

The Mediating Role of Emotional Loneliness in Relationship between Stonewalling and Sexual Disengagement

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Research and
Practice in Couple
Therapy

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the mediating role of emotional loneliness in the relationship between stonewalling and sexual disengagement in romantic relationships. A descriptive correlational research design was used with a sample of 415 adult participants from Mexico, selected based on the Morgan and Krejcie table. Standardized instruments were employed to assess stonewalling, emotional loneliness, and sexual disengagement. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27 for descriptive and Pearson correlation analyses, and AMOS version 24 for structural equation modeling (SEM). Model fit was evaluated using common goodness-of-fit indices, and direct, indirect, and total effects were calculated to assess mediation. Pearson correlation coefficients indicated significant positive relationships between stonewalling and emotional loneliness ($r = .51, p < .001$), stonewalling and sexual disengagement ($r = .43, p < .001$), and emotional loneliness and sexual disengagement ($r = .56, p < .001$). The structural model demonstrated good fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 1.96$, CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.047). Stonewalling significantly predicted emotional loneliness ($\beta = 0.51, p < .001$) and sexual disengagement ($\beta = 0.23, p < .01$). Emotional loneliness significantly predicted sexual disengagement ($\beta = 0.56, p < .001$), and the indirect effect of stonewalling on sexual disengagement through emotional loneliness was also significant ($\beta = 0.28, p < .001$), confirming partial mediation. The results suggest that emotional loneliness serves as a critical mediating factor in the association between stonewalling and sexual disengagement. These findings underscore the importance of addressing emotional disconnection in therapeutic interventions aimed at enhancing intimacy and relational satisfaction in couples.

Keywords: Stonewalling; Emotional Loneliness; Sexual Disengagement.

How to cite this article:

Fernandes, L., & Hernández, C. (2024). The Mediating Role of Emotional Loneliness in Relationship between Stonewalling and Sexual Disengagement. *Research and Practice in Couple Therapy*, 2(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.61838/rpct.2.1.2>

Introduction

Romantic relationships are dynamic psychological and emotional systems that can either foster intimacy and well-being or exacerbate isolation and distress when dysfunctional. One of the most complex yet prevalent relational dynamics that contributes to relational breakdown is stonewalling, a defensive communication pattern characterized by emotional withdrawal, silence, and avoidance during conflict. Stonewalling is not only a barrier to conflict resolution but also a mechanism of detachment that can erode emotional and sexual connection over time. In this context, sexual disengagement, defined as a lack of emotional and physical intimacy during sexual interactions, often emerges as a silent indicator of deeper emotional dysfunctions within a relationship. This phenomenon has been linked to various psychosocial and emotional variables, including loneliness, which increasingly plays a pivotal mediating role in couples' emotional and relational patterns (Yao et al., 2023; Zhan et al., 2022).

Recent empirical research has drawn attention to emotional loneliness as a core factor influencing relationship quality, particularly in long-term romantic unions. Emotional loneliness refers to the subjective feeling of lacking close, emotionally significant relationships. It is distinct from social loneliness, which pertains to the absence of a broader social network. Studies have demonstrated that emotional loneliness has a stronger association with negative relational outcomes such as low relationship satisfaction, reduced sexual intimacy, and increased psychological distress (Mittelman et al., 2023; Numanović et al., 2023). Emotional loneliness not only reflects a lack of intimacy but also serves as a psychological conduit through which dysfunctional communication patterns such as stonewalling impact relational well-being (Chiao et al., 2022; Su et al., 2022). The current study therefore posits emotional loneliness as a potential mediating factor between stonewalling and sexual disengagement in couples.

Stonewalling has been widely recognized in Gottman's Four Horsemen model as one of the strongest predictors of marital dissolution. It denotes a partner's complete disengagement during conflict—physically present but emotionally and communicatively absent. Aliş (2022) found that individuals with psychiatric vulnerabilities, such as bipolar disorder, showed higher incidences of stonewalling and concurrent intimacy deficits in their romantic relationships (Aliş, 2022). However, even in non-clinical populations, stonewalling reflects avoidance of emotional processing and contributes to a climate of relational disconnect. When a partner stonewalls, the other often feels rejected or invalidated, which may initiate a cycle of emotional loneliness and sexual distancing (Aziz et al., 2021; Şimşek et al., 2021).

