

Predicting Attitudes Toward Extramarital Relationships Based on Loneliness, Dependence on Online Social Media, and Mindfulness in Students

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Abstract

Introduction: Comprehending the determinants shaping students' perspectives on extramarital relationships holds significant importance given shifting social norms and the growing ubiquity of online interactions. This research sought to investigate the extent to which loneliness, dependence on online social media, and mindfulness predict students' attitudes toward extramarital relationships.

Methods: Utilising a descriptive-correlational research design, this study targeted all married female students enrolled at the Islamic Azad University of Shiraz during the 2024 academic year. A convenience sample of 259 participants was selected. Data were collected using the Attitudes Toward Infidelity Scale, UCLA Loneliness Scale, Online Social Media Dependence Scale, and Five-Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire. Data were analysed using SPSS version 26, employing Pearson's correlation and stepwise multiple regression analyses.

Results: The analysis revealed statistically significant positive correlations between loneliness and dependence on online social media and attitudes toward extramarital relationships. In contrast, a statistically significant negative correlation was observed between mindfulness and attitudes toward extramarital relationships ($P < 0.001$). Collectively, loneliness, dependence on online social media, and mindfulness explained 45% of the variance in students' attitudes toward extramarital relationships, with mindfulness emerging as the strongest predictor.

Conclusion: These findings highlight the complex interplay of psychological and digital factors in shaping attitudes toward extramarital relationships among married female students. Loneliness and excessive social media use may foster permissive attitudes toward infidelity, whereas mindfulness appears to promote fidelity by enhancing emotional regulation. These insights underscore the potential for mindfulness-based strategies to strengthen marital commitment and inform future research into relational dynamics in academic settings.

Keywords: Extramarital relations, Loneliness, Social media, Mindfulness, Students

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Introduction

Extramarital relationships significantly undermine marital stability, profoundly impacting the psychological well-being of both partners. Often synonymous with infidelity, these relationships involve breaches of dyadic commitment through emotional or physical intimacy with someone outside the primary relationship (1). Typically, infidelity entails a married individual engaging in sexual activities with a non-spousal partner, often of the opposite sex (2). Social theorists highlight an increasing prevalence of such relationships, which erodes familial structures and marital cohesion (3). Prevalent in both clinical and non-clinical

populations, extramarital relationships cause substantial distress (4), with varying prevalence rates due to differing conceptualisations (5). The discovery of an affair can profoundly affect personality, physical and mental health, and relational dynamics (6, 7).

Loneliness is a critical predictor of attitudes toward extramarital relationships. Historically, philosophical traditions viewed loneliness positively, representing intentional solitude for contemplation or spiritual growth (8). However, contemporary psychological frameworks characterise loneliness as a distressing state marked by a perceived or actual deficit in social connections, including feelings of isolation, lack

of companionship, or diminished quality of interpersonal bonds (9). Poor social interaction skills can exacerbate social isolation, prompting individuals to seek compensatory mechanisms to alleviate loneliness (10). Research highlights that loneliness significantly influences marital dynamics. For instance, Ghazanfari Shabankare et al. (11) identified a negative correlation between loneliness and marital satisfaction, indicating that emotional and familial detachment can impair spousal relationships. Similarly, Joorbonyan and Qorbanoorlafmejani (8) found a significant inverse relationship between loneliness and marital adjustment, underscoring its detrimental impact on relational harmony.

Loneliness is linked to heightened online social media addiction among married individuals, exacerbating marital quality decline (12). Online addiction entails psychological and physical distress from excessive digital technology use, such as mobile phones or social media, resulting in dependency and adverse outcomes (13). Social media integration into family life reshapes spousal dynamics, altering expectations and responsibilities. These platforms may promote values conflicting with societal norms, challenging internalised moral frameworks (14). Such value conflicts can precipitate spousal and familial crises, as social networks cultivate distinct communication cultures (15). Technology's pervasive influence transforms interpersonal connections and expectations (16). Research by Damercheli et al. (17) and Latifian et al. (18) confirms that online addiction fosters permissive attitudes toward extramarital relationships.

In contrast, mindfulness among married individuals is associated with a reduced likelihood of developing positive attitudes toward extramarital relationships. Mindfulness entails a non-judgmental awareness of present-moment experiences, including thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations (19). As a cognitive-emotional skill, mindfulness enhances self-regulation and present-moment awareness, protecting against favourable views of extramarital involvement (20). Research indicates that individuals with higher mindfulness levels exhibit greater emotional impulse control, improved assessment of long-term consequences, and a tendency to align actions with core values when faced with tempting situations (21). Additionally, mindfulness fosters self-compassion and empathy, promoting

authentic and committed interpersonal bonds that are inversely related to positive attitudes toward extramarital relationships (22).

