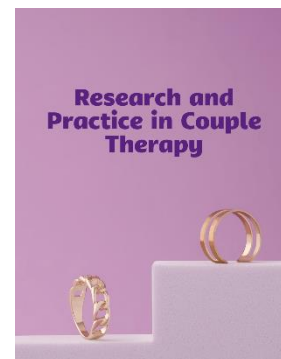




Impact of Forgiveness on Marital Trust: Mediating Role of Emotional Reconciliation

1. Daniela. Gottschlich^{ID}: Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC, Canada
2. Jingjing. Ying^{ID}: Shanghai Institute of Early Childhood Education, Shanghai Normal University, Shanghai, China
3. Xian Seng. Neo^{ID}: Faculty of Humanities, Department of Psychology, Nanyang Technological University, Nanyang, Singapore
4. Syarifah. Maisarah^{ID}: Faculty of Social Sciences & Liberal Arts, Department of Psychology, UCSI University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
5. Farzaneh. Mardani^{ID}*: Department of Psychology and Counseling, KMAN Research Institute, Richmond Hill, Ontario, Canada

*corresponding author's email: farzanehmardani@kmanresce.ca



ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the effect of forgiveness on marital trust with emotional reconciliation as a mediating variable among married individuals in Hong Kong. A descriptive correlational design was employed using a sample of 381 married participants, selected based on Krejcie and Morgan's sample size table for large populations. Data were collected using standardized self-report questionnaires measuring forgiveness, emotional reconciliation, and marital trust. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) were conducted using SPSS-27 and AMOS-21 software. Assumptions for normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity were tested and confirmed prior to the analysis. Pearson correlations revealed significant positive associations between forgiveness and emotional reconciliation ($r = .62, p < .01$), forgiveness and marital trust ($r = .58, p < .01$), and emotional reconciliation and marital trust ($r = .55, p < .01$). The SEM analysis demonstrated a good model fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.14$, CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.045, TLI = 0.96). Forgiveness had a significant direct effect on emotional reconciliation ($\beta = 0.62$) and marital trust ($\beta = 0.34$), while emotional reconciliation significantly predicted marital trust ($\beta = 0.37$). The indirect effect of forgiveness on marital trust through emotional reconciliation was also significant ($\beta = 0.23$), indicating a partial mediating role. The total effect of forgiveness on marital trust was substantial ($\beta = 0.57, p < .001$). The findings suggest that forgiveness enhances marital trust both directly and indirectly through emotional reconciliation. These results underscore the importance of promoting emotional repair strategies in marital relationships to rebuild trust following interpersonal conflicts.

Keywords: Forgiveness; Marital Trust; Emotional Reconciliation

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Introduction

Marital trust represents a foundational pillar in the architecture of intimate relationships, determining not only the emotional climate of the couple but also the long-term stability of their union. In recent decades, empirical research has increasingly illuminated how trust in marriage is shaped by a dynamic interplay of emotional processes, communication behaviors, and individual predispositions. Among these, forgiveness and emotional reconciliation have emerged as key relational resources that enable couples to repair breaches, restore intimacy, and foster mutual security after interpersonal transgressions (Siadat et al., 2023; Xiao et al., 2025). While forgiveness facilitates the intrapersonal release of resentment, emotional reconciliation engages the dyadic process of re-establishing emotional connection—thereby reinforcing trust.



The social and psychological underpinnings of marital trust are complex and multifaceted. Trust within a marriage is not merely a belief in a partner's honesty or predictability; rather, it reflects an integration of *affective*, *cognitive*, and *behavioral* dimensions grounded in the history of the relationship and the partners' responsiveness during conflict (Xiao et al., 2025). Marital trust is significantly influenced by emotional repair mechanisms following relational injuries such as infidelity, betrayal, or chronic conflict (Chi et al., 2019). Studies suggest that forgiveness alone is not sufficient unless it is accompanied by a willingness to emotionally reconcile, which involves the reinstatement of empathy, warmth, and shared emotional narratives (Ohtsubo & Smith, 2024; Parent, 2019). These restorative processes hold particular importance in cultural contexts like Hong Kong, where evolving gender norms, economic stressors, and shifting family structures have reshaped marital expectations and trust dynamics (Ting, 2014).