Sexual disengagement, while often considered a symptom, is in many cases a signal of broader affective disconnection within the relationship. When partners withdraw emotionally, it can disrupt sexual harmony, diminish physical closeness, and alter perceptions of relationship satisfaction (Soares et al., 2020). As Rowan et al. (2020) argue, relational disconnection—especially when chronic—fosters not only individual loneliness but also relational withdrawal, with sexual disengagement functioning as a behavioral outcome of accumulated emotional distance (Rowan et al., 2020). Such disengagement becomes particularly pronounced when partners rely on defensive communication strategies like stonewalling, thereby weakening the attachment bond and sexual reciprocity.

Moreover, empirical findings highlight that emotional loneliness can mediate the negative relational effects of dysfunctional communication. For instance, Ciechanowska and Kozerska (2022) revealed that emotionally active individuals, even amidst social challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, experienced greater relational dissatisfaction when emotional loneliness persisted (Ciechanowska & Kozerska, 2022). This underlines the internal and subjective quality of loneliness that cannot be compensated by mere social proximity. In another longitudinal study, Mueller et al. (2023) emphasized the impact of emotional bonds—even with non-human companions—on socio-emotional functioning, highlighting the centrality of emotional connectivity in maintaining psychological well-being (Mueller et al., 2023). Within romantic relationships, emotional loneliness has been linked not only to decreased satisfaction but also to increased withdrawal from intimacy-related behaviors, including sexual interaction (Dedeoğlu et al., 2022).

The relevance of this framework extends to different cultural and demographic contexts. For example, Stephens and Phillips (2022) observed that older adults' neighborhood perceptions affected both social and emotional loneliness, which in turn shaped their relational satisfaction and general well-being (Stephens & Phillips, 2022). Similarly, Zheng and Li (2022) demonstrated that even familial beliefs and filial piety among Chinese children impacted parental emotional states, including loneliness and life satisfaction, which can parallel marital patterns in collectivist cultures (Zheng & Li, 2022). Such findings highlight the broader implications of emotional loneliness beyond individual experience, affecting both sexual and emotional components of dyadic relationships.

Furthermore, research has shown that emotional loneliness contributes significantly to life satisfaction and cognitive-emotional health. McFeeley et al. (2023) suggested that emotional well-being serves as a psychological pathway linking cognitive functioning and life satisfaction in later life, again reinforcing the centrality of affective connectedness in sustaining relationship health (McFeeley et al., 2023). Likewise, Özdoğan (2021) found that the meaning of life partially mediates the link between emotional loneliness and subjective well-being among university students, emphasizing the existential dimensions of loneliness that permeate romantic engagement (Özdoğan, 2021). In couples, the erosion of shared meaning—often a consequence of chronic stonewalling—can trigger emotional withdrawal and eventual sexual detachment.

Loneliness in romantic relationships is not merely an individual experience but an emergent relational property shaped by mutual behaviors and unmet emotional needs. As Chiao et al. (2021) and Chiao et al. (2022) noted in studies on familial and peer contexts, emotional loneliness tends to intensify when communication becomes dysfunctional or when emotional responsiveness declines (Chiao et al., 2022; Chiao et al., 2021). The implications of these findings are critical in understanding how habitual stonewalling fosters an environment of neglect, leading to a cycle of loneliness and eventual sexual disengagement. From a psychological perspective, this triadic relationship between communication patterns, emotional states, and sexual behavior underscores the need for integrated interventions in couple therapy.

