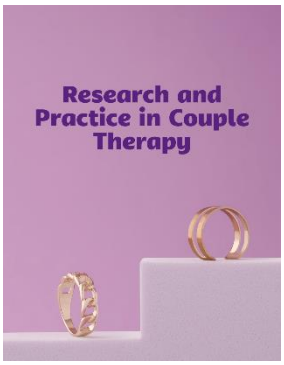
Article Type: Original Research
Article history:
Received 03 March 2024
Revised 16 May 2024
Accepted 20 May 2024
Published online 01 Jone 2024

Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Components of Marital Cohesion: A Multiple Case Study



1. Saeid. Motevalli[1*]: School of Education, UCSI University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2. Syarifah. Maisarah[2]: Department of Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences & Liberal Arts, UCSI University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*corresponding author's email: saeed@ucsiuniversity.edu.my

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components that contribute to marital cohesion among Malaysian couples. Using a qualitative multiple case study design, this research involved 23 participants (12 married couples and one widowed individual) residing in Malaysia. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on minimum criteria of five years of marital experience. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. NVivo 12 software was used to manage data coding. Theoretical saturation was achieved, and trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive memoing. Three overarching domains of marital cohesion were identified: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Cognitive cohesion included shared meaning of marriage, cognitive commitment, conflict attribution styles, trust in partner's judgment, and rational decision-making. Affective cohesion encompassed emotional intimacy, love and affection, emotional support, forgiveness, emotional presence, and emotional boundary-setting. Behavioral cohesion involved shared daily routines, conflict management behaviors, expressions of care, sexual and physical intimacy, joint decision-making, role participation, and marital rituals. The findings revealed that these dimensions interact dynamically and are shaped by contextual, cultural, and relational factors. Participant narratives highlighted the compensatory roles among domains and the impact of digital behaviors, gender roles, and financial collaboration on cohesion. Marital cohesion is a multifaceted construct shaped by the interaction of cognitive beliefs, emotional dynamics, and behavioral practices. Effective marital functioning requires alignment across these domains, but cohesion can also be sustained through compensatory strengths in one area when others are lacking. The findings underscore the importance of culturally informed, multidimensional approaches in marital assessment and intervention.

Keywords: Marital cohesion; cognitive commitment; emotional intimacy; behavioral rituals; qualitative study; Malaysian couples; case study.

How to cite this article:
Motevalli, S., & Maisarah, S (2024). Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Components of Marital Cohesion: A Multiple Case Study. *Research and Practice in Couple Therapy, 2*(2), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.61838/rpct.2.2.2

Introduction

Marital cohesion, as a multidimensional construct, plays a pivotal role in sustaining the emotional, psychological, and behavioral integrity of spousal relationships over time. Defined broadly, it encompasses the strength of emotional ties, the alignment of cognitive beliefs, and the degree of mutual engagement in everyday life routines between married partners. Across cultural contexts, cohesive marital bonds have been shown to enhance subjective well-being, mental health, resilience against external stressors, and even the social development of children within the household (Chen et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). Yet, as contemporary family structures evolve in the face of globalization, digital disruption, and sociocultural shifts, understanding the foundational components of marital cohesion becomes more critical than ever.

Recent literature underscores that marital cohesion is not a unitary phenomenon but rather a dynamic interplay of three core domains: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The cognitive domain includes belief systems, decision-making frameworks, and commitment schemas that influence how spouses mentally construct their relationship (Alizadeh et al., 2024; Nwankwo et al., 2023). The affective domain involves emotional intimacy, emotional regulation, and expressions of love, while the behavioral dimension includes shared rituals, joint problem-solving, and practical cooperation in everyday life (Jawairia et al., 2024; Samadi et al., 2020). Importantly, these domains are not static; they interact fluidly and are contextually shaped by life events, social pressures, and personal histories.