Forgiveness, a construct with religious, moral, and psychological connotations, is widely recognized as a key predictor of marital quality and conflict resolution. Defined as a conscious, intentional process to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge, forgiveness involves both emotional and cognitive restructuring (Chi et al., 2019; Ordóñez-Carabaño et al., 2020). Forgiveness in marital contexts has been shown to predict lower levels of depression and greater marital adjustment, particularly in cases involving severe offenses such as infidelity (Ade et al., 2017; Dalgleish et al., 2014). However, forgiveness does not automatically guarantee reconciliation. Emotional reconciliation requires a more vulnerable, mutual process in which both partners actively repair the emotional bond, often through expressions of remorse, empathy, and renewed commitment (Cloke, 2015; Kapshuk & Shapira, 2022). Without such engagement, forgiveness may remain superficial, and marital trust may not fully recover (Assche et al., 2017; Erwin & Sturm, 2022).

Scholars have further emphasized that reconciliation processes are embedded in broader emotional and social systems. In their work on post-conflict societies, Cárdenas et al. (Cárdenas et al., 2015) and Ordóñez-Carabaño et al. (Ordóñez-Carabaño et al., 2020) illustrate how apologies, acknowledgment of harm, and mutual validation are crucial to rebuilding trust—principles that equally apply to intimate relationships. Emotional reconciliation in marital contexts involves rebuilding emotional safety, reestablishing intimacy, and cultivating a new shared narrative after the disruption. This has been observed not only in personal relationships but also in intergroup dynamics, where reconciliation is contingent on emotional readiness and shared vulnerability (Assche et al., 2017; Baysu & Çoşkan, 2018).

The mediating role of emotional reconciliation in the forgiveness–trust pathway has been increasingly supported by theoretical and empirical work. Emotional reconciliation creates a psychological bridge that connects the individual act of forgiveness to the relational state of restored trust. Without reconciliation, forgiveness may exist only as a cognitive shift or religious obligation, insufficient to repair emotional intimacy (Bhusal, 2024; Ohtsubo & Smith, 2024). Hughes (Hughes, 2020) has argued that true reconciliation involves not only the cessation of hostility but also the reconstitution of mutual emotional availability. This process enhances the partner's perception of safety and predictability, leading to greater marital trust (Pavlenko & Krasnikova, 2024).

Importantly, this interplay is often moderated by communication dynamics. Effective communication has been shown to facilitate the expression of forgiveness and emotional vulnerability, thereby reinforcing reconciliation and, subsequently, trust (Dalhatu & Muhammad, 2024; Samarh, 2025). Conversely, poor communication can obstruct reconciliation, leaving relational wounds unresolved. Samarh (Samarh, 2025), for instance, highlights the significance of prophetic communication styles—characterized by patience, humility, and non-defensiveness—in enhancing marital harmony and trust. This supports the view that reconciliation is not merely emotional but is also enacted behaviorally through constructive interaction patterns.

Demographic and contextual variables such as age, gender, duration of marriage, and cultural background further influence the pathways between forgiveness, reconciliation, and trust. Ting (Ting, 2014) notes that in Hong Kong, changing social norms

and economic pressures have led to delayed marriage, shifting gender roles, and increased relational uncertainty. These dynamics necessitate adaptive relational processes like forgiveness and reconciliation to maintain long-term trust. Pavlenko and Krasnikova (Pavlenko & Krasnikova, 2024) also found that empathy and emotional intelligence vary by length of marriage, suggesting that longer relationships may either deepen reconciliation capacities or entrench maladaptive coping strategies.