Furthermore, relational dynamics are embedded within broader social and cultural contexts, which also influence emotional connectivity and intimacy. Su et al. (2022) noted that the experience of loneliness among older immigrants was moderated by social support and acculturation, again illustrating that emotional loneliness is shaped by relational and cultural environments (Su et al., 2022). Macdonald and Hülür (2020) reinforced this point, showing how social connections played a protective role against loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic among older Swiss adults (Macdonald & Hülür, 2020). Although these studies did not focus exclusively on sexual disengagement, they provide strong evidence of the mediating power of emotional loneliness in relational satisfaction and emotional resilience.

The theoretical and empirical synthesis presented above positions emotional loneliness as a critical psychological construct in understanding the pathway from stonewalling to sexual disengagement. Given that romantic intimacy is highly sensitive to emotional communication patterns, the inability to share vulnerabilities due to stonewalling can silently fuel emotional isolation. As shown by Szczęśniak et al. (2020), self-esteem can moderate the impact of loneliness on life satisfaction, suggesting that individual-level factors may also influence the relational outcomes associated with emotional loneliness (Szczęśniak et al., 2020). However, when emotional loneliness becomes entrenched within the dyadic space, it is likely to manifest in sexual disengagement, serving as both a consequence and a perpetuator of relational dysfunction.

In light of these findings, the present study investigates the mediating role of emotional loneliness in the relationship between stonewalling and sexual disengagement among adult romantic partners in Mexico.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive correlational design to examine the mediating role of emotional loneliness in the relationship between stonewalling and sexual disengagement among adult participants in Mexico. A total of 415 individuals were selected using stratified random sampling, in accordance with the Morgan and Krejcie sample size determination table for large populations. Inclusion criteria required participants to be currently in a romantic relationship for at least one year and between the ages of 20 and 50. The participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and provided informed consent

prior to participation. All participants completed a self-report questionnaire consisting of standardized instruments measuring stonewalling, emotional loneliness, and sexual disengagement.

Measures

To assess sexual disengagement, the Sexual Satisfaction Scale for Women (SSS-W) developed by Meston and Trapnell (2005) was used, specifically the "Emotional and Relational Aspects of Sexual Activity" subscale. This subscale includes items that reflect emotional withdrawal and lack of intimacy during sexual encounters. The full SSS-W consists of 30 items across five subscales, but for the purposes of measuring sexual disengagement, only the 5-item subscale on emotional and relational disengagement was applied. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater sexual disengagement. The tool has demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > .85$) and construct validity across multiple studies involving diverse adult female populations, confirming its appropriateness for research on relational and sexual functioning.

Emotional loneliness was measured using the Emotional Loneliness subscale of the De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale, developed by De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg (1999). This subscale consists of 6 items that capture feelings of emotional emptiness and the absence of a close, intimate attachment. Respondents answer items using a 3-point response format: "Yes," "More or less," and "No," with scoring procedures recoding certain items so that higher total scores reflect greater emotional loneliness. The De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale has been widely used in both clinical and non-clinical settings, with multiple studies confirming its factorial validity and internal reliability (Cronbach's α ranges from .80 to .90 for the emotional subscale), making it a robust instrument for assessing the subjective experience of emotional loneliness.

Stonewalling was assessed using the Stonewalling subscale of the Gottman Sound Relationship House Questionnaire (SRHQ), originally developed by Gottman and colleagues (1999) as part of the broader framework for evaluating destructive communication behaviors in intimate relationships. The subscale comprises 5 items that assess behaviors such as emotional shutdown, silent treatment, and refusal to engage during conflict. Responses are given on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 7 (always), with higher scores indicating more frequent stonewalling behavior. The SRHQ and its subscales have demonstrated strong psychometric properties in longitudinal marital studies, including high internal consistency (Cronbach's α above .80 for the stonewalling subscale) and criterion validity in predicting relational dissatisfaction and conflict escalation.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 24. Initially, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the bivariate relationships between the dependent variable (sexual disengagement) and the independent variables (stonewalling and emotional loneliness). To assess the mediating role of emotional loneliness, a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach was employed. Model fit was evaluated using standard indices, including the chi-square/df ratio, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). The level of statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ for all tests.

