

The structural model of the mediating role of sexual self-efficacy in the relationship between body appreciation and body image inflexibility with attitudes toward infidelity among employed women

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to determine the fit of a structural model examining the mediating role of sexual self-efficacy in the relationship between body appreciation and body image inflexibility with attitudes toward infidelity among employed women. In terms of purpose, the study was applied, and in terms of nature, it was descriptive-correlational. The statistical population comprised all employed women in Markazi Province in 2025, from whom 270 participants were selected through convenience sampling. Research instruments included the Attitudes Toward Infidelity Scale (Knox & Schacht, 2015), the Body Image Psychological Inflexibility Scale (Callaghan et al., 2015), the Body Appreciation Scale (Avalos et al., 2005), and the Sexual Self-Efficacy Questionnaire (Vaziri & Lotfi Kashani, 2013). Data were analyzed using path analysis. The results indicated that attitudes toward infidelity were predicted by psychological inflexibility related to body image among married women ($P=.010$, $\beta=.282$), whereas body appreciation did not predict attitudes toward infidelity ($P=.304$, $\beta=-.061$). Sexual self-efficacy significantly predicted attitudes toward infidelity ($P=.010$, $\beta=-.297$). Moreover, attitudes toward infidelity were predicted by psychological inflexibility of body image ($P=.038$, $\beta=-.038$) and body appreciation ($P=.010$, $\beta=-.090$) through the mediating role of sexual self-efficacy among married women. These findings highlight the importance of psychological interventions focused on body image and sexual empowerment. Counseling centers can, by promoting acceptance and commitment-based approaches to reduce body image inflexibility and by providing training protocols on sexual self-efficacy, create the necessary cognitive-behavioral foundation for preventing the tendency toward infidelity and strengthening marital stability in women.

Introduction

Family life is fraught with risks that threaten the continuity and health of the family unit. One such critical risk is marital infidelity, which entails profound emotional, cognitive, and structural consequences for the marital relationship. From the perspective of therapists, extramarital relationships or infidelity primarily emphasize the concept of unfaithfulness and the violation of marital commitment. Infidelity encompasses all behaviors and interactions of a married individual with a person of the opposite



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sex outside the family framework that lead to friendly, intimate, emotional, or romantic connections, which in turn generate specific emotional charges for the involved spouse ([Tardast et al., 2024](#)). Traditionally, extramarital relationships were defined by sexual intercourse with someone other than the spouse; however, in a broader sense, marital infidelity includes any sexual or emotional relationship beyond the committed bond between two spouses. It is estimated that approximately one-third of men and one-fourth of women may engage in infidelity at least once during their marital life ([Mark et al., 2011](#)).

Body image disturbance can have deep psychological and physical effects, acting as a potential predictor of attitudes toward infidelity. Positive body image dimensions include “body appreciation” and “body image flexibility” ([Saadatbin Javaheri et al., 2021](#)). The body can be viewed as the crystallization of social conditions and discourses that surround the individual, shaping how they perceive their own physicality. Body image is a multidimensional construct regarding one’s body—particularly its shape, size, and attractiveness—comprising an individual’s perceptions, feelings, and thoughts about their body ([Norouzi et al., 2018](#)). In contrast to a healthy body image, “body image psychological inflexibility” occurs when an individual is unwilling to experience thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations related to their body image, and chronically attempts to control, avoid, or alter the form or frequency of these experiences ([Amiri & Yaghoubi, 2017](#)). “Body appreciation,” as a component of positive body image, is defined as holding favorable attitudes toward the body regardless of physical appearance, accepting the body despite its discrepancy with societal thinness standards, respecting the body’s needs, and protecting it through health-promoting behaviors ([Avalos et al., 2005](#)). Individuals with higher levels of body appreciation are more resilient against cultural pressures to meet unrealistic attractiveness standards and are more likely to engage in self-care, health-oriented, and well-being-focused behaviors ([Gillen & Dunaev, 2017](#)).

Regarding sexual functioning, low sexual self-efficacy and low self-esteem in women can lead to the formation of permissive attitudes toward infidelity as a compensatory strategy to restore self-worth. “Sexual self-efficacy,” defined as an individual’s perceived control or confidence in their ability to achieve specific and desired sexual outcomes, is a crucial predictor of sexual behavior. It encompasses dimensions such as control over one’s sexual life, competence as a sexual agent, the ability to engage in safe sexual behavior, suitability as a sexual partner, and the capacity to attain sexual satisfaction ([Closson et al., 2018](#)). Sexual self-efficacy is essential for healthy, desirable sexual functioning and overall quality of sexual life ([Riazi et al., 2021](#)).