The theoretical foundations of marital cohesion have been deeply influenced by relational and systemic models of the family, with a growing body of research linking cohesion to family adaptability, conflict resolution, and psychological health (Lei & Kantor, 2020; Wondimu & Andualem, 2024). For example, the degree of psychological flexibility within marriage—defined as the ability to tolerate emotional discomfort while committing to shared values—has been found to predict marital adjustment across various cultures (Alizadeh et al., 2024). Similarly, beliefs about commitment and relational permanence shape how couples weather conflict and navigate adversity, particularly in societies where divorce is stigmatized or discouraged (Figueiredo & Pereira, 2025; Harutyunyan, 2018).

In parallel, affective elements of cohesion—such as mutual empathy, emotional responsiveness, and support—are essential in cultivating trust and psychological safety within marriage. Emotional closeness, expressed through affection, emotional presence, and forgiveness, is a reliable buffer against marital dissatisfaction and emotional detachment (Chen et al., 2024; Mutua et al., 2022). Studies have shown that emotional cohesion plays a mediating role between external stressors (e.g., financial strain, parenting burdens) and overall marital satisfaction (Gopalan et al., 2023; Marian et al., 2022). Especially in cases where one partner experiences chronic illness or mental health distress, emotional cohesion becomes a cornerstone of relational stability (Hien et al., 2024; Jawairia et al., 2024).

Behavioral cohesion, meanwhile, reflects the concrete actions couples take to maintain their partnership, including shared routines, sexual intimacy, and collaborative decision-making. Rituals such as shared meals, weekly planning, or religious observance serve as behavioral anchors that promote routine bonding and emotional stability (Samadi et al., 2020; Van & Minh, 2024). A recent cross-cultural analysis highlighted that couples who report high behavioral synchrony are more likely to experience lower levels of conflict escalation and emotional fatigue (Burkhanova & Sadretdinova, 2023). Moreover, physical proximity and joint participation in family roles have been linked with sustained marital satisfaction even during transitional periods such as the birth of a child or retirement (Naicker & Parumasur, 2018; Zhang et al., 2024).

Importantly, the interaction among cognitive, affective, and behavioral components is rarely symmetrical or linear. For instance, a couple might demonstrate strong behavioral coordination while lacking in emotional intimacy, leading to superficial stability without deep satisfaction. Alternatively, high affective connection without cognitive alignment on life goals may lead to passionate but conflict-prone unions. This complexity necessitates qualitative inquiry capable of capturing the lived experiences, nuanced meanings, and interactional patterns within marriages. As such, qualitative methods—particularly those employing in-depth interviews—offer valuable insights into how marital cohesion is constructed, maintained, or eroded over time (Dong & Han, 2025; Samadi et al., 2020).

In Southeast Asian contexts such as Malaysia, the intersection of traditional collectivist values and modern individualist influences creates a particularly fertile ground for exploring marital cohesion. Cultural expectations around gender roles, religious obligations, and extended family responsibilities often intersect with personal aspirations, emotional needs, and economic pressures. These tensions can either strengthen or strain marital cohesion, depending on how couples negotiate them (Jawairia et al., 2024; Navabinejad et al., 2024). Moreover, digitalization and widespread social media use have introduced

new domains of relational interaction—and conflict—particularly with regard to emotional infidelity, boundaries, and marital privacy (Harahsheh, 2025; Mutua et al., 2022).

A growing body of evidence suggests that the rise in internet dependency and digital communication has affected traditional patterns of intimacy, communication, and trust. Harahsheh's study on divorced women found that internet addiction significantly predicted emotional distance and marital dissatisfaction (Harahsheh, 2025). Similarly, Lee's analysis of spillover and compensatory behaviors in parenting couples suggests that marital cohesion can deteriorate when partners prioritize digital engagement over interpersonal responsiveness (Lee, 2018). The behavioral implications of such shifts are especially pronounced in younger couples, where online identities and digital lifestyles intersect with relational boundaries (Dong & Han, 2025).

Furthermore, demographic factors such as socioeconomic status, employment type, and family size also influence how marital cohesion is experienced and sustained. For example, Nwankwo et al. identified financial communication and management as powerful predictors of marital cohesion in Nigerian teachers (Nwankwo et al., 2023). In another context, Imani et al. demonstrated that marital cohesion among mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder was mediated by psychological coherence and object relations (Imani et al., 2022). These findings highlight the need for a contextual and intersectional approach to marital cohesion, especially when exploring cases in culturally diverse and economically stratified societies like Malaysia.