Findings and Results

Of the 415 participants, 229 (55.18%) were female and 186 (44.82%) were male. The age distribution was as follows: 84 participants (20.24%) were aged 20–29, 132 (31.81%) were aged 30–39, 143 (34.46%) were aged 40–49, and 56 (13.49%) were aged 50 and above. Regarding relationship duration, 101 individuals (24.34%) reported being in a relationship for 1–3

years, 139 (33.49%) for 4–7 years, and 175 (42.17%) for more than 7 years. In terms of education level, 76 participants (18.31%) held a high school diploma, 201 (48.43%) had completed undergraduate studies, and 138 (33.25%) held a graduate degree.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 415)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Stonewalling	4.28	1.03
Emotional Loneliness	3.76	0.89
Sexual Disengagement	3.95	0.94

Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations for the three variables in the model. Participants reported moderate levels of stonewalling ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.03$) and sexual disengagement ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.94$), while emotional loneliness showed a slightly lower mean ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.89$), indicating that emotional withdrawal is a central but slightly less intense experience compared to the others in this sample.

Prior to conducting statistical analyses, the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity were tested and confirmed. Skewness and kurtosis values for all variables were within acceptable ranges (between -1.12 and $+0.87$ for skewness; between -0.98 and $+1.05$ for kurtosis), indicating approximate normality. Linearity was visually confirmed through scatterplot matrices, showing linear relationships between predictor and outcome variables. Tolerance values ranged from 0.72 to 0.89 and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values ranged from 1.12 to 1.38 , indicating no concerns with multicollinearity. Levene's test for homogeneity of variances yielded non-significant results across variables (p -values $> .05$), confirming homoscedasticity. These results support the validity of using parametric techniques such as Pearson correlation and SEM in the present analysis.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Variables

Variable	1. Stonewalling	2. Emotional Loneliness	3. Sexual Disengagement
1. Stonewalling	—		
2. Emotional Loneliness	.51** ($p < .001$)	—	
3. Sexual Disengagement	.43** ($p < .001$)	.56** ($p < .001$)	—

As shown in Table 2, stonewalling is significantly and positively correlated with emotional loneliness ($r = .51$, $p < .001$) and sexual disengagement ($r = .43$, $p < .001$). Emotional loneliness also has a strong positive correlation with sexual disengagement ($r = .56$, $p < .001$). These results indicate that higher levels of defensive communication are associated with greater emotional isolation and less engaged sexual behavior within romantic relationships.

Table 3. Fit Indices for the Structural Equation Model

Fit Index	Value	Threshold Criteria
χ^2	113.48	—
df	58	—
χ^2/df	1.96	< 3.00
GFI	0.94	≥ 0.90
AGFI	0.91	≥ 0.90
CFI	0.96	≥ 0.95
TLI	0.95	≥ 0.95
RMSEA	0.047	< 0.06

Table 3 presents the model fit indices for the structural equation model. The chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio was within acceptable limits ($\chi^2/df = 1.96$). All fit indices were satisfactory, with $GFI = 0.94$, $AGFI = 0.91$, $CFI = 0.96$, and $TLI =$

0.95. The RMSEA was 0.047, indicating a good fit. Collectively, these statistics confirm that the proposed model fits the observed data well and supports further interpretation of the path coefficients.

Table 4. Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects Between Variables in the SEM Model

Path	b	S.E	β	p
Stonewalling → Emotional Loneliness (Direct)	0.53	0.06	0.51	< .001
Emotional Loneliness → Sexual Disengagement (Direct)	0.62	0.07	0.56	< .001
Stonewalling → Sexual Disengagement (Direct)	0.27	0.08	0.23	< .01
Stonewalling → Sexual Disengagement (Indirect via Emotional Loneliness)	0.33	0.05	0.28	< .001
Stonewalling → Sexual Disengagement (Total Effect)	0.60	0.06	0.51	< .001