Attitudes toward extramarital relationships are influenced by a complex interplay of intrapersonal (e.g., personal values), interpersonal (e.g., relationship quality), and extrapersonal (e.g., social and media norms) factors. Despite extensive research on individual and interpersonal aspects of extramarital affairs, studies focusing on married female students remain scarce. Balancing academic and familial responsibilities, these women face unique stressors, including academic pressures, geographical separation from family, and exposure to diverse social networks, which may foster permissive attitudes toward extramarital relationships. This study examined the predictive roles of loneliness, online social media dependence, and mindfulness in shaping attitudes toward extramarital relationships among married female students.

Methods

This descriptive-correlational study was conducted from September to December 2024, targeting all married female students enrolled at Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, during the 2024 academic year. The target population included all married female students actively enrolled in undergraduate, master's, or doctoral programs at the university during this period. A convenience sampling method was used, selecting five faculties and five classes per faculty. A total of 280 questionnaires were distributed, with 259 complete responses analysed. The sample size was determined based on statistical power calculations, targeting a minimum of 250 participants to detect moderate effect sizes ($r \approx 0.3$) with 80% power at a 0.05 significance level, considering three predictor variables (loneliness, online social media dependence, and mindfulness) in the regression model. Inclusion criteria required participants to be married female students enrolled at the university in 2024. Exclusion criteria included incomplete questionnaires, unmarried status, or non-enrollment during the study period. The focus on female students was justified by their unique psycho-social challenges, including balancing academic demands and familial responsibilities, which may heighten vulnerability to relational stressors. This study adhered to ethical standards

and received approval from the Ethical Committee of Islamic Azad University-Arsanjan Branch (IR.IAU.A.REC.1403.150). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity of data were ensured through secure data storage and de-identification of responses.

Instruments

The Attitudes Toward Infidelity Scale (ATIS)

Attitudes toward extramarital affairs were assessed using the Attitudes Toward Infidelity Scale (ATIS) (23). This 12-item instrument employs a 7-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Total ATIS scores can range from 12 to 84, where elevated scores indicate more permissive attitudes regarding marital infidelity. The ATIS has demonstrated acceptable internal consistency reliability, with a reported Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.71 (24). The internal consistency reliability of the ATIS in the current study was assessed using Cronbach's α , which yielded a coefficient of 0.79.

The UCLA Loneliness Scale (ULS)

Loneliness was measured using the 20-item UCLA Loneliness Scale (ULS), a self-report instrument employing a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "always" (25). Prior studies have demonstrated the ULS's robust internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$) (26), a finding that was corroborated within the current sample. The ULS demonstrated strong internal consistency in this study, as indicated by a Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.84.

Online Social Media Dependence Questionnaire

The Online Social Media Dependence Scale is a 15-item self-report instrument initially developed by Leung (27). This instrument employs a five-point Likert scale (always, often, sometimes, rarely, and never), with scoring ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Torkian et al. (28) validated the Online Social Media Dependence Scale in Iran, reporting a Cronbach's α reliability coefficient of 0.80. In the present study, Cronbach's α was utilised to determine the reliability of the Online Social Media Dependence Questionnaire, yielding a

coefficient of 0.86.

The Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ)

The 15-item Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) (29) assessed mindfulness, operationalised as present-moment awareness. This self-report measure evaluates the capacity to attend to present experiences with non-judgmental acceptance, in contrast to tendencies toward rumination, worry, or automatic responding. Each item is rated on a 6-point Likert scale, resulting in a total score ranging from 15 to 90, with higher scores reflecting greater dispositional mindfulness. Previous research has established the strong internal consistency of the FFMQ, reporting a Cronbach's α of 0.86 (30). The FFMQ exhibited similarly robust internal consistency in the current study, with a Cronbach's α of 0.88.

Data Analysis

SPSS version 26 was used for descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and stepwise multiple regression analyses to predict attitudes based on loneliness, online social media dependence, and mindfulness. A significance level of $P < 0.05$ was adopted for all statistical tests.