Despite these insights, much of the existing literature remains quantitative and reductionist, often operationalizing marital cohesion through standardized scales that may not fully capture the depth and complexity of couple dynamics. There is a distinct lack of multiple case study research exploring how cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components of marital cohesion manifest in everyday experiences and interactions (Figueiredo & Pereira, 2025; Samadi et al., 2020). Given the variability in how individuals construct meaning around love, duty, satisfaction, and relational success, qualitative methods are particularly well-suited for illuminating underexplored dimensions of this phenomenon (Burkhanova & Sadretdinova, 2023; Gopalan et al., 2023).

This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by conducting a multiple case qualitative exploration of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of marital cohesion among Malaysian couples.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study design to explore the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of marital cohesion among couples in Malaysia. The multiple case study approach enabled an in-depth, contextualized understanding of the phenomenon across diverse marital experiences. Purposeful sampling was used to select 23 participants (12 married couples and one widowed individual) from various regions of Malaysia, representing different age groups, ethnic backgrounds, educational levels, and durations of marriage. Inclusion criteria required participants to be legally married or recently widowed, with at least five years of marital experience, and willing to engage in open discussion about their marital relationship.

The sampling process continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning no new themes or insights were emerging from additional data. This criterion ensured depth and adequacy in capturing the variations and commonalities in marital cohesion experiences.

Measures

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which offered participants the flexibility to express their thoughts, emotions, and lived experiences while allowing the researchers to maintain focus on the central research objectives. An interview guide was developed based on a review of existing literature and conceptual frameworks of marital cohesion, including cognitive beliefs about marriage, emotional attachment, and behavioral expressions of commitment and intimacy.

Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in either Malay or English, depending on the participant's preference. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. All participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and ethical approval for the study was obtained from the institutional review board of the affiliated university.

Data analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, to identify recurring patterns and categories relevant to marital cohesion. Coding was performed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software (version 12) to manage and organize the data efficiently. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data, followed by axial coding to establish connections between cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains.

Throughout the analysis process, the research team engaged in constant comparison across cases to detect similarities, differences, and contextual nuances. To ensure trustworthiness, strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing, and reflective memoing were employed. Themes were finalized through consensus among the researchers, with attention to both within-case and cross-case patterns.

This rigorous methodological approach ensured that the findings represent a rich, authentic portrayal of marital cohesion as experienced by Malaysian couples, capturing both shared and individualized dimensions of the phenomenon.

Findings and Results

A total of 23 participants (12 couples and one widowed individual) took part in this study, all residing in different regions of Malaysia. The sample consisted of 13 females (56.5%) and 10 males (43.5%), ranging in age from 29 to 58 years, with a mean age of 41.2 years. In terms of marital duration, 9 participants (39.1%) had been married for 5–10 years, 8 participants (34.8%) for 11–20 years, and 6 participants (26.1%) for over 20 years. The educational background of participants varied, with 7 holding a secondary school diploma (30.4%), 10 having completed a bachelor's degree (43.5%), and 6 holding postgraduate qualifications (26.1%). Regarding occupation, 11 participants (47.8%) were employed in the public sector, 7 (30.4%) in the private sector, and 5 (21.7%) were self-employed or homemakers. Participants represented Malaysia's major ethnic groups, including Malay (65.2%), Chinese (21.7%), and Indian (13.0%). This demographic diversity provided a broad sociocultural lens through which marital cohesion was explored.

Table 1. Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts in Marital Cohesion

Main Category	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
Cognitive Cohesion	Shared Meaning of Marriage	"Mutual understanding of roles", "Common goals", "Religious compatibility", "Shared worldview", "Agreement on child-rearing"
	Cognitive Commitment	"Belief in permanence", "Long-term vision", "Resistance to divorce", "Promise-keeping", "Valuing the marital bond"
	Conflict Attribution Styles	"Blaming external stressors", "Taking shared responsibility", "Minimizing partner blame", "Seeing conflict as solvable"
	Rational Decision-Making	"Logical compromise", "Weighing pros and cons", "Future-oriented thinking", "Budget planning", "Parenting agreements"

