-domains. These constructs can therefore contribute independent information to understanding marital functioning. In addition, specific components within each domain may differ in their explanatory relevance. For example, physical or material self-perception may be associated with embodied self-confidence and evaluations of personal adequacy; social self-perception may affect perceived competence in interpersonal settings; psychological self-perception may influence how internal experiences are organized and interpreted. Likewise, psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism may not contribute equally to marital difficulties because emotional callousness, entitlement, and strategic manipulation involve different relational processes. A dimensional analysis of these facets can therefore provide greater specificity than relying exclusively on global scores.

The importance of examining these variables is heightened by the complex social context in which contemporary marriages operate. Marital relationships are affected by occupational pressures, economic demands, changing gender and family roles, expectations regarding emotional intimacy, and tensions between individual autonomy and family interdependence. Work-related emotional exhaustion and conflict between occupational and family demands may undermine relationship satisfaction, while dyadic coping and partner support can function as important relational resources (Parsakia & Seyed Alitabar, 2026). At the same time, individuals differ in the psychological capacities through which they process these pressures. Self-differentiation and mentalization, for example, have been shown to contribute indirectly to marital satisfaction by shaping how adults understand both themselves and others within relational contexts (Kim & Woo, 2025). These findings emphasize that marital

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outcomes emerge from interactions among external stress, intrapersonal processing, and interpersonal behavior. From this perspective, self-perception may represent an important self-evaluative resource, whereas Dark Triad tendencies may represent a potential interpersonal liability. Their simultaneous examination may therefore clarify how adaptive and maladaptive individual characteristics relate to the exhaustion that develops within distressed marital systems.

Despite growing research on marital burnout, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature has concentrated on communication patterns, demographic correlates, marital satisfaction, commitment, conflict, infidelity, or emotional divorce rather than directly investigating the combined contribution of self-evaluative functioning and socially aversive personality traits to marital burnout. Existing evidence indicates that communication processes can influence burnout (Jafari et al., 2021) and that burnout is associated with a range of personal and contextual characteristics (Nejatian et al., 2021), but these findings leave open the question of whether the way individuals perceive themselves explains meaningful variation in burnout alongside relatively stable personality tendencies. Second, although Dark Triad traits have been associated with marital adjustment (Kazemi & Saadatkhah, 2017; Kazemi & Saadatkhah, 2022), marital commitment (Rabiei et al., 2023), emotional divorce (Sadeghkhani et al., 2023), attitudes toward infidelity (Honarpisheh & Hashemi, 2024), and infidelity propensity through moral disengagement and dissatisfaction (Lişman & Holman, 2023), fewer studies have directly examined marital burnout as the central outcome while simultaneously considering a multidimensional measure of self-perception. Third, cultural context remains important because expectations surrounding marriage, family interdependence, interpersonal roles, and relationship stability vary across societies. Consequently, findings from other populations cannot automatically be generalized to married adults in Iranian settings. Research conducted with culturally appropriate measures of relational functioning (Sayed Alitabar et al., 2018) and self-perception (Pourhossein & Ghasemi, 2007) can contribute to more contextually grounded explanations of marital burnout.

Addressing these gaps has both theoretical and applied significance. Theoretically, simultaneous consideration of self-perception and Dark Triad traits can contribute to a more differentiated understanding of marital burnout by integrating self-evaluative and interpersonal-dispositional perspectives. If favorable self-perception is inversely associated with burnout while Dark Triad tendencies are positively associated with it, this would suggest that relational exhaustion reflects not only the presence of interpersonal risk factors but also the relative availability of personal psychological resources. At a more specific level, determining which self-perception dimensions and which Dark Triad components demonstrate the strongest statistical associations with burnout may help refine models of individual vulnerability within intimate relationships. Applied implications should nevertheless be approached cautiously. Associations among self-reported psychological variables do not demonstrate causation, and personality traits should not be used to assign unilateral responsibility for relational problems. However, identifying systematic relationships can help generate more precise hypotheses for prospective, dyadic, and intervention research and may inform comprehensive assessments in which personal self-appraisals, personality tendencies, communication patterns, partner characteristics, and contextual stressors are evaluated together rather than independently.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to investigate the predictive roles of self-perception and Dark Triad personality traits in marital burnout among married adults in Isfahan, Iran.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

A descriptive, cross-sectional correlational survey was conducted among married residents of Isfahan, Iran, in 2026 (Iranian year 1405). The study population was defined as married adults living in the city. A convenience sampling strategy was used to recruit 300 respondents. Sample-size planning was described as relying on the Cochran formula and comparable studies, although population parameters and a formal power calculation were not specified. Because responses were collected at the individual level, the analytic sample is referred to as 300 married respondents rather than 300 independently identified married couples or 300 dyads.