In line with investigating psychological factors involved in the pathology of marital relationships, [Sadeghi et al. \(2025\)](#) examined the predictive power of love trauma, sexual self-efficacy, and sexual fantasies on marital infidelity and emotional divorce. The findings indicated that sexual self-efficacy acts as a negative predictor, playing a protective role against infidelity, whereas love trauma and exploratory sexual fantasies are positive predictors. This suggests that low sexual self-efficacy, combined with past emotional trauma, makes individuals more vulnerable to developing permissive attitudes toward infidelity and experiencing emotional divorce. Moreover, [Gherman et al. \(2014\)](#) demonstrated that body shape concerns significantly influence women’s attributions of responsibility regarding their spouse’s infidelity; women with higher body-related concerns adopt distinct attributional patterns in jealousy-arousing situations, illustrating the key role of body perception in moral judgments and evaluations of marital loyalty. Furthermore, research findings indicate that body image, as one of the key predictors of sexual functioning, plays a decisive role in women’s psychological health and interpersonal behaviors. In this regard, studies have confirmed that cognitive-perceptual components, such as body image and sexual guilt, possess significant predictive capacity in explaining sexual pathologies and challenges in marital relationships, which highlights the necessity of investigating mediating constructs in this domain ([Babaee et al., 2025](#); [Refahi et al., 2019](#)). Finally, [Pourabdol et al. \(2025\)](#) showed that positive body image, marital satisfaction, and happiness are significantly and positively correlated with sexual desire, with body image accounting for a substantial portion of the variance in sexual desire, reinforcing the importance of psychophysiological components in promoting sexual desire and establishing a foundation for strengthening women’s sexual self-efficacy within marital relationships.

In the contemporary world, the widespread entry of women into the workforce and the simultaneous performance of professional and familial roles have fundamentally altered the structure and

dynamics of the family. Employment, while increasing financial independence and social interaction, brings new psycho-cognitive challenges, as these women are constantly exposed to role conflict, external standards of evaluation in the workplace, and social comparison. For an employed woman, the workplace is not merely a source of income but an arena for displaying body image and expressing competence, which can directly affect her perception of attractiveness, sexual self-efficacy, and ultimately, her attitude toward marital commitment. The convergence of workplace stress with potential body dissatisfaction and reduced self-efficacy in intimate dimensions may set the stage for shifts in attitudes toward loyalty and the propensity for alternative behaviors. Therefore, given the research gap in explaining the simultaneous role of body and sexual components in predicting attitudes toward infidelity among employed women, the present study aimed to determine the fit of a structural model examining the mediating role of sexual self-efficacy in the relationship between body appreciation and body image inflexibility with attitudes toward infidelity among employed women.

Method

Sample and Sampling Method

The present study employed an applied objective and a descriptive-correlational research design. The statistical population consisted of all employed women in Markazi Province in 2025. A sample of 270 participants was selected using convenience sampling. Inclusion criteria were: (1) holding a permanent or contractual position in organizations within Markazi Province; (2) married status (with at least one year since the official marriage date); (3) age range of 20 to 50 years; (4) informed consent to participate; and (5) general psychological health (absence of acute psychotic or psychological disorders that would hinder comprehension of the questionnaires). Exclusion criteria included: (1) history of psychological or pharmacological treatment for acute sexual or body image problems within the past 6 months; (2) acute family crises or stressors (e.g., advanced stages of divorce or severe emotional separation); and (3) incomplete questionnaires or invalid responses, which led to the exclusion of such data from the statistical analysis.

Tools Used

Attitudes Toward Infidelity Scale (ATIS)

Developed by [Knox and Schacht \(2015\)](#), this 12-item scale utilizes a 7-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree to 7: strongly agree). It consists of two subscales: negative attitudes (6 items) and positive attitudes (6 items) toward infidelity. Each subscale ranges from 6 to 42. [Habibi Asgarabad et al. \(2019\)](#) confirmed the factor structure through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) among 528 clients in Tehran, reporting an internal consistency Cronbach's alpha of .71.