	Trust in Partner's Judgment	"Confidence in decisions", "Relying on spouse's advice", "Respect for opinions", "Seeking input before action"
Affective Cohesion	Emotional Intimacy	"Feeling emotionally safe", "Mutual vulnerability", "Emotional responsiveness", "Expressing feelings openly", "Non-verbal closeness", "Feeling understood"
	Love and Affection	"Saying 'I love you'", "Frequent hugging", "Feeling adored", "Romantic gestures", "Emotional bonding", "Companionship"
	Emotional Support	"Being there in hard times", "Empathizing", "Comforting words", "Emotional availability", "Listening without judgment"
	Forgiveness and Emotional Recovery	"Letting go of resentment", "Emotional healing after fights", "Empathy after hurt", "Willingness to move forward"
	Emotional Presence in Daily Life	"Checking in emotionally", "Celebrating small wins", "Sharing emotional highs/lows", "Creating rituals of connection", "Feeling missed"
	Jealousy and Emotional Boundaries	"Managing jealousy", "Need for emotional exclusivity", "Fear of emotional distance", "Clarity in emotional boundaries"
Behavioral Cohesion	Shared Daily Routines	"Eating meals together", "Sleeping at the same time", "Running errands together", "Watching shows together", "Morning check-ins"
	Conflict Management Behaviors	"Taking time-outs", "Using humor", "Avoiding escalation", "Compromise in arguments", "Problem-solving together", "Silent reconciliation"
	Expressions of Care	"Acts of service", "Cooking for each other", "Checking on health", "Remembering important dates", "Providing physical comfort"
	Sexual and Physical Intimacy	"Frequency of sex", "Cuddling", "Kissing", "Initiating intimacy", "Physical touch during the day", "Feeling desired"
	Joint Decision-Making	"Discussing financial matters", "Planning vacations", "Making parenting decisions", "Agreeing on lifestyle changes", "Coordinating future plans", "Buying items together"
	Family Role Participation	"Co-parenting routines", "Household chores division", "Active parenting", "Taking turns in responsibilities", "Encouraging spouse's rest"
	Rituals and Celebrations	"Anniversary rituals", "Holiday traditions", "Weekend habits", "Gift-giving", "Shared religious practices"

Cognitive Cohesion

Shared Meaning of Marriage: Participants consistently emphasized that sharing a mutual understanding of what marriage means to both partners contributed to their marital cohesion. Many couples mentioned alignment in religious values, family goals, and life expectations. One participant shared, *"For us, marriage is about teamwork and worship; we raise our kids and build our life with the same vision."* Others referred to shared values as a "foundation" for handling life's challenges together.

Cognitive Commitment: Long-term thinking and a belief in the permanence of the relationship were central themes. Couples described their commitment as a conscious choice, regardless of fluctuating feelings. A participant noted, *"We've gone through tough times, but I always tell myself this marriage is for life, and we must protect it."* Others stressed the role of promises and personal values in maintaining their bond.

Conflict Attribution Styles: Participants demonstrated different ways of attributing conflict causes, which significantly affected cohesion. Many reported that blaming external stressors rather than each other helped de-escalate tensions. As one husband explained, *"When we fight, we don't say 'you did this.' We say, 'maybe it's work stress.' That makes it easier to forgive."* Taking joint responsibility was cited as a hallmark of a stable relationship.

Rational Decision-Making: The use of reason and foresight in problem-solving emerged as a cognitive strength among couples. They spoke of budgeting together, discussing parenting styles, and weighing options before acting. One wife explained, *"He's emotional, I'm rational. But together, we balance each other when deciding about the kids or money."* This balance was linked to a sense of mutual respect and strategic coordination.

Trust in Partner's Judgment: Trust in a spouse's decision-making ability was another strong cognitive feature. Couples shared how they consult each other before making key decisions, demonstrating interdependence. A participant said, *"I don't buy anything big without asking her. I value her thoughts and that makes her feel respected too."* Such mutual reliance created a sense of cognitive unity and reinforced loyalty.