Participants completed questionnaires assessing self-perception, Dark Triad traits, and marital burnout. Reported participant characteristics included age, education, and length of marriage. The available study description does not provide gender-specific frequencies, partner matching, a recruitment flow diagram, or explicit exclusion criteria; consequently, the analysis is presented as individual-level survey research rather than as a dyadic actor–partner investigation. No follow-up observations were reported.

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2.2. Data Collection Tools

Self-perception. The 30-item Self-Perception/Self-Apperception Questionnaire attributed to Pourhossein and Ghasemi (2007) assesses four domains: material or physical self, active self, social self, and psychological self-awareness. Respondents use ordered response categories scored from 0 to 5, yielding a possible total from 0 to 150. Higher scores reflect more favorable self-perception under the reported scoring scheme. The instrument development work described a sample of 142 individuals and an internal-consistency coefficient of approximately .84; the coefficient reported for the present sample was likewise Cronbach's α = .84. A publication describing the instrument's validation was identified in the Iranian journal Psychological Sciences Pourhossein & Ghasemi, 2007.

Dark Triad traits. The 12-item Dirty Dozen, originally developed by Jonason and Webster (2010), contains four items each for Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. The study describes nine-point agreement responses; greater scores indicate higher endorsement of socially aversive personality traits. The original research examined the scale's structural and convergent validity. The study reports Iranian subscale α values of .75, .68, and .69 from an earlier local validation cited in its research materials; the overall α obtained in this sample was .74. Trait labels in the analyses refer to nonclinical self-reported tendencies and must not be interpreted as psychiatric diagnoses.

Marital burnout. The Couple Burnout Measure (CBM) developed by Pines (1996) assesses physical, emotional, and psychological exhaustion in a committed relationship. The instrument appendix contains 21 items, each rated on a seven-point frequency scale. Some positively worded items require reverse scoring. Higher values indicate greater burnout. The study reported prior internal-consistency estimates ranging approximately from .84 to .90 and an overall Cronbach's α of .89 in the current sample. Because the descriptive analyses report summed-scale totals, scores are discussed on their reported total-score metric rather than converting them to a different metric.

2.3. Data Analysis

Analyses were performed in SPSS version 27. Frequency distributions summarized age, education, and marriage duration. Means, standard deviations, and observed ranges described the psychological measures. Pearson product–moment correlations tested bivariate associations. Stepwise multiple regression first examined self-perception and overall Dark Triad traits as predictors of marital burnout. Two further models used the four self-perception facets and the three Dark Triad dimensions, respectively. The study also reported Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests, tolerance and variance inflation factors (VIF), and the Durbin–Watson statistic as regression diagnostics. Significance was evaluated at the conventional two-sided .05 threshold.

3. Findings and Results

The 300 married respondents spanned ages 24 years through 50 years or older. The largest age category was 35–39 years (32.0%), followed by 40–44 years (27.7%). Diploma-level education (37.3%) and bachelor's degrees (35.0%) were common. Marriage duration was most often 11–15 years (28.7%). The reported distributions are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents (N = 300)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age (years)	24–29	27	9.0
	30–34	24	8.0
	35–39	96	32.0
	40–44	83	27.7
	45–49	61	20.3
	50 or older	9	3.0
Education	Below high school	28	9.3
	High school diploma	112	37.3
	Associate degree	16	5.3
	Bachelor's degree	105	35.0
	Master's degree	39	13.0
Marriage duration	1–5 years	26	8.7

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	6–10 years	44	14.7
	11–15 years	86	28.7
	16–20 years	71	23.7
	More than 20 years	73	24.3

Descriptive findings for global scores and their component subscales are reported in Table 2. Mean overall marital burnout was 70.53 (SD = 21.93); the self-perception mean was 58.17 (SD = 12.31); and the Dark Triad mean was 34.82 (SD = 11.47). Cronbach's α values were .89, .84, and .74 for burnout, self-perception, and the Dark Triad, respectively. These alpha values reflect aggregate scores; reliability estimates of each domain within the analyzed sample were not provided.