Research from neuropsychology and developmental psychology provides further support for the emotional foundations of reconciliation. Liao et al. (Liao et al., 2013) demonstrate how children learn to reconcile through the development of emotion understanding and empathy—skills that remain relevant in adult relationships. Similarly, Dalgleish et al. (Dalgleish et al., 2014) showed that emotional regulation and responsiveness predicted improvements in marital satisfaction during Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT), highlighting the clinical relevance of reconciliation mechanisms. Lindström's studies on marital status and trust reveal that being in a marital relationship is positively associated with generalized trust, suggesting that the health of close relationships spills over into broader social trust (Lindström, 2012; Lindström & Rosvall, 2012).

This study builds on the emerging consensus that forgiveness and emotional reconciliation are distinct yet interrelated constructs, both of which contribute to the development of marital trust. The inclusion of emotional reconciliation as a mediating variable provides a more nuanced understanding of how trust is restored after conflict or injury. Unlike prior research that examined direct effects only, the present study adopts a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach to examine both direct and indirect pathways, offering a more integrative model of marital trust formation.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study utilized a descriptive correlational design to investigate the relationship between forgiveness and marital trust, with emotional reconciliation as a mediating variable. The target population consisted of married individuals residing in Hong Kong. A total of 381 participants were selected using stratified random sampling, with the sample size determined based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size table for a population exceeding 10,000. Eligibility criteria included being legally married for at least one year and voluntarily consenting to participate in the study. Participants completed a self-report questionnaire battery, including standardized scales measuring forgiveness, emotional reconciliation, and marital trust. Data were collected anonymously to ensure confidentiality and minimize social desirability bias.

Measures

The Marital Trust Scale developed by Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985) is a widely used self-report instrument designed to assess the degree of trust between romantic partners. The scale consists of 17 items across three subscales: predictability, dependability, and faith, capturing both cognitive and emotional aspects of trust in intimate relationships. Respondents rate items on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating a greater level of trust toward one's spouse. Several studies have reported high internal consistency for the total scale (Cronbach's alpha > .80) and subscales, as well as strong convergent and discriminant validity, confirming its reliability and applicability in marital research.

The Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS), created by Thompson et al. (2005), is a validated instrument designed to measure dispositional forgiveness across different contexts. The scale includes 18 items divided into three subscales: forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (almost always false of me) to 7 (almost always true of me). The HFS emphasizes a general tendency to forgive, regardless of whether a

transgression is interpersonal or impersonal. The scale has demonstrated good psychometric properties in multiple studies, including high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha ranging from .72 to .87) and confirmed construct validity through factor analyses and correlations with related constructs such as empathy, rumination, and emotional well-being.

The Emotional Reconciliation Scale by Worthington, Hook, Utsey, and Davis (2014) is a psychometrically validated measure aimed at assessing the emotional aspects of reconciliation following interpersonal transgressions, particularly in close relationships. The scale comprises 16 items across two subscales: emotional restoration (e.g., positive emotional shifts toward the transgressor) and relationship rebuilding. Items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting greater emotional reconciliation. The scale has shown acceptable reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values above .80 for both subscales, and construct validity has been supported through correlations with measures of forgiveness, trust, and relationship satisfaction in marital and close interpersonal contexts.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 21. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage) were used to describe demographic variables. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine the relationships between the independent variables (forgiveness and emotional reconciliation) and the dependent variable (marital trust). To assess the mediating effect of emotional reconciliation, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed using the maximum likelihood estimation method. Model fit was evaluated through indices including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI). A significance level of $p < .01$ was adopted for all inferential statistics.