Body Image Psychological Inflexibility Scale (BIPIS)

Designed by [Callaghan et al. \(2015\)](#), this 16-item scale uses a 7-point Likert scale. The developers reported a Cronbach's alpha of .93, a test-retest reliability of .90, and a concurrent validity coefficient of .74 with the Body Image Distortion Questionnaire. [Amiri and Yaghoubi \(2017\)](#) reported an alpha of .92 and significant correlations with metacognitive strategies and body-related safety behaviors.

Body Appreciation Scale (BAS)

Developed by [Avalos et al. \(2005\)](#), this 13-item scale uses a 5-point Likert scale (1: never to 5: always). [Atari \(2016\)](#) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .87 and established construct validity through correlations with self-esteem and life satisfaction.

Sexual Self-Efficacy Questionnaire

Developed by [Vaziri and Lotfi Kashani \(2013\)](#), this 10-item scale uses a 4-point Likert scale. The developers confirmed its factor structure via principal component analysis with varimax rotation, reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85, and established convergent validity through correlations with female sexual function (.80) and sexual satisfaction (.81) indices.

Procedure

Data were collected via an online survey platform. The research call and the questionnaire link were distributed through professional virtual networks. Once the target sample size was reached, responses were reviewed for eligibility based on demographic criteria, and valid data were extracted for analysis. Statistical analysis was performed using both descriptive and inferential methods. Descriptive

statistics (mean, standard deviation) were calculated for demographic data. Inferential analysis included Pearson correlation coefficients and path analysis to evaluate the structural model's fit, utilizing SPSS (version 22) and AMOS (version 24).

Results

The demographic profile of the participants (N=270) revealed a diverse age distribution: 19 participants (7%) were under 25 years old, 85 (31.5%) were between 26 and 30, 59 (21.9%) were between 31 and 35, 50 (18.5%) were between 36 and 40, and 57 (21.1%) were 46 years or older. Regarding marital duration, 86 participants (31.9%) had been married for less than 5 years, while 184 (68.1%) reported 6 years or more of marital experience. In terms of educational attainment, 19 participants (7%) held an associate degree, 209 (77.4%) held a bachelor's degree, and 42 (15.6%) held a master's degree. Regarding professional background, 81 participants (30%) had less than 5 years of work experience, 122 (45.2%) had between 5 and 10 years, and 67 (24.8%) reported more than 10 years of employment.

Table -1: Pearson Correlation Matrix of Research Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Body Image Psychological Inflexibility	-			
2. Body Appreciation	-.017	-		
3. Sexual Self-Efficacy	-.232**	.304**	-	
4. Attitude toward Infidelity	.319**	-.228**	-.209**	-

As shown in the table 1, there was no significant relationship between body image psychological inflexibility and body appreciation ($r = -.017$, $p > .05$). A significant negative correlation was found between body image psychological inflexibility and sexual self-efficacy ($r = -.232$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, a significant positive correlation was observed between body appreciation and sexual self-efficacy ($r = .304$, $p < .01$). Regarding the attitude toward infidelity, body image psychological inflexibility was significantly and positively correlated with this construct ($r = .319$, $p < .01$), whereas body appreciation showed a significant negative correlation with the attitude toward infidelity ($r = -.228$, $p < .01$). Finally, sexual self-efficacy was also significantly and negatively correlated with the attitude toward infidelity ($r = -.209$, $p < .01$).

Table- 2: Goodness-of-Fit Indices for the Structural Model

Fit Indices	Structural Model
Chi-square (χ^2)	.314
Degrees of Freedom (df)	2
χ^2/df	.157
Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)	1.000
Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI)	.997
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	1.000
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	.001
p-value	.855

Table 2 presents the model fit indices, indicating a good fit between the proposed structural model and the collected data. In this model, it was hypothesized that 'body image psychological inflexibility' and 'body appreciation' predict the 'attitude toward infidelity' in employed women, both directly and indirectly through the mediating role of 'sexual self-efficacy'. The results of the fit indices demonstrate that the model provides an adequate fit to the empirical data, and the hypothesized paths are supported by the findings.