Table 2

Reported descriptive statistics of the study variables

Construct	Dimension	Observed min	Observed max	M	SD
Marital burnout	Physical exhaustion	6	35	24.19	5.96
	Emotional exhaustion	13	62	31.57	10.31
	Psychological exhaustion	6	42	19.71	7.28
	Global score	29	131	70.53	21.93
Self-perception	Material/physical	7	24	12.74	3.53
	Active	8	27	14.65	3.74
	Social	7	30	14.75	4.19
	Psychological awareness	8	31	16.01	3.95
	Global score	34	105	58.17	12.31
Dark Triad	Narcissism	4	24	11.57	4.47
	Machiavellianism	4	21	6.98	4.12
	Psychopathy	4	28	16.19	6.93
	Global score	12	70	34.82	11.47

The reported Kolmogorov–Smirnov statistics were .107 for marital burnout, .097 for self-perception, and .072 for Dark Triad scores; each was accompanied by a reported p value of .200. These results were described as not indicating a departure from normality at the .05 level. For the two overall predictors, tolerance was .88 and VIF was 1.127; the reported Durbin–Watson statistic was 2.01. These findings do not suggest severe collinearity among the two aggregate predictors. They do not, by themselves, establish linearity, homoscedasticity, or generalizability to a probability sample.

As shown in Table 3, higher self-perception was associated with lower marital burnout, r = −.421, whereas higher Dark Triad scores were associated with greater burnout, r = .317. Self-perception facets were all negatively correlated with the outcome (r range −.22 to −.49); the material/physical facet showed the strongest absolute bivariate association. All three Dark Triad components had positive bivariate associations, with psychopathy showing the largest (r = .304).

Table 3

Pearson correlations with marital burnout (N = 300)

Predictor	Pearson r	Reported p
Self-perception, global	−.421	< .001
Material/physical self	−.490	< .001
Active self	−.340	< .001
Social self	−.300	< .001
Psychological awareness	−.220	< .001
Dark Triad, global	.317	< .001
Psychopathy	.304	< .001
Narcissism	.189	< .001

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Machiavellianism	.144	.010

In the principal stepwise regression, self-perception was entered first (R = .421, R^2 = .177), accounting for approximately 17.7% of burnout-score variance. The addition of Dark Triad traits yielded R = .459 and R^2 = .211, representing an incremental reported R^2 of .034, or 3.4 percentage points. The first model had reported F(1, 298) = 64.23; the two-predictor model had reported F(2, 297) = 39.61. In the final model, self-perception remained an inverse predictor (standardized β = −.354, t = −6.43), while the Dark Triad remained a positive predictor (β = .194, t = 3.53). See Table 4.

Table 4

Stepwise regression for global self-perception and Dark Triad scores

Model/term	R	R^2	ΔR^2	β	t	Reported p
Step 1: Self-perception	.421	.177	—	−.421	−8.01	< .001
Step 2: Self-perception	.459	.211	.034	−.354	−6.43	< .001
Step 2: Dark Triad				.194	3.53	< .001

The standardized coefficients indicate that the inverse association with self-perception persisted after accounting for the aggregate Dark Triad score. The incremental contribution of Dark Triad traits was statistically significant but modest relative to the variance explained by self-perception alone. The final model left approximately 78.9% of observed burnout-score variance unexplained, which is consistent with the expectation that marital burnout has multiple psychological, interpersonal, and contextual correlates beyond these two self-report measures.

Separate stepwise models assessed heterogeneity within the two broad predictor domains. Among self-perception components, the material/physical facet was retained first (R^2 = .241); adding the social facet increased R^2 to .256 (ΔR^2 = .015). In the final domain-level model, standardized coefficients were −.43 for material self and −.13 for social self. The active and psychological-awareness facets were correlated with burnout but were not retained by the stepwise selection procedure. This distinction is important: an excluded predictor is not necessarily unrelated to burnout, particularly when facets share variance.