Findings and Results

Of the 381 participants, 215 (56.43%) were female and 166 (43.57%) were male. The age distribution revealed that 78 participants (20.47%) were aged 20–29, 149 (39.11%) were aged 30–39, 113 (29.66%) were aged 40–49, and 41 (10.76%) were aged 50 and above. Regarding education level, 104 participants (27.30%) held a high school diploma, 175 (45.93%) had a bachelor's degree, and 102 (26.77%) held a postgraduate degree. In terms of marital duration, 89 (23.36%) had been married for 1–5 years, 144 (37.80%) for 6–10 years, and 148 (38.85%) for more than 10 years. Most participants, 328 (86.08%), reported living with their spouse at the time of data collection.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 381)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Forgiveness	91.74	12.65
Emotional Reconciliation	60.38	10.47
Marital Trust	89.26	11.92

As shown in Table 1, participants reported relatively high levels of forgiveness ($M = 91.74$, $SD = 12.65$) and marital trust ($M = 89.26$, $SD = 11.92$), indicating generally positive perceptions in these domains. Emotional reconciliation also scored moderately high ($M = 60.38$, $SD = 10.47$), suggesting that most participants reported engaging in emotional repair processes after conflict.

Prior to conducting the main analyses, assumptions for parametric testing and SEM were examined. Normality was confirmed through skewness and kurtosis values; all variables had skewness ranging from -0.62 to 0.47 and kurtosis between -0.81 and 0.58, indicating acceptable levels within the ± 2 threshold. Linearity was assessed using scatterplots and correlation matrices, all of which showed linear trends between variables. Multicollinearity was evaluated through Variance Inflation

Factor (VIF) and tolerance values. All VIF scores were below 2.15, and tolerance values exceeded 0.58, suggesting no multicollinearity. Homoscedasticity was confirmed by inspecting residual plots, which showed a random and evenly distributed pattern. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.912, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 2246.37$, $df = 153$, $p < .001$), indicating the data were suitable for factor analysis and SEM.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Forgiveness	—		
2. Emotional Reconciliation	.62**	—	
3. Marital Trust	.58**	.55**	—

Table 2 presents Pearson correlation coefficients between the study variables. Forgiveness was significantly and positively correlated with emotional reconciliation ($r = .62$, $p < .01$) and marital trust ($r = .58$, $p < .01$). Emotional reconciliation was also positively correlated with marital trust ($r = .55$, $p < .01$). These moderate-to-strong correlations support the theoretical assumption that forgiveness and reconciliation are significantly associated with trust in marital relationships.

Table 3. Goodness-of-Fit Indices for the Structural Equation Model

Fit Index	Value	Recommended Threshold
χ^2 (Chi-Square)	113.45	—
df (Degrees of Freedom)	53	—
χ^2/df	2.14	< 3.00
GFI	0.95	≥ 0.90
AGFI	0.92	≥ 0.90
CFI	0.97	≥ 0.95
RMSEA	0.045	≤ 0.06
TLI	0.96	≥ 0.95

The model demonstrated a good fit to the data, as shown in Table 3. The chi-square/df ratio was 2.14, and all key indices met or exceeded standard thresholds (GFI = 0.95, AGFI = 0.92, CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.045, TLI = 0.96), indicating that the hypothesized structural model fit the data well and was appropriate for further interpretation of path relationships.

Table 4. Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects in the Structural Equation Model

Path	b	S.E	β	p
Forgiveness → Emotional Reconciliation	0.67	0.08	0.62	$< .001$
Forgiveness → Marital Trust (direct)	0.38	0.09	0.34	$< .001$
Emotional Reconciliation → Marital Trust	0.41	0.07	0.37	$< .001$
Forgiveness → Marital Trust (indirect)	0.27	0.05	0.23	$< .001$
Forgiveness → Marital Trust (total)	0.65	0.06	0.57	$< .001$

As illustrated in Table 4, all path coefficients were statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level. Forgiveness had a strong direct effect on emotional reconciliation ($\beta = 0.62$) and a moderate direct effect on marital trust ($\beta = 0.34$). Emotional reconciliation also significantly predicted marital trust ($\beta = 0.37$). The indirect effect of forgiveness on marital trust via emotional reconciliation was $\beta = 0.23$, indicating a meaningful mediating role. The total effect of forgiveness on marital trust ($\beta = 0.57$) underscores its centrality in fostering trust within marital relationships.