As presented in Table 4, the direct effect of stonewalling on emotional loneliness was significant ($b = 0.53$, $\beta = 0.51$, $p < .001$), as was the direct effect of emotional loneliness on sexual disengagement ($b = 0.62$, $\beta = 0.56$, $p < .001$). Stonewalling also had a significant direct effect on sexual disengagement ($b = 0.27$, $\beta = 0.23$, $p < .01$). More notably, the indirect effect of stonewalling on sexual disengagement via emotional loneliness was also significant ($b = 0.33$, $\beta = 0.28$, $p < .001$), indicating a substantial mediating role. The total effect ($b = 0.60$, $\beta = 0.51$, $p < .001$) confirms that both direct and indirect pathways contribute meaningfully to the prediction of sexual disengagement.

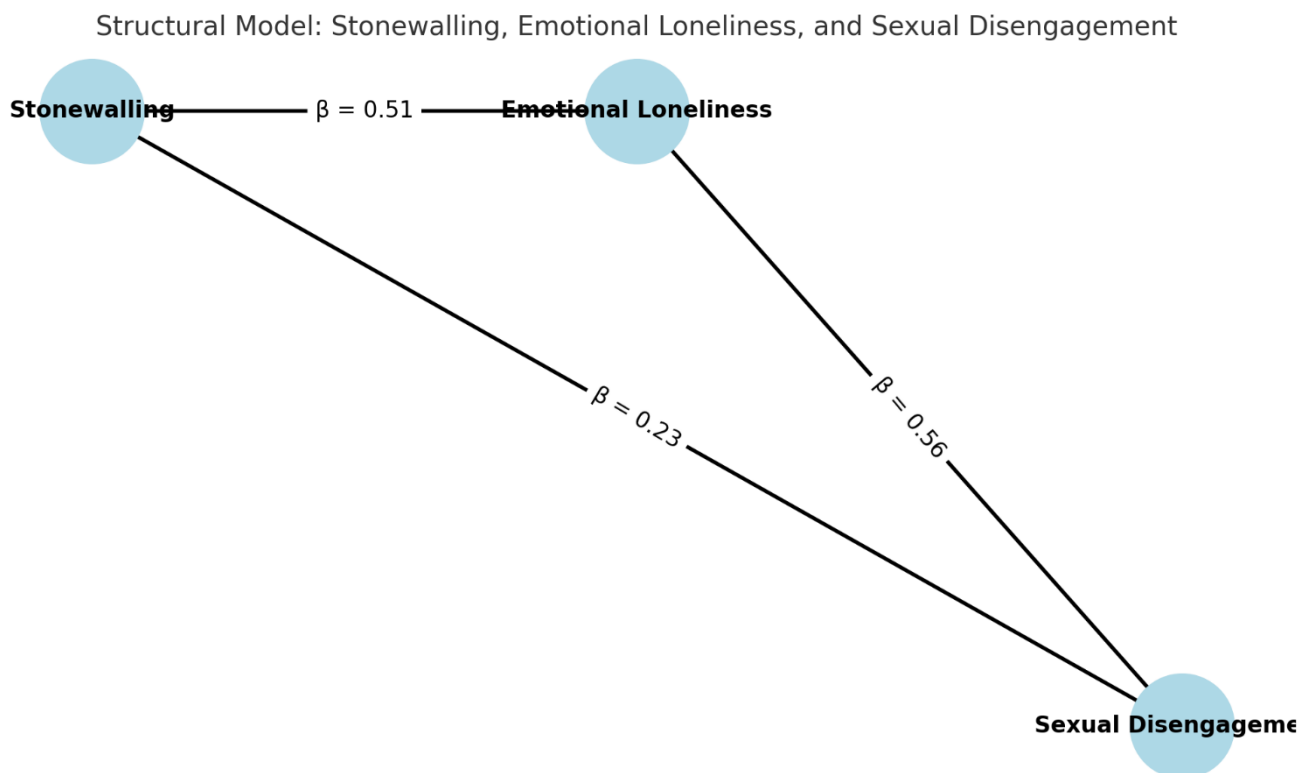


Figure 1. Final Model with Beta Coefficients

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study confirmed that emotional loneliness plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between stonewalling and sexual disengagement among romantic partners. Correlation analysis revealed a positive and significant relationship between stonewalling and emotional loneliness, as well as between emotional loneliness and sexual disengagement. Moreover, structural equation modeling indicated that emotional loneliness partially mediated the relationship between stonewalling and sexual disengagement, suggesting that while stonewalling directly contributes to sexual