Among Dark Triad components, psychopathy was retained first (R^2 = .093); the addition of narcissism increased the model R^2 to .107 (ΔR^2 = .014). The final standardized betas were .27 for psychopathy and .12 for narcissism. Machiavellianism showed a weak positive bivariate correlation but was not retained in that stepwise model. Detailed findings appear in Table 5.

Table 5

Facet-specific stepwise regression models for marital burnout

Predictor set and term	Model R^2	β	t	Reported p
Self-perception / Step 1: Material	.241	−.49	−9.71	< .001
Self-perception / Step 2: Material	.256	−.43	−8.10	< .001
Self-perception / Step 2: Social		−.13	−2.47	.010
Dark Triad / Step 1: Psychopathy	.093	.30	5.51	< .001
Dark Triad / Step 2: Psychopathy	.107	.27	4.88	< .001
Dark Triad / Step 2: Narcissism		.12	2.21	.020

4. Discussion

The present study examined the roles of self-perception and Dark Triad personality traits in predicting marital burnout among married adults in Isfahan. The findings showed that self-perception was significantly and negatively associated with marital burnout, whereas Dark Triad personality traits were significantly and positively associated with marital burnout. At the bivariate level, the correlation between overall self-perception and marital burnout was moderate and negative (r = −.421, p < .001), indicating that individuals who evaluated themselves more positively tended to report lower levels of marital burnout. In contrast, the overall Dark Triad score was positively correlated with marital burnout (r = .317, p < .001), suggesting that greater endorsement of narcissistic,

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Machiavellian, and psychopathic tendencies was associated with higher relational exhaustion. The regression analysis further demonstrated that self-perception alone explained 17.7% of the variance in marital burnout, while the addition of Dark Triad traits increased the explained variance to 21.1%. In the final model, self-perception remained a significant negative predictor (β = −.354), whereas Dark Triad traits remained a significant positive predictor (β = .194). These findings indicate that both self-evaluative processes and socially aversive personality tendencies contribute independently to concurrent differences in marital burnout, although self-perception accounted for a larger proportion of the explained variance. This pattern is compatible with broader evidence showing that marital functioning is affected simultaneously by individual psychological resources and maladaptive interpersonal tendencies rather than by a single isolated factor (Kim & Woo, 2025; Parsakia & Seyed Alitabar, 2026).

The negative association between self-perception and marital burnout can be interpreted in terms of the psychological resources that arise from a relatively coherent and favorable evaluation of the self. Individuals who perceive themselves as competent, socially capable, psychologically integrated, and personally valuable may be better able to tolerate relational stress without construing every disagreement as evidence of personal inadequacy or rejection. A stable and favorable self-perception may support assertive communication, appropriate boundary setting, emotional regulation, and resilience during episodes of marital conflict. In contrast, individuals with less favorable self-perceptions may be more sensitive to criticism, more dependent on partner validation, and more likely to experience relational disagreements as threats to self-worth. Over time, repeated negative self-evaluations in the context of unresolved conflict may intensify feelings of helplessness, emotional depletion, and disengagement, thereby increasing susceptibility to marital burnout. The conceptualization and measurement of self-perception as a multidimensional construct involving physical or material, active, social, and psychological components provides a useful basis for understanding why self-appraisal may be relevant to marital functioning (Pourhossein & Ghasemi, 2007). These dimensions reflect different ways in which individuals experience and evaluate themselves, and their combined effect may shape the extent to which they approach intimate relationships from a position of personal efficacy or vulnerability.

The present findings also correspond with research showing that marital burnout is embedded within a wider network of individual and relational factors. Nejatian et al. reported that marital burnout among married women was associated with multiple demographic and relational characteristics, emphasizing that burnout cannot be reduced to a simple consequence of time spent in marriage or isolated conflict episodes (Nejatian et al., 2021). In addition, Jafari et al. demonstrated that effective communication-skills training could improve marital burnout outcomes, suggesting that interpersonal competencies and relational behaviors are closely connected to the experience of marital exhaustion (Jafari et al., 2021). The present results extend this literature by indicating that self-perception may represent an important intrapersonal correlate of burnout. Communication skills may be more difficult to use effectively when individuals enter interactions with a diminished sense of competence, low confidence in their social effectiveness, or negative interpretations of their personal worth. Conversely, favorable self-perception may facilitate more constructive communication and reduce the tendency to interpret ordinary disagreements in global, self-defeating terms. This interpretation is also consistent with research emphasizing the contribution of self-differentiation and mentalization to marital satisfaction, because these capacities involve maintaining a coherent sense of self while accurately interpreting interpersonal experience (Kim & Woo, 2025).