Structural Model of Forgiveness, Emotional Reconciliation, and Marital Trust

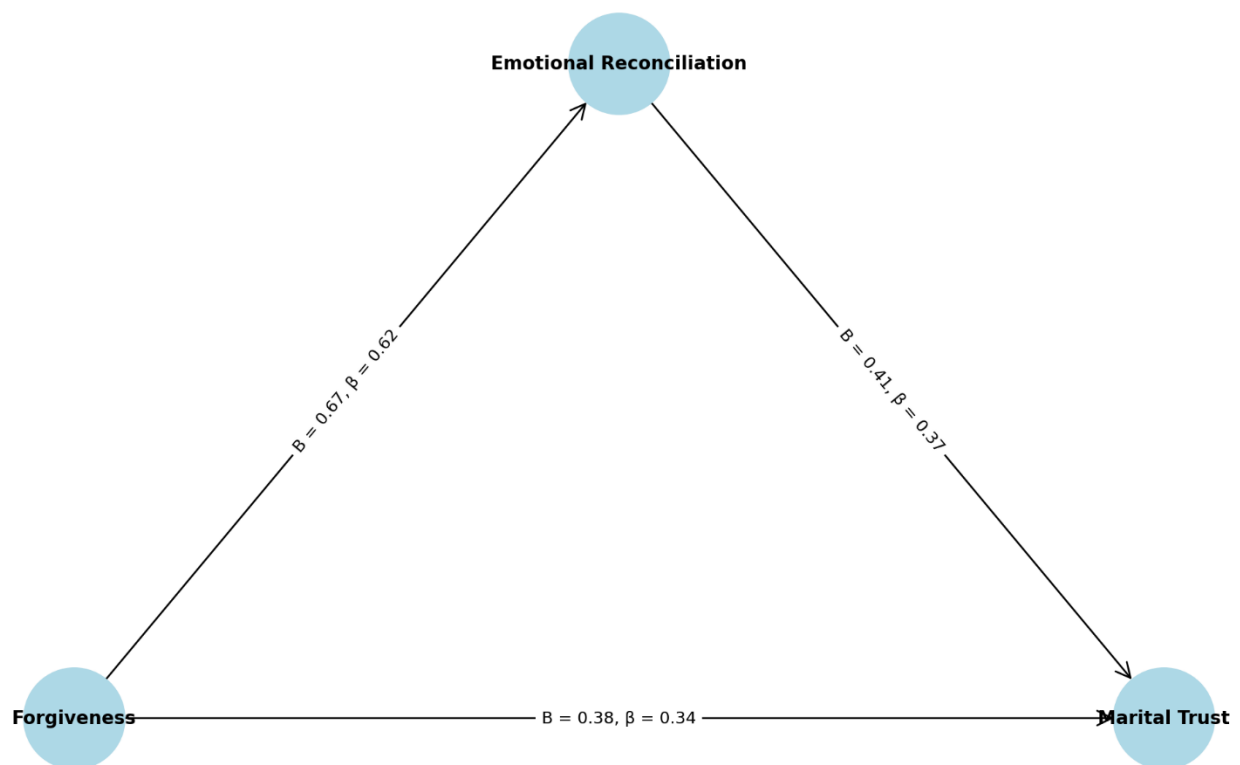


Figure 1. Model with Standard Coefficients

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the effect of forgiveness on marital trust, with emotional reconciliation examined as a mediating variable among married individuals in Hong Kong. The findings, derived from both Pearson correlation and structural equation modeling (SEM), confirmed that forgiveness significantly predicted marital trust, and this relationship was partially mediated by emotional reconciliation. Specifically, the results showed that higher levels of forgiveness were associated with greater emotional reconciliation, which in turn contributed to elevated levels of trust between marital partners.