disengagement, it also does so indirectly by fostering emotional isolation. These findings support the theoretical assumption that affective withdrawal and poor conflict resolution strategies—such as stonewalling—erode emotional intimacy, which in turn undermines sexual satisfaction and engagement within romantic relationships.

The significant association between stonewalling and emotional loneliness aligns with the foundational premise that stonewalling functions as a destructive communication pattern, which contributes to a climate of emotional disconnection. Stonewalling typically involves withdrawing from interaction, suppressing emotional expression, and refusing to engage during moments of relational stress. This behavior deprives couples of the opportunity to resolve conflict, express emotional needs, or reaffirm closeness—ultimately heightening feelings of emotional loneliness. Similar patterns have been noted in prior research where emotionally avoidant behaviors were found to exacerbate emotional isolation in intimate relationships (Aliş, 2022). Moreover, studies have suggested that stonewalling is particularly detrimental in long-term partnerships, where persistent avoidance can foster chronic emotional loneliness and interpersonal dissatisfaction (Aziz et al., 2021; Şimşek et al., 2021).

Emotional loneliness was also significantly associated with sexual disengagement in this study, a result consistent with prior findings indicating that a lack of emotional intimacy often translates into diminished sexual desire, lower frequency of sexual activity, and reduced satisfaction with physical intimacy. As observed by Zhan et al. (2022), emotional disconnection—particularly when reinforced by behaviors like stonewalling—can erode romantic satisfaction and reduce empathetic engagement, both of which are essential components of a satisfying sexual relationship (Zhan et al., 2022). Likewise, Yao et al. (2023) found that married couples experiencing emotional loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic reported decreased relationship satisfaction, with many describing withdrawal from sexual interaction as an outcome of emotional fatigue and detachment (Yao et al., 2023). These converging results emphasize the tightly woven link between emotional and sexual intimacy, where breakdowns in one domain often predict dysfunction in the other.

The mediating role of emotional loneliness observed in this study extends the existing literature by highlighting its function as a psychological bridge between conflict behaviors and physical intimacy. Although previous studies have shown that stonewalling is predictive of sexual dissatisfaction, few have examined the intervening emotional mechanisms that facilitate this association. Emotional loneliness, in this context, emerges not just as an outcome but as an active mediator—a psychological state that amplifies the negative effects of stonewalling on relational and sexual well-being. This is supported by the findings of Mittelman et al. (2023), who demonstrated that emotional well-being variables such as loneliness and perceived support significantly predicted relational satisfaction in older adult couples (Mittelman et al., 2023). In other words, the emotional distance created by stonewalling undermines affective reciprocity, which is essential for maintaining sexual connection.

In broader psychosocial terms, the current findings are consistent with research on loneliness across life stages and contexts. For example, Ciechanowska and Kozerska (2022) found that emotionally active women experienced heightened loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite maintaining social interactions, pointing to the depth of emotional loneliness as a subjective state not merely mitigated by external contact (Ciechanowska & Kozerska, 2022). Similarly, Zheng and Li (2022) demonstrated that children's filial behaviors impacted parental loneliness and well-being, underlining the intersubjective and relational nature of emotional fulfillment (Zheng & Li, 2022). The consistent link between emotional isolation and overall relational dysfunction across studies affirms the role of emotional loneliness as both a relational and intrapersonal construct.