Table- 3: Standardized and Unstandardized Path Coefficients for the Structural Model

Path	b	SE	β	P
Direct Paths				
Inflexibility → Infidelity	.138	.069	.282	.010
Appreciation → Infidelity	-.033	.060	-.061	.304
Inflexibility → Self-Efficacy	-.043	.052	-.126	.039
Appreciation → Self-Efficacy	.113	.074	.302	.010
Self-Efficacy → Infidelity	-.432	.067	-.297	.010
Indirect Paths				
Inflexibility → Self-Efficacy → Infidelity	-.018	.018	-.038	.038

Appreciation → Self-Efficacy → Infidelity	-.049	.030	-.090	.010
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According to the results presented in Table 3, attitude toward infidelity was significantly predicted by body image psychological inflexibility in married women ($\beta=.282$, $p=.010$). However, attitude toward infidelity was not significantly predicted by body appreciation ($\beta=-.061$, $p=.304$). In contrast, sexual self-efficacy significantly predicted attitude toward infidelity ($\beta=-.297$, $p=.010$). Furthermore, attitude toward infidelity was significantly predicted by body image psychological inflexibility ($\beta=-.038$, $p=.038$) and body appreciation ($\beta=-.090$, $p=.010$) through the mediating role of sexual self-efficacy in married women.

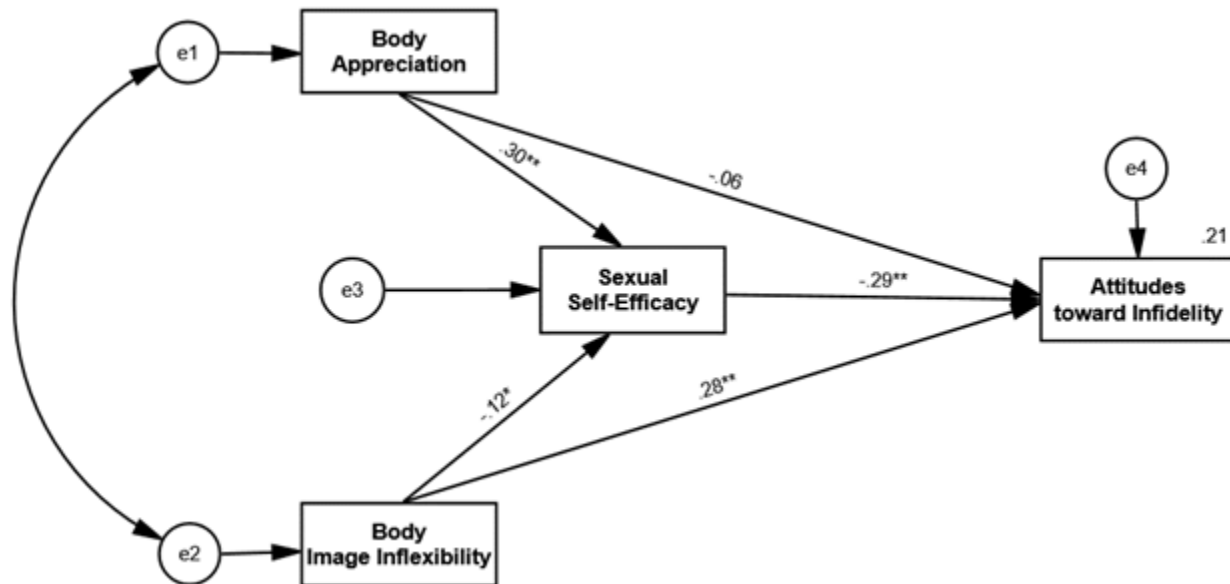


Figure 1 illustrates the structural model based on standardized coefficients. The results indicate that the independent variables—sexual self-efficacy, body appreciation, and body image psychological inflexibility—collectively account for 29% of the variance in the attitude toward infidelity among employed women ($R^2=.29$). These findings suggest that a significant portion of individual differences in attitudes toward infidelity can be explained by components related to body image and sexual efficacy.