The bivariate analysis revealed statistically significant and positive correlations between forgiveness and marital trust ($r = .58$, $p < .01$), as well as between forgiveness and emotional reconciliation ($r = .62$, $p < .01$), and between emotional reconciliation and marital trust ($r = .55$, $p < .01$). These findings support the hypothesis that forgiveness facilitates not only individual healing but also promotes relational repair mechanisms. The SEM results further validated the proposed model with strong goodness-of-fit indices (CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.045, TLI = 0.96), demonstrating that emotional reconciliation partially mediates the relationship between forgiveness and marital trust. This mediating effect suggests that while forgiveness is an important precursor to trust restoration, the presence of emotionally reconciling behaviors (such as empathetic communication, emotional openness, and mutual validation) significantly enhances this process.

These results align with prior empirical studies that underscore forgiveness as a crucial psychological and interpersonal factor in marital relationships. Forgiveness allows individuals to regulate negative emotions, let go of blame, and respond to transgressions with compassion and understanding, thus facilitating conflict resolution and the restoration of closeness (Chi et al., 2019; Cloke, 2015). In the context of spousal betrayal or chronic conflict, forgiveness has been shown to reduce psychological distress and enhance relational satisfaction by enabling couples to transition from grievance to growth (Ade et

al., 2017; Dalglish et al., 2014). Our findings confirm that these benefits extend beyond individual outcomes to influence broader relational constructs such as marital trust.

However, this study also demonstrates that forgiveness alone may not fully account for the recovery of trust. Emotional reconciliation emerged as a significant mediating factor, indicating that active relational processes must complement intrapersonal forgiveness to fully restore trust. This supports the argument posed by scholars such as Ohtsubo and Smith (Ohtsubo & Smith, 2024), who note that reconciliation is a distinct, interactive process that involves acknowledgment of harm, emotional expression, and the re-establishment of mutual vulnerability. Similarly, Cárdenas et al. (Cárdenas et al., 2015) emphasize that acknowledgment and apology—core elements of reconciliation—are essential to rebuilding emotional bonds in both interpersonal and collective contexts.

The role of reconciliation as a mediator is especially critical in cultural contexts such as Hong Kong, where marital norms are shifting under the influence of modernization, work-life stress, and evolving gender roles (Ting, 2014). In such settings, emotional resilience and interpersonal adaptability are crucial for relationship continuity. Findings from previous studies suggest that couples in urbanized Asian societies are increasingly challenged to balance traditional expectations with modern demands, and that reconciliation-oriented behaviors (such as open emotional disclosure and non-defensive dialogue) serve as cultural tools for managing these tensions (Dalhatu & Muhammad, 2024; Samarh, 2025).

In addition to confirming the mediating role of emotional reconciliation, this study contributes to the growing understanding of how trust is rebuilt following relational disruptions. Trust is not only a static belief in a partner's honesty or reliability but also a dynamic product of ongoing relational investment and emotional availability (Siadat et al., 2023; Xiao et al., 2025). Our results resonate with findings by Lindström and Rosvall (Lindström, 2012), who emphasize the role of emotional and social capital in promoting interpersonal trust, and by Brown et al. (Brown et al., 2024), who showed that trust restoration often determines the trajectory of marital separation, reconciliation, or repartnering in later life.

Furthermore, the link between forgiveness and reconciliation has implications beyond the marital dyad. Studies on intergroup and post-conflict reconciliation—such as those by Ordóñez-Carabaño et al. (Ordóñez-Carabaño et al., 2020) and Baysu and Çoşkan (Baysu & Çoşkan, 2018)—reveal similar patterns in which forgiveness facilitates a readiness for reconciliation, but trust is only re-established through mutual emotional engagement. The same applies to intimate partnerships: forgiveness opens the door, but reconciliation walks through it to restore emotional safety and commitment.