Results

Table 1 presents the sample's demographic characteristics, showing a diverse distribution across academic levels, marital durations, and age groups, providing context for the study's findings.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for key variables within the married student sample. Mean scores indicate moderate positive attitudes toward extramarital relationships (45.14), higher levels of loneliness (52.20) and online social media dependence (50.27), and moderate mindfulness (51.87). Standard deviations suggest moderate variability. Skewness values near zero indicate generally symmetrical distributions, with slight negative skews for attitudes and loneliness, and slight positive skews for dependence and mindfulness. Kurtosis values suggest platykurtic to mesokurtic distributions. These statistics offer an initial profile of the central tendencies and distribution shapes of the variables in this cohort.

Table 3 displays the Pearson correlation coefficients illustrating the bivariate relationships between attitudes toward extramarital

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the participants

Characteristic	Category	N	(%)
Academic Level	Undergraduate	21	8.1
	Master's	150	57.9
	PhD	88	34.0
Marital Duration	<1 year	39	15.1
	1–5 years	90	34.7
	5–10 years	130	50.2
Age	20–25 years	29	11.2
	26–30 years	76	29.3
	31–35 years	83	32.0
	36–40 years	31	12.0
	41–45 years	40	15.4

Table 2: Means, standard deviations (SD), skewness, and kurtosis of the research variables

Variables	Means	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Attitudes toward extramarital relationships	45.14	11.48	0.06	-0.83
Loneliness	52.20	8.57	-0.11	-0.54
Dependence on online social media	50.27	8.27	0.14	-0.44
Mindfulness	51.87	10.49	0.06	-0.48

Table 3: Pearson correlation coefficients of attitudes toward extramarital relationships based on loneliness, dependence on online social media, and mindfulness

Variables	Attitudes toward extramarital relationships	P
Loneliness	r=0.47	0.001
Dependence on online social media	r=0.53	0.001
Mindfulness	r=-0.57	0.001

Significance level $P < 0.001$ **Table 4:** Summary of stepwise regression analysis predicting attitudes toward extramarital relationships

Model	Predictor variables	R	R ²	B	SE	β	t	P
1	Mindfulness	0.57	0.32	-0.62	0.07	-0.57	-10.99	0.001
2	Mindfulness and dependence on online social media	0.65	0.43	0.50	0.07	0.36	6.94	0.001
3	Mindfulness, dependence on online social media and loneliness	0.67	0.45	0.25	0.07	0.19	3.46	0.001

Significance level $P < 0.001$

relationships and the predictor variables of loneliness, dependence on online social media, and mindfulness within the married student sample. The analysis yielded statistically significant positive correlations between attitudes toward extramarital relationships and both loneliness ($r=0.47$, $P<0.001$) and dependence on online social media ($r=0.53$, $P<0.001$), signifying that greater experiences of loneliness and higher levels of online social media dependence are associated with more permissive views regarding extramarital relationships. In contrast, a statistically significant negative correlation was found between attitudes toward extramarital relationships and mindfulness ($r=-0.57$, $P<0.001$), implying that increased

mindfulness is linked to less accepting attitudes toward extramarital relationships.

As evident in Table 4, mindfulness emerged as the strongest predictor of attitudes toward extramarital relationships in the initial model. This variable exhibited a correlation coefficient of 0.57 with attitudes toward extramarital relationships, accounting for 32% of the variance. In the subsequent model, the inclusion of dependence on online social networks, following mindfulness, increased the correlation to 0.65, with these two variables collectively explaining approximately 42% of the variance in attitudes toward extramarital relationships, representing a 10% increment in predictive power.

In the final model, with the addition of loneliness after mindfulness and dependence on online social networks, the correlation further increased to 0.67, and the three variables together accounted for about 45% of the variance in attitudes toward extramarital relationships, a 3% gain in predictive capacity due to loneliness. Based on the sequential entry of variables, mindfulness demonstrated the most substantial contribution to predicting attitudes toward extramarital relationships ($\beta=-0.57$). Furthermore, mindfulness and dependence on online social networks ($\beta=0.36$) significantly predicted these attitudes, and the combination of mindfulness, dependence on online social networks, and loneliness ($\beta=0.19$) collectively contributed to the prediction of attitudes toward extramarital relationships (Table 4).

Discussion

This study investigated the predictive roles of loneliness, online social media dependence, and mindfulness in shaping attitudes toward extramarital relationships among married female students. The findings revealed significant correlations, offering insights into the psychosocial mechanisms influencing marital fidelity and providing a foundation for developing targeted interventions to enhance relational stability.