Affective Cohesion

Emotional Intimacy: Many couples spoke about feeling emotionally safe and understood in their marriages. This emotional closeness allowed for vulnerability and open sharing. One wife explained, *"I can cry in front of him without shame. That's how I know I'm not alone."* Emotional intimacy was often nurtured through daily conversations, shared fears, and mutual encouragement.

Love and Affection: Expressions of love—both verbal and non-verbal—emerged as crucial to emotional bonding. Participants mentioned gestures like hugs, saying "I love you," and simple companionship as binding forces. *"Even after 15 years, he still surprises me with flowers on my birthday,"* shared one participant. These behaviors were seen as indicators of lasting affection.

Emotional Support: Support during times of distress was cited as a critical emotional pillar. Whether dealing with illness, job stress, or family problems, spouses who offered presence and empathy reported higher cohesion. A husband explained, *"She doesn't always solve my problems, but she listens. That's all I need."* Emotional availability was perceived as a stabilizing factor.

Forgiveness and Emotional Recovery: The ability to forgive and move forward after conflict featured heavily in participants' narratives. Participants noted that grudges were toxic to cohesion, while timely forgiveness enabled emotional renewal. One woman shared, *"We fight, sure. But by the next morning, we hug. That's our rule."* Couples often described forgiveness as an active, deliberate process rooted in empathy.

Emotional Presence in Daily Life: Participants emphasized the importance of being emotionally "present" in each other's daily routines. Checking in, acknowledging small victories, or simply asking about each other's day was meaningful. A participant reflected, *"He texts me just to say he's thinking of me. It makes me feel valued."* These small but frequent connections cultivated emotional stability.

Jealousy and Emotional Boundaries: Managing jealousy and maintaining emotional exclusivity were discussed in various ways. Some participants admitted struggling with jealousy but noted the importance of setting emotional boundaries. One participant shared, *"It's not about controlling, it's about knowing your partner is emotionally loyal to you."* This regulation of emotional boundaries reinforced trust and reduced insecurity.

Behavioral Cohesion

Shared Daily Routines: Many couples described routines as the glue of their relationship—eating together, praying, or watching shows nightly. One participant said, *"Even if we're busy, we always have dinner together. That's our time."* These rituals created predictability, comfort, and a sense of togetherness.

Conflict Management Behaviors: Participants revealed diverse strategies for managing arguments, such as taking time-outs or using humor. A husband recounted, *"When I get angry, she just starts laughing—it breaks the tension."* This practical and sometimes playful handling of conflict prevented escalation and preserved cohesion.

Expressions of Care: Daily acts of kindness were emphasized as behavioral affirmations of love. From cooking to remembering appointments, these gestures made participants feel appreciated. *"When he makes me tea without asking, it says more than words,"* a wife shared. These small actions communicated deep emotional investment.

Sexual and Physical Intimacy: Physical closeness and sexual connection were important to sustaining behavioral cohesion. Couples described intimacy as both physical and emotional bonding. One husband stated, *"It's not just about sex—it's about holding hands, hugging, feeling close."* Regular physical touch was seen as a way to maintain emotional warmth and security.

Joint Decision-Making: Most participants emphasized making decisions together, especially regarding finances, parenting, and lifestyle. One wife said, *"We never spend more than RM1000 without talking first. It keeps us on the same page."* Such cooperative decision-making was closely tied to respect and equality.

Family Role Participation: Balanced division of household and parenting duties was another theme. Participants noted that when both partners actively contributed, marital satisfaction and cohesion improved. A participant explained, *"He changes diapers, I handle bedtime. We share everything."* This practical collaboration strengthened mutual responsibility.

Rituals and Celebrations: Finally, celebrating anniversaries, holidays, and even small victories was seen as vital. Couples created shared traditions to mark time and affirm their bond. One participant recalled, *"Every Eid, we take a family photo and cook together. It's our thing."* These rituals offered moments of joy and togetherness amidst daily stress.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of marital cohesion among Malaysian couples through a qualitative multiple case design. Findings indicated that marital cohesion is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon influenced by shared beliefs, emotional dynamics, and concrete behaviors that bind partners together. The study found that couples sustain their cohesion by fostering shared cognitive understandings of marriage, developing emotional safety and affection, and engaging in consistent, mutual behaviors such as shared routines and joint decision-making. These dimensions, while interrelated, presented unique contributions to the overall marital bond and reflected diverse contextual, cultural, and interpersonal dynamics.