Discussion

The objective of the present study was to determine the fit of the structural model regarding the mediating role of sexual self-efficacy in the relationship between body appreciation and body image psychological inflexibility with attitudes toward infidelity among employed women. The results indicated that attitudes toward infidelity in married women are predicted by body image psychological inflexibility and sexual self-efficacy; however, they are not predicted by body appreciation. Furthermore, attitudes toward infidelity are predicted by body image psychological inflexibility and body appreciation through the mediation of sexual self-efficacy in married women. These results are consistent with the studies of [Sadeghi et al. \(2025\)](#), [Babaei et al. \(2025\)](#), [Gherman et al. \(2014\)](#), and [Pourabdol et al. \(2025\)](#), who demonstrated that body-related components and sexual functioning play a fundamental role in infidelity tendencies and marital outcomes. [Sadeghi et al. \(2025\)](#) showed that sexual self-efficacy, as a negative predictor, reduces tendencies toward infidelity and emotional divorce, whereas emotional trauma and sexual fantasies reinforce such tendencies; this is consistent with the protective role of sexual self-efficacy in explaining attitudes toward infidelity in the current study. Findings by [Babaei et al. \(2025\)](#) indicated that sexual self-efficacy and emotional safety are associated with reduced body dysmorphia, which aligns with the effect of body image psychological inflexibility on attitudes toward infidelity in this study. Additionally, [Gherman et al. \(2014\)](#) showed that body image concerns affect attributional patterns of responsibility and moral judgments regarding infidelity, and [Pourabdol et al. \(2025\)](#) by emphasizing the role of positive body image in enhancing sexual desire, highlighted the importance of a positive attitude

toward the body as a foundation for strengthening sexual self-efficacy and protection against negative marital outcomes, in alignment with the results of the present study.

In explaining the prediction of attitudes toward infidelity based on body image psychological inflexibility in employed women, it can be stated that within the framework of attachment theory, body image and its related psychological flexibility can be shaped by the individual's early attachment experiences with caregivers. Women who have experienced insecure attachment during childhood may struggle with the formation of maladaptive schemas such as "defectiveness/shame" or "mistrust/abuse." These schemas can lead to a negative body image and inflexibility in facing challenges related to one's appearance and self-worth. Consequently, when these women encounter marital challenges that impact their body image or sense of worth (such as insufficient attention from a spouse, comparison with others, or physical changes due to pregnancy and childbirth), they may be driven toward maladaptive coping behaviors, such as infidelity, due to their psychological inflexibility in this domain. This infidelity can be an unconscious attempt to gain attention, validation, or the lost sense of self-worth, which, in the end, leads to an intensification of the problem rather than its resolution ([Khezrlou et al., 2024](#)).

From the perspective of Cognitive-Behavioral Theory, an individual's core attitudes and beliefs about themselves, others, and the world influence their behavior. Body image psychological inflexibility refers to the individual's ability to moderate negative thoughts and feelings associated with their appearance and to accept them, even when facing challenging conditions. Women who have low flexibility in this area may possess maladaptive beliefs, such as "I am not enough" or "If I do not look good, I will not be lovable." These beliefs can lead to severe anxiety regarding appearance and reduced self-efficacy in marital relationships. Under such circumstances, infidelity can be considered a way to prove attractiveness or compensate for feelings of inadequacy. Although this behavior might be relieving in the short term, it reinforces the initial maladaptive beliefs in the long term and creates a vicious cycle of negative attitudes toward oneself and the relationship ([Linardon et al., 2019](#)).

Self-Determination Theory emphasizes the importance of satisfying three basic psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Body image psychological inflexibility can be associated with an individual's sense of competence regarding their appearance and body. Women who have low flexibility in this area may feel that they lack sufficient competence in this aspect of themselves. This failure to satisfy the need for competence, along with potential problems in satisfying the need for relatedness (due to marital relationship issues) and autonomy (feeling insufficient control over their life and body), can lead to feelings of psychological helplessness. In this state, infidelity may be viewed as an attempt to regain a sense of competence, gain attention, and satisfy the need for relatedness through other means, or express lost autonomy, although these strategies eventually lead to greater harm ([Yu et al., 2024](#)).

In explaining attitudes toward infidelity based on sexual self-efficacy in employed women, it can be stated that from the perspective of Bandura's Social Learning Theory, sexual self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to regulate, initiate, and enjoy sexual interactions in a relationship. Low sexual self-efficacy in married women is often accompanied by feelings of inability to express needs, body shame, and a lack of mastery over the sexual experience ([Bandura, 2021](#)). When a woman has a low sense of self-efficacy in her marital relationship, this failure can lead to the formation of a positive attitude toward infidelity; this is because she unconsciously views infidelity not necessarily as a tool for pleasure, but as a strategy to evaluate her "seductive ability" and "sexual attractiveness" in a space outside the current relationship, where she perceives more safety and self-efficacy ([Wiederman & Hurd, 2020](#)). In fact, the attitude toward infidelity here acts as a "compensatory mechanism" to restore distorted self-efficacy.