The facet-specific analysis further clarified the association between self-perception and marital burnout. Among the four dimensions of self-perception, the material or physical self showed the strongest negative bivariate association with marital burnout (r = −.490) and was retained as the strongest predictor in the stepwise regression. The social self was also retained in the final facet-level model, with standardized coefficients of β = −.43 for material self-perception and β = −.13 for social self-perception. The active and psychological-awareness dimensions were negatively correlated with burnout but did not provide sufficient incremental explanatory value to remain in the stepwise model. These findings suggest that the aspects of self-perception most closely connected to how individuals experience themselves in embodied, practical, and interpersonal domains may be particularly relevant to marital exhaustion. Importantly, the material or physical dimension should not be interpreted simply as financial status or objective socioeconomic position; rather, it reflects the domain of self-appraisal measured by the instrument.

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Individuals who feel more secure about their physical, personal, and socially visible characteristics may enter marital interactions with greater confidence and reduced vulnerability to perceived inadequacy. Similarly, stronger social self-perception may support effective participation in interpersonal exchanges and enhance the individual's capacity to negotiate needs without excessive fear of rejection. The importance of subjective relationship evaluations in Iranian samples has also been supported by psychometric research on relationship satisfaction, emphasizing that relational functioning is closely connected to how individuals cognitively and emotionally evaluate themselves and their partnerships (Sayed Alitabar et al., 2018).

A second major finding was that higher Dark Triad scores were associated with greater marital burnout. The Dark Triad framework conceptualizes narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy as related but distinct socially aversive personality traits characterized by different combinations of entitlement, manipulation, self-centeredness, emotional coldness, cynicism, and impulsivity (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). These tendencies are likely to be relevant to intimate relationships because marriage depends heavily on empathy, reciprocity, trust, compromise, emotional responsiveness, and the capacity to prioritize shared interests alongside individual needs. When individuals habitually approach interpersonal relationships in a manipulative, exploitative, excessively self-focused, or emotionally detached manner, repeated relational strain may develop. Such patterns can weaken mutual trust, reduce emotional safety, make conflict resolution more difficult, and contribute to chronic disappointment for both partners. The positive association found in the present study therefore supports the theoretical expectation that socially aversive personality tendencies may be associated with greater exhaustion within marital relationships.

The current findings are consistent with previous studies linking Dark Triad characteristics to poorer marital and relationship outcomes. Kazemi and Saadatkhah found that narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy were related to marital adjustment, supporting the proposition that these personality tendencies influence the quality of adaptation within marriage (Kazemi & Saadatkhah, 2017; Kazemi & Saadatkhah, 2022). The present study extends that line of evidence by showing that the Dark Triad is also associated with marital burnout, a construct reflecting accumulated emotional, psychological, and physical exhaustion rather than adjustment alone. Similarly, Rabiei et al. found that Dark Triad traits contributed to the prediction of marital commitment (Rabiei et al., 2023). This finding is relevant because declining commitment and increasing emotional exhaustion may be mutually reinforcing processes within distressed marriages. Individuals who are less invested in preserving the relationship may be less willing to engage in difficult but necessary processes of emotional repair, while persistent burnout may in turn weaken commitment and motivation to maintain the relationship.

The association between Dark Triad tendencies and marital burnout is also supported by research examining more severe forms of relational deterioration. Sadeghkhani et al. developed a structural model in which Dark Triad personality traits were associated with emotional divorce, with marital burnout functioning as a mediating variable (Sadeghkhani et al., 2023). This evidence is particularly aligned with the present findings because emotional divorce can be regarded as an advanced form of relational disengagement in which emotional connection deteriorates even if the formal marriage remains intact. Marital burnout may represent one of the psychological processes through which antagonistic personality tendencies contribute to such disengagement. Likewise, Honarpisheh and Hashemi reported that Dark Triad traits were related to attitudes toward infidelity among women experiencing marital conflict, with marital frustration acting as a mediator (Honarpisheh & Hashemi, 2024). Although the present study did not assess infidelity or frustration, these findings collectively suggest that Dark Triad traits may become especially consequential when relationships are already characterized by dissatisfaction, conflict, or emotional depletion.