The cognitive domain of marital cohesion emerged as particularly important in establishing a durable foundation for the relationship. Participants emphasized shared meanings of marriage, strong cognitive commitment, and rational joint decision-making as central to sustaining their bond. These findings align with previous research suggesting that cognitive structures such as long-term commitment beliefs, shared goals, and mental schemas of loyalty play a critical role in buffering marital relationships against conflict and external pressure (Alizadeh et al., 2024; Figueiredo & Pereira, 2025). For instance, couples who articulated a clear belief in the sanctity and permanence of marriage appeared more resilient in facing disagreements or crises. This is consistent with findings from (Nwankwo et al., 2023), who highlighted the predictive role of financial communication and shared decision-making in strengthening cognitive alignment and cohesion. Moreover, cognitive alignment concerning gender roles, religious values, and family planning mirrored similar results in a study by (Harutyunyan, 2018), indicating that cognitive cohesion provides a stable frame through which partners interpret and respond to relational events.

Equally important were the affective components of cohesion, such as emotional intimacy, forgiveness, and consistent emotional support. Participants described these affective features as the "heart" of their marriages, emphasizing that love and emotional safety created an atmosphere in which mutual vulnerability and trust could flourish. This mirrors the work of (Chen et al., 2024), who identified emotional closeness as a critical determinant of marital satisfaction, particularly in couples facing chronic stressors such as illness. Similarly, (Mutua et al., 2022) found that couples who experienced higher emotional reciprocity were better able to withstand disruptions caused by digital distractions and external stress. In this study, emotional intimacy was often expressed through both verbal affirmation and physical gestures—paralleling findings from (Zhang et al., 2024), who reported that emotional warmth directly predicts parental involvement and marital satisfaction. The capacity for emotional recovery through forgiveness was also salient, with participants describing intentional processes of conflict resolution and emotional repair. These narratives align with (Gopalan et al., 2023), who noted that couples with high emotional cohesion often display better conflict de-escalation and post-conflict bonding.

Another significant affective factor was emotional presence in daily life—a subtle but consistent form of emotional engagement. Participants emphasized gestures like checking in during the day, celebrating small moments, and sharing moods as indicators of enduring affection. These micro-interactions reflect what (Marian et al., 2022) termed "relational sustainability practices," which include routine acts of emotional investment that cumulatively sustain marital bonds. Furthermore, the

emotional regulation of jealousy and establishment of emotional boundaries—also reported by participants—echo the findings of (Jawairia et al., 2024), who documented the emotional distress caused by boundary ambiguity in couples dealing with chronic illness and caregiving stress. In the current study, couples who successfully managed emotional jealousy tended to establish explicit communication norms and mutually agreed boundaries, demonstrating an emotionally intelligent approach to preserving intimacy.

The behavioral components of marital cohesion were perhaps the most visibly enacted and routinely reinforced aspects of the marital relationship. Shared routines, household role participation, sexual intimacy, and collaborative parenting formed the behavioral infrastructure of cohesion. These findings are strongly supported by (Samadi et al., 2020), who emphasized the role of shared rituals and mutual engagement in maintaining long-term marital satisfaction. Participants in the present study reported that behavioral synchrony—such as eating meals together, co-parenting, and planning jointly—served as "anchors" of daily connection, promoting emotional and logistical balance in the relationship. (Van & Minh, 2024) similarly found that routine behavioral alignment among healthcare workers significantly enhanced their sense of relational cohesion despite high-stress work conditions. In line with this, physical and sexual intimacy emerged as an essential behavioral expression of closeness. Couples noted that affectionate gestures, from hand-holding to regular sexual engagement, were integral to sustaining warmth and attachment. These findings are echoed in the work of (Hien et al., 2024), who illustrated the role of sexual meaning-making and its emotional correlates in sustaining marital quality across varying cultural contexts.