Furthermore, within the framework of sexual processing and relationship satisfaction theory, women with high sexual self-efficacy tend to resolve sexual problems within the context of the primary relationship (problem-focused coping), whereas women with low self-efficacy often use avoidant strategies or escapism instead of facing sexual conflicts ([Fletcher et al., 2023](#)). Low sexual self-efficacy causes a woman to feel "hunted" or "passive" in her marital relationship, which provides the groundwork for changing the attitude toward infidelity as a kind of "enabling factor." Recent research has confirmed that sexual self-efficacy is not only a predictor of relationship quality but also a key protective factor

against facilitative attitudes toward infidelity, because a woman who is capable of expressing and managing her sexual needs is less likely to be caught in cognitive traps resulting from sexual deprivation or emotional frustration ([Zare et al., 2022](#)).

Finally, in explaining attitudes toward infidelity based on body image psychological inflexibility and body appreciation with the mediation of sexual self-efficacy in employed women, it can be said that from the perspective of Embodied Cognition Theory and the Acceptance and Commitment approach, body image psychological inflexibility (as the individual's tendency to avoid negative thoughts about the body or cognitive fusion with them) and weakness in "body appreciation" (as the lack of a positive attitude and gratitude toward bodily functions), both indicate the individual's psychological detachment from their own body. Women who are inflexible regarding their bodies and lack a sense of body appreciation are constantly evaluating their bodies against external standards, which leads to negative sexual self-awareness and performance anxiety. In the mediating path, this anxiety directly destroys sexual self-efficacy (the individual's belief in their ability to regulate sexual experiences), because when an individual is not at peace with their body, they cannot have an active and capable self in sexual interactions ([Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015](#); [Moman et al., 2022](#)).

In this model, low sexual self-efficacy acts as a mediator to drive the adverse effects of negative body image toward the creation of facilitative attitudes toward infidelity. According to Self-Determination Theory, women who have low sexual self-efficacy due to inflexibility in body image and lack of body appreciation do not feel competence and autonomy in the primary relationship and regard their bodies as a "malfunctional tool." Consequently, the attitude toward infidelity acts as a "compensatory fantasy" for these women; that is, by imagining a new space, they hope that in that space, by putting aside body shame and increasing perceived sexual self-efficacy, they can recover their body through an external, admiring gaze ([Siegel et al., 2020](#); [Zare et al., 2022](#)). Thus, the mediation of sexual self-efficacy explains how body dissatisfaction, by reducing capability in the sexual relationship, makes the individual more vulnerable to non-committed attitudes.

Despite the valuable findings, this study faced limitations that must be considered in generalizing the results, including the use of a convenience sampling method due to executive limitations in the statistical population of employed women in Markazi Province in 2025, which may involve bias in terms of complete representation of the population. Also, the correlational nature of the research limits the possibility of inferring definitive cause-and-effect relationships. Accordingly, it is suggested that future researchers increase the external validity of the findings by using probabilistic and random sampling methods. Also, implementing longitudinal research designs to examine the evolution of attitudes toward infidelity over time and conducting qualitative research to understand the lived experiences of women regarding the relationship between the body and marital commitment can significantly contribute to the existing literature.

Given the practical nature of this research, it is suggested that family and sexual health counseling centers in Markazi Province redesign therapeutic protocols based on "Acceptance and Commitment Therapy" with a special focus on "body image" for married women. In these intervention programs, training in skills to promote sexual self-efficacy and exercises based on self-compassion and body appreciation should be considered as prerequisites for consolidating marital loyalty. Also, holding empowerment workshops for employed women with the aim of distinguishing between "body acceptance" and "valuing based on external standards" can increase these women's sexual and psychological self-confidence, enhance their resilience against facilitative attitudes toward infidelity, and ultimately lead to the stability and sustainability of the family foundation.

Conclusion

This research was conducted with the aim of providing a structural explanation for attitudes toward infidelity among employed women in Markazi Province, and the results showed that the predictive model based on body image psychological inflexibility and body appreciation, with the mediation of sexual self-efficacy, has a good fit. In fact, these findings confirm that a positive attitude toward infidelity in women does not necessarily arise from mere dissatisfaction with the spouse, but has deeper roots in "the individual's relationship with their own body" and "belief in sexual capability." In other words, the deficit in body image flexibility and the lack of body appreciation, by weakening sexual self-efficacy in

women, create a psychological context in which infidelity is highlighted as a compensatory strategy to restore distorted individual worth and attractiveness.

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