The international literature provides further support for this interpretation. Lişman and Holman found that Dark Triad traits were related to propensity toward marital infidelity and that marital satisfaction and moral disengagement were relevant to this association (Lişman & Holman, 2023). This suggests that aversive personality tendencies may not operate independently of relationship quality; rather, they may interact with dissatisfaction and cognitive processes that make maladaptive behaviors easier to justify. In the context of marital burnout, a similar process may occur when chronic exhaustion reduces emotional investment and increases disengagement from relational norms. Individuals high in Dark Triad traits may be more likely to respond to such exhaustion through self-serving, avoidant, manipulative, or emotionally detached behaviors rather than through mutual problem solving. Nevertheless,

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the present findings should not be interpreted deterministically. Elevated Dark Triad scores do not imply that an individual will inevitably behave destructively, and the observed relationships reflect statistical tendencies rather than categorical personality classifications.

The facet-level results for the Dark Triad provide additional insight. Psychopathy showed the strongest positive bivariate association with marital burnout (r = .304) and entered the regression model first, accounting for 9.3% of the variance. Narcissism provided a smaller but statistically significant additional contribution, raising the explained variance to 10.7%, whereas Machiavellianism was positively correlated with marital burnout but was not retained in the final stepwise model. The stronger role of psychopathy may be understandable given that subclinical psychopathic tendencies involve callousness, impulsivity, reduced empathy, and limited concern for interpersonal consequences. These characteristics can directly interfere with relationship repair because successful resolution of marital conflict generally requires sensitivity to the partner's emotional experience and the ability to inhibit impulsive or retaliatory reactions. The Dirty Dozen operationalizes these traits as dimensional tendencies in nonclinical populations, making it especially suitable for examining such interpersonal differences without equating them with psychiatric diagnoses (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Narcissism may also increase burnout through entitlement, hypersensitivity to criticism, excessive need for admiration, and difficulty accepting relational reciprocity when it conflicts with self-enhancing motives.

The weaker predictive contribution of Machiavellianism should be interpreted cautiously. Although Machiavellianism showed a positive correlation with burnout, its unique contribution was insufficient for retention after the overlap among Dark Triad components was considered. This does not indicate that Machiavellian tendencies are irrelevant to marital functioning. Manipulation, cynicism, strategic concealment, and instrumental treatment of others may still undermine trust and reciprocity; however, some of their statistical effects may overlap with narcissism or psychopathy. The original conceptualization of the Dark Triad emphasizes that the three traits are interrelated but not interchangeable (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), while the Dirty Dozen was explicitly designed to capture these dimensions efficiently in a brief measure (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Therefore, the present pattern may reflect shared variance among antagonistic interpersonal characteristics as well as genuine differences in how strongly each dimension relates to marital exhaustion.

The combined regression results are particularly important because self-perception retained a significant inverse association with marital burnout even after Dark Triad traits were added to the model. This suggests that favorable self-perception may provide information about marital burnout beyond the influence of aversive interpersonal dispositions. At the same time, Dark Triad traits explained additional variance after self-perception was accounted for, indicating that the two constructs capture partially distinct psychological processes. This finding is consistent with multidimensional models of marital functioning in which personal resources and interpersonal liabilities operate simultaneously. Parsakia and Seyed Alitabar showed that marital satisfaction and work–family conflict can be understood through the combined influence of job stress, emotional exhaustion, dyadic coping, and partner support (Parsakia & Seyed Alitabar, 2026). Although those variables differ from the present constructs, the broader implication is comparable: marital outcomes emerge from interacting personal, interpersonal, and contextual mechanisms. The present findings similarly indicate that marital burnout cannot be explained solely by self-evaluation or personality antagonism, but both domains contribute meaningful information.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the findings support an integrative understanding of marital burnout in which self-perception functions as a potentially protective intrapersonal correlate while Dark Triad traits represent potential interpersonal vulnerabilities. More favorable self-perception may reduce the likelihood that marital stress is internalized as evidence of personal inadequacy, whereas antagonistic personality tendencies may increase the probability that conflict is managed through self-centered, insensitive, or manipulative interaction patterns. These processes are likely to operate alongside communication quality, commitment, relationship satisfaction, external stressors, and partner support. The present results therefore complement previous evidence connecting marital burnout to communication (Jafari et al., 2021), relationship satisfaction and broader psychosocial pressures (Parsakia & Seyed Alitabar, 2026), Dark Triad traits and marital adjustment (Kazemi & Saadatkhah, 2017; Kazemi & Saadatkhah, 2022), commitment (Rabiei et al., 2023), emotional divorce (Sadeghkhani et al., 2023), and