The data also support earlier research emphasizing the cascading impact of emotional disconnection on intimate relationships. According to Stephens and Phillips (2022), emotional loneliness was associated with perceptions of neighborhood disconnection and reduced social network quality, which in turn affected psychological health in older adults (Stephens & Phillips, 2022). This finding mirrors the present results, wherein emotional loneliness served as an intermediary

factor translating interpersonal detachment (stonewalling) into more tangible behavioral consequences (sexual disengagement). It also resonates with observations by Rowan et al. (2020), who posited that even when individuals are embedded in a social environment, emotional loneliness may persist due to a lack of emotionally fulfilling interactions (Rowan et al., 2020).

Furthermore, emotional loneliness may exacerbate relational distress by diminishing the protective influence of perceived support. As Su et al. (2022) noted, immigrants experiencing acculturative stress suffered elevated levels of emotional loneliness and psychological distress, even when basic social networks were intact (Su et al., 2022). Within romantic partnerships, a similar pattern may be observed; although couples may still cohabit or communicate functionally, a lack of emotional closeness may foster a profound sense of isolation. This internalized loneliness undermines not only affective intimacy but also the capacity for mutual emotional regulation, a key component of sexual and relational satisfaction (Mueller et al., 2023; Soares et al., 2020).

In summary, this study provides empirical validation for the notion that emotional loneliness functions as a central emotional mechanism linking destructive communicative behavior—stonewalling—to behavioral withdrawal from sexual intimacy. By demonstrating this mediating role, the findings advance the theoretical understanding of how emotional and sexual disconnection unfold in romantic partnerships. Emotional loneliness, long overlooked as a silent affective burden, is shown here to be both a consequence of poor communication and a driver of relational dysfunction, particularly in the sexual domain. This insight suggests that therapeutic interventions aimed at reducing stonewalling behaviors and enhancing emotional availability may be effective strategies for preventing or reversing sexual disengagement.

Despite its significant contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, the use of self-report questionnaires may have introduced social desirability or recall bias, particularly when reporting sensitive variables such as sexual disengagement and emotional loneliness. Second, the study's cross-sectional design restricts causal inferences. Although structural equation modeling provides insights into directional relationships, longitudinal studies are needed to confirm the temporal order of stonewalling, emotional loneliness, and sexual disengagement. Third, while the sample was geographically diverse within Mexico, cultural factors unique to the region may limit the generalizability of findings to other countries or populations with different norms regarding intimacy, communication, and sexuality. Additionally, the study did not account for other potentially influential factors such as attachment style, depressive symptoms, or relationship duration, which may moderate the observed relationships.

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to explore the temporal sequence of communication patterns, emotional loneliness, and sexual intimacy across time. This would offer stronger causal evidence and help to identify critical turning points in the deterioration or improvement of relational intimacy. Studies could also benefit from exploring additional mediators and moderators, such as emotional regulation, empathy, or conflict resolution skills, to better understand the complexity of the associations. Furthermore, integrating qualitative methods—such as interviews or focus groups—could provide richer, more nuanced insights into how individuals subjectively experience emotional loneliness and sexual disengagement. Comparative studies across cultures would also illuminate how sociocultural expectations shape these dynamics differently in individualistic versus collectivist societies.

The results of this study carry valuable implications for practitioners working in couple therapy and relationship counseling. Therapists should assess for signs of stonewalling early in treatment, recognizing it not merely as a communication barrier but as a precursor to emotional and sexual withdrawal. Interventions that target emotional expressiveness, promote vulnerability, and build affective safety may help couples reduce emotional loneliness and restore intimacy. Programs such as emotionally focused therapy (EFT) or Gottman-based interventions can be tailored to address the specific dynamics observed in this study. Additionally, clinicians should educate couples on the bidirectional nature of emotional and sexual intimacy, emphasizing that

repairing one domain often requires attention to the other. By identifying emotional loneliness as a critical mediating variable, practitioners are better equipped to structure interventions that break the cycle of relational disengagement and foster long-term relational health.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered 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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