A statistically significant positive correlation was found between loneliness and permissive attitudes toward extramarital relationships, consistent with prior research (8, 11). Loneliness, characterised as an aversive emotional state stemming from perceived social disconnection (9), may drive individuals to seek external connections to address unmet emotional needs. Marital deficit theory posits that loneliness within a primary relationship prompts compensatory behaviours, such as extramarital involvement, to fulfil relational deficits (8). This mechanism appears particularly relevant for married female students, who navigate dual stressors of academic demands and familial responsibilities, potentially amplifying emotional isolation and fostering more accepting attitudes toward extramarital relationships.

Attachment theory further elucidates this association, suggesting that chronic loneliness reflects underlying attachment insecurities that shape moral evaluations of marital boundaries (9). For married female students, persistent loneliness

may lead to more flexible interpretations of relational norms, facilitating favourable attitudes toward extramarital relationships as a means to alleviate emotional distress. Additionally, the social-cognitive model highlights how loneliness induces cognitive biases, such as minimising the negative consequences of extramarital involvement while prioritising immediate emotional gratification (11). These biases may be exacerbated by this demographic's unique environmental and academic pressures, further influencing their relational attitudes.

The study also identified a significant positive correlation between dependence on online social media and permissive attitudes toward extramarital relationships, aligning with previous studies (17, 18). Uses and gratifications theory suggests that excessive social media engagement provides access to stimulating content and interactions outside the marital bond, potentially normalising non-normative relational behaviours (18). For married female students, prolonged exposure to virtual environments may blur perceived marital boundaries, particularly on platforms facilitating casual or intimate connections. This exposure can reshape expectations and challenge traditional values, fostering permissive attitudes toward extramarital relationships.

Online social media dependence may also contribute to feelings of inadequacy through upward social comparison, where idealised online portrayals of relationships heighten dissatisfaction with one's marital dynamics (17). This dissatisfaction creates a conducive environment for developing favourable attitudes toward extramarital relationships, as individuals may seek to emulate the idealised scenarios encountered online. Social norms theory further explains how frequent exposure to content that romanticises or normalises extramarital affairs can distort perceptions of acceptable marital behaviour (18). For married female students, such content may lead to internalisation of beliefs that extramarital relationships are common and acceptable, prompting a re-evaluation of personal values and fostering more permissive attitudes.

Conversely, a significant negative correlation was observed between mindfulness and attitudes toward extramarital relationships, corroborating prior research (31). Mindfulness, defined as non-judgmental present-moment awareness (19), is a

protective factor that enhances emotional self-regulation and reduces impulsive reactivity (32). At the intrapersonal level, mindfulness enables married female students to manage emotional impulses and make value-driven decisions, resisting relational temptations. Interpersonally, it promotes active engagement and effective communication within the marital dyad, strengthening spousal bonds and reducing the inclination to seek external alternatives (22).

Cognitively, mindfulness mitigates biases in information processing, fostering a more realistic appraisal of the consequences of extramarital involvement (31). Married female students with higher mindfulness levels demonstrate greater awareness of such behaviours' emotional and social ramifications, adopting a cautious stance aligned with integrated value systems. This psychological resilience is particularly valuable in student life, where academic pressures and separation from familial support may heighten vulnerability to relational stressors. Mindfulness also fosters self-awareness and self-compassion, reducing reliance on external validation and the need to address emotional deficits through extramarital relationships (33). By serving as an internal source of stability, mindfulness mitigates the tendency to pursue short-term, potentially maladaptive solutions to emotional needs.

Several limitations must be considered. The reliance on self-report questionnaires introduces the risk of social desirability bias, where participants may provide socially acceptable responses rather than genuine attitudes (11). Additionally, the sample, drawn exclusively from married female students at Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, limits generalizability to other populations or cultural contexts. Future research should incorporate diverse samples and objective measures to enhance robustness. These findings underscore the interplay of loneliness, online social media dependence, and mindfulness in shaping attitudes toward extramarital relationships, highlighting mindfulness as a promising target for interventions to promote marital fidelity among married female students.

Conclusion

This study confirms that loneliness, online social media dependence, and mindfulness significantly predict attitudes toward extramarital relationships among married female students. Positive

correlations between loneliness and social media dependence with permissive attitudes suggest that social isolation and virtual engagement foster tolerance for infidelity. Conversely, a strong negative correlation with mindfulness underscores its protective role, promoting marital fidelity through present-moment awareness and emotional regulation. These variables collectively account for 45% of the variance, highlighting the interplay of psychological and digital factors. As the strongest predictor, mindfulness merits further investigation to elucidate its mechanisms in mitigating permissive attitudes toward extramarital relationships.

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Ethical Approval

The Ethical Committee of Islamic Azad University- Arsanjan Branch approved the study (IR.IAU.A.REC.1403.150).

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Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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