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infidelity-related attitudes and tendencies (Honarpisheh & Hashemi, 2024; Lișman & Holman, 2023). Taken together, these converging findings suggest that marital burnout is best understood as a multifaceted relational outcome shaped by how individuals perceive themselves, how they characteristically relate to others, and how these individual tendencies operate within the broader dynamics of the marital system.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional correlational design prevents conclusions about temporal ordering or causality; therefore, the terms prediction and predictor refer to statistical prediction within the observed data rather than evidence that self-perception or Dark Triad traits cause marital burnout. Second, convenience sampling from married adults in Isfahan limits the representativeness of the sample and restricts generalization to other geographic, cultural, socioeconomic, or demographic groups. Third, all major variables were assessed using self-report questionnaires, increasing the possibility of common-method variance, social-desirability bias, inaccurate self-presentation, and response tendencies, particularly for socially undesirable characteristics such as psychopathy and Machiavellianism. Fourth, data were collected at the individual rather than dyadic level, preventing examination of partner effects, reciprocal influences, and discrepancies between spouses' reports. Fifth, the use of stepwise regression may increase model instability and sensitivity to sample-specific correlations, meaning that the retained facets may not replicate in independent samples. Finally, potentially relevant covariates such as gender, socioeconomic strain, attachment patterns, psychiatric symptoms, relationship duration, conflict frequency, partner support, and communication quality were not simultaneously controlled in the reported predictive models.

Future research should employ longitudinal and prospective designs to determine whether self-perception and Dark Triad traits predict subsequent changes in marital burnout over time and to clarify possible reciprocal relationships among these variables. Probability-based or stratified sampling across several Iranian cities and different socioeconomic and cultural contexts would improve generalizability. Dyadic research involving both spouses is particularly recommended so that actor and partner effects can be estimated and the extent to which one partner's personality characteristics influence the other partner's burnout can be examined directly. Future studies should also test theoretically specified mediation and moderation models, including communication quality, attachment insecurity, emotion regulation, marital satisfaction, conflict-resolution style, dyadic coping, partner support, moral disengagement, and marital commitment. Confirmatory regression or structural equation modeling should be preferred over purely data-driven stepwise procedures when adequate sample sizes are available, and models should be validated in independent samples. It would also be useful to investigate whether different self-perception domains interact with specific Dark Triad traits and whether these associations differ by gender, marriage duration, parental status, or level of marital conflict. Multi-method assessment incorporating partner reports, behavioral observations, clinician ratings, and repeated measurements could further reduce the limitations associated with exclusive reliance on self-report instruments.

The findings suggest that marital and family practitioners may benefit from assessing both self-evaluative functioning and maladaptive interpersonal tendencies when working with couples experiencing persistent relational exhaustion. Assessment should explore how each partner views personal competence, physical and social self-worth, psychological functioning, and perceived effectiveness within the relationship, while also examining patterns such as entitlement, reduced empathy, impulsivity, interpersonal manipulation, or excessive dependence on external validation. Intervention should not stigmatize individuals on the basis of personality scores or treat Dark Triad characteristics as diagnostic labels; instead, these tendencies can be considered within a broader formulation of communication patterns, emotional needs, conflict cycles, relationship history, and contextual stressors. Counseling programs may focus on strengthening realistic and stable self-perception, improving emotional awareness, increasing empathic responsiveness, developing constructive communication and conflict-resolution skills, and reducing destructive interpersonal strategies. Where pronounced callousness, impulsivity, or entitlement is present, interventions may require greater emphasis on accountability, perspective taking, behavioral self-monitoring, and recognition of the consequences of interpersonal behavior. Couple-focused programs should also incorporate both partners' perspectives rather than locating responsibility for marital burnout solely within one individual, because relational exhaustion is likely to emerge from the interaction between individual vulnerabilities, partner responses, and ongoing contextual pressures.

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Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

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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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