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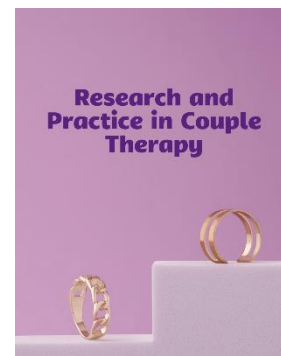
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The Link Between Emotional Instability and Marital Burnout: Role of Affective Rumination as Mediator

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between emotional instability and marital burnout, with a focus on the mediating role of affective rumination among married adults in Uzbekistan. A descriptive correlational research design was employed using a sample of 300 married individuals selected based on Morgan and Krejcie's sample size table. Participants completed standardized self-report questionnaires measuring emotional instability (NEO-FFI Neuroticism subscale), affective rumination (Affective Rumination Scale), and marital burnout (Pines' Marital Burnout Questionnaire). Data were analyzed using SPSS-27 for descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation, and AMOS-21 for structural equation modeling (SEM) to test direct and indirect effects. Model fit indices, path coefficients, and mediation effects were evaluated to confirm the hypothesized relationships among variables. Pearson's correlation results revealed that emotional instability was positively correlated with affective rumination ($r = .51, p < .001$) and marital burnout ($r = .48, p < .001$), while affective rumination was also positively correlated with marital burnout ($r = .56, p < .001$). The SEM analysis showed that emotional instability had a significant direct effect on affective rumination ($\beta = 0.51$) and marital burnout ($\beta = 0.28$), while affective rumination had a significant direct effect on marital burnout ($\beta = 0.39$). The indirect effect of emotional instability on marital burnout through affective rumination ($\beta = 0.20$) was also significant, confirming partial mediation. Model fit indices indicated an acceptable fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.97$, RMSEA = 0.054, CFI = 0.96). The findings suggest that affective rumination is a key psychological mechanism through which emotional instability contributes to marital burnout. Interventions targeting emotional regulation and cognitive processing may help reduce relational fatigue and enhance marital well-being.

Keywords: Emotional instability; Affective rumination; Marital burnout; Mediation

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Introduction

Marital relationships, considered among the most intimate and enduring social bonds, often require sustained emotional investment, adaptability, and psychological resilience. However, increasing evidence suggests that persistent emotional strain and maladaptive psychological patterns can erode the stability and quality of marriage, ultimately leading to marital burnout. Marital burnout—a multidimensional phenomenon involving emotional exhaustion, detachment, and a sense of ineffectiveness in one's relationship—is not merely a psychological state but a process that unfolds in response to prolonged relational stress (Wang et al., 2025). Understanding the psychological mechanisms and personality traits contributing to marital burnout is critical in both theoretical and practical contexts, particularly in societies undergoing rapid socio-cultural transformation, such as Uzbekistan.



Among the key psychological variables that have drawn scholarly attention in recent years, emotional instability (a core facet of neuroticism) has emerged as a robust predictor of relational dissatisfaction and instability. Emotional instability is characterized by heightened sensitivity to stress, mood swings, and increased vulnerability to negative affect. Individuals with high emotional instability are more likely to experience frequent conflicts, perceive neutral partner behaviors as threatening, and engage in maladaptive cognitive processing such as rumination (Amin et al., 2024; Bijani et al., 2023). These dynamics create fertile ground for emotional exhaustion, detachment, and the depletion of marital resources, thereby increasing the risk of burnout.

Evidence supports the notion that personality traits, particularly emotional instability, significantly shape marital outcomes. For instance, Wang et al. (Wang et al., 2025) demonstrated that emotionally unstable partners exhibited higher levels of marital instability across various stages of the family life cycle. Similarly, Im and Do (Im & Do, 2025) found that emotional dysregulation in parents not only intensified marital conflict but also contributed to elevated stress in their children, emphasizing the systemic consequences of this trait. These findings converge with the work of Kakolian et al. (Kakolian et al., 2024), who noted that emotional maturity and expectations mediate the association between emotional instability and marital satisfaction.