Psychologically, reconciliation plays a critical role in mitigating residual emotional injuries and rebuilding relational schemas. The study by Heim and Schaal (Heim & Schaal, 2015), which validated a reconciliation questionnaire in post-genocide Rwanda, demonstrated that reconciliation is associated with reduced trauma symptoms and improved interpersonal functioning—highlighting its therapeutic potential. In the marital context, emotional reconciliation can similarly neutralize cognitive distortions, promote empathy, and enhance shared meaning-making, all of which contribute to trust reformation (Kapshuk & Shapira, 2022; Pavlenko & Krasnikova, 2024).

Moreover, the mediating model of this study is consistent with attachment and emotion regulation theories. Emotional reconciliation allows partners to restore emotional security after relational threats, which is consistent with findings by Dalglish et al. (Dalglish et al., 2014) in the context of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy. Reconciliation processes involve not only the cessation of hostility but also a reactivation of attachment bonds, which fosters trust as a relational outcome. This reinforces the position that reconciliation is not a passive consequence of forgiveness but an active mechanism that shapes trust trajectories.

Lastly, the finding that trust restoration is more robust when both forgiveness and emotional reconciliation are present underscores the need for integrated models in marital therapy and counseling. Therapeutic interventions that emphasize both

intrapersonal (e.g., cognitive reappraisal, self-forgiveness) and interpersonal (e.g., empathy, emotional responsiveness) processes are more likely to foster sustained improvements in marital trust and satisfaction (Bhusal, 2024; Erwin & Sturm, 2022).

Despite its valuable contributions, the present study is not without limitations. First, the cross-sectional design precludes any causal inferences. While the mediation model suggests directional pathways, the lack of longitudinal data limits the ability to assess changes in trust over time. Second, the use of self-report measures may have introduced social desirability bias, especially given the sensitive nature of marital conflict, forgiveness, and trust. Although anonymity was preserved, participants may still have responded in ways that reflect social norms rather than personal truths. Third, the study was limited to married individuals residing in Hong Kong, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts or non-married populations such as cohabiting or separated couples. Finally, while emotional reconciliation was modeled as a single mediator, other potential mediators or moderators—such as empathy, attachment style, or communication patterns—were not explored, limiting the complexity of the model.

Future research would benefit from longitudinal or experimental designs that can more precisely track the causal relationships between forgiveness, emotional reconciliation, and marital trust over time. Such studies could examine how these variables evolve during key transitions in the marital life cycle, such as after childbirth, during financial hardship, or following infidelity. Additionally, qualitative or mixed-methods studies may provide richer insights into the lived experiences of forgiveness and reconciliation, capturing nuances that quantitative tools might overlook. Expanding the model to include additional mediators (e.g., empathy, shame reduction, or narrative repair) or moderators (e.g., cultural norms, religiosity, or gender role beliefs) could offer a more comprehensive framework. Cross-cultural comparisons would also be informative to explore whether the observed patterns hold in more collectivist versus individualist societies. Finally, intervention-based studies could evaluate whether targeted reconciliation training enhances forgiveness outcomes and fosters more durable marital trust.

Practitioners in the fields of marital counseling and couple therapy should consider incorporating structured reconciliation processes alongside forgiveness interventions. While encouraging individual acts of forgiveness is beneficial, clinicians should also create opportunities for couples to engage in mutual emotional disclosures, validation exercises, and trust-building rituals. Therapies such as Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) or narrative approaches can be especially effective in facilitating these relational repairs. It is also recommended that couples be educated about the distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation, with a focus on developing communication skills that support vulnerability, accountability, and relational healing. In multicultural settings such as Hong Kong, culturally sensitive adaptations of these practices are essential. Equipping couples with these emotional and communicative competencies not only promotes trust recovery but also strengthens relational resilience in the face of future conflicts.

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.

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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.

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