Notably, the study also revealed that all three domains—cognitive, affective, and behavioral—interacted in a dynamic, non-linear manner. While some couples demonstrated strength in all three areas, others showed compensatory strategies. For example, couples with low affective expressiveness compensated through behavioral reliability and cognitive commitment. Conversely, couples lacking cognitive alignment often leaned heavily on affective bonding to maintain cohesion. This dynamic interaction reflects the fluid nature of marital cohesion, which can shift over time and be influenced by contextual stressors or individual growth. These findings are consistent with (Lee, 2018), who discussed compensatory mechanisms in marital relationships, particularly in parenting contexts. Similarly, (Gopalan et al., 2023) highlighted that work–family conflict can strain one domain of cohesion, prompting reinforcement in another.

The current study also resonates with broader research linking digital behaviors and internet use with cohesion. While participants did not explicitly mention digital conflicts, their emphasis on "being emotionally present" and "minimizing distractions" during time together reflects a latent concern about digital intrusion. This aligns with the findings of (Harahsheh, 2025), who identified internet addiction as a negative predictor of emotional presence and marital engagement in divorced women. Likewise, (Mutua et al., 2022) emphasized that unregulated social media use can dilute behavioral and emotional intimacy, especially when couples spend more time online than engaging with each other. In contrast, participants in the current study who practiced joint media engagement (e.g., watching shows together, shared video calls) reported higher satisfaction, suggesting that digital tools, if managed collaboratively, can reinforce behavioral cohesion.

The impact of sociocultural and demographic factors also emerged across participant narratives. For instance, participants from more religious or collectivist backgrounds emphasized cognitive commitment and family honor, while younger participants highlighted emotional safety and personal growth. These variations are consistent with (Navabinejad et al., 2024), who found that family structure and cultural expectations significantly affect emotional alignment and divorce tendencies. Furthermore, the influence of socioeconomic stressors was indirectly noted through themes like joint budgeting, shared financial decisions, and role division—echoing (Nwankwo et al., 2023) and (Dong & Han, 2025), who found that financial alignment and planning strengthen cognitive and behavioral cohesion. These patterns suggest that marital cohesion is not only psychological but also deeply contextual, shaped by economic, cultural, and life-stage factors.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the sample size, while sufficient for qualitative saturation, was limited to 23 participants from Malaysia and may not capture the full spectrum of marital dynamics across Southeast Asia. Second, the reliance on self-reported data may have introduced social desirability bias, particularly in discussing sensitive topics like jealousy or sexual intimacy. Third, while the multiple case study design allowed for cross-case comparisons, it does not permit causal inferences or generalizations. Additionally, interviews were conducted in either Malay or English, potentially excluding nuanced emotional expressions rooted in native dialects. Lastly, the study did not explicitly analyze the influence of children, in-laws, or extended family systems, which are critical in many collectivist cultures.

Future studies should expand the geographic and cultural scope by including participants from diverse Asian, Middle Eastern, and Western contexts to explore cross-cultural variations in marital cohesion. Additionally, longitudinal designs could provide insights into how cohesion evolves across different stages of marriage or life transitions such as childbirth, relocation, or retirement. Including both partners in dyadic interviews would offer richer, more dynamic data on mutual perceptions and discrepancies. Furthermore, integrating digital ethnography or online communication analysis could shed light on the role of social media and technology in shaping or disrupting cohesion. Lastly, researchers should consider developing or adapting culturally sensitive measurement tools that reflect the three-domain model of cohesion proposed in this study.

Marriage counselors, family therapists, and social workers can benefit from integrating a three-dimensional framework of cohesion into their assessment and intervention strategies. Cognitive alignment can be nurtured through goal-setting exercises and shared value clarification sessions. Affective cohesion may be strengthened through emotional attunement training, forgiveness practices, and empathy-building interventions. Behavioral cohesion can be encouraged by establishing shared routines, cooperative decision-making structures, and joint rituals. Practitioners working in multicultural settings should tailor interventions to reflect sociocultural norms and expectations, ensuring relevance and resonance with clients' lived realities. Educational programs for premarital couples can also benefit from highlighting the distinct but interconnected roles of cognition, emotion, and behavior in sustaining lasting marital cohesion.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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