A key mechanism through which emotional instability may influence marital burnout is affective rumination—a repetitive, emotion-laden cognitive process focused on distress and relational negativity. Affective rumination prevents emotional recovery, prolongs psychological arousal, and biases attention toward marital dissatisfaction (Stulz et al., 2022). Research by Eisenberg et al. (Eisenberg et al., 2025) highlighted how emotionally reactive individuals, especially those under familial stress, tend to engage in affective rumination, which in turn undermines interpersonal functioning and well-being. When applied to marital contexts, this suggests that affective rumination may serve as a psychological mediator that links dispositional vulnerability to burnout-related outcomes.

Recent studies reinforce this perspective. For example, Golandam (Golandam, 2021) demonstrated that emotional intelligence—which includes the ability to regulate affective rumination—is inversely associated with perceived marital instability among newlywed women. Likewise, Cho and Lee (Cho & Lee, 2022) found that marital conflict is intensified when mothers are unable to regulate emotional responses effectively, resulting in negative parenting behaviors and relational strain. These findings suggest that emotional instability may not directly cause marital burnout, but rather contributes to it through maladaptive emotional-cognitive pathways.

Marital burnout has also been linked to broader patterns of relational dissatisfaction and systemic stress. Tuttle et al. (Tuttle et al., 2018) showed that occupational stress in law enforcement couples could spill over into marital domains, creating emotional fatigue and disconnection. Similarly, Sun et al. (Sun et al., 2022) demonstrated how marital dissatisfaction adversely affects work performance, suggesting a reciprocal relationship between personal and professional well-being. These insights highlight the necessity of understanding burnout within a systemic and transactional framework rather than isolating it as an individual pathology.

Cultural and contextual variables also play a pivotal role in shaping marital dynamics. Singh and Shanbhag (Singh & Shanbhag, 2025) emphasized how sociocultural expectations, including parental interference and gender norms, influence marital stability in collectivist societies. These factors may amplify the emotional strain associated with unmet expectations and emotional volatility. In the context of Uzbekistan—a society in transition where traditional marital roles persist alongside modern individualistic aspirations—these dynamics are particularly salient.

Furthermore, interpersonal mechanisms such as perceived support, forgiveness, and commitment are essential in buffering the adverse effects of emotional strain. Li et al. (Li, Xun, et al., 2023) proposed that forgiveness in the early stages of marriage

enhances relationship quality and stability. In another study, Li et al. (Li, Guo, et al., 2023) found that external stressors could weaken marital stability unless mitigated by spousal support. These findings underscore that while emotional instability and rumination may predispose couples to burnout, relational strengths can moderate their effects.

Wikle et al. (Wikle et al., 2024) advanced this understanding by identifying family leisure as a protective factor that mitigates the long-term impact of childhood adversity on marital satisfaction. Similarly, Hong et al. (Hong et al., 2020) emphasized the buffering effects of daily positive interactions on emotional distress, suggesting the relevance of small yet consistent behaviors in promoting marital resilience. This opens a path for intervention strategies targeting emotion regulation and mindfulness in at-risk couples.

Despite the growing literature on marital burnout and its predictors, empirical investigations on the mediating role of affective rumination in the link between emotional instability and marital burnout remain limited. Previous studies often examined these variables in isolation, with little attention to their combined effects within a structural framework. For example, Siddiqua and Majeed (Siddiqua & Majeed, 2021) investigated emotional intelligence and coping in dual-earner couples, while Bijani et al. (Bijani et al., 2021) explored how marital justice and coping styles predict instability. However, few studies integrated cognitive-emotional mediators into their models, limiting the explanatory power of their findings.

The present study aims to address this gap by proposing and testing a structural model in which affective rumination mediates the relationship between emotional instability and marital burnout.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This research employed a descriptive correlational design to examine the relationship between emotional instability, affective rumination, and marital burnout. The target population included married adults residing in Uzbekistan. Based on the Morgan and Krejcie sample size determination table (1970), a minimum of 300 participants was considered adequate for statistical validity and generalizability. Participants were selected using a convenience sampling method from community centers, counseling clinics, and online forums. Inclusion criteria were: (1) being legally married, (2) at least one year into the marriage, and (3) age between 25 and 55 years. Individuals with self-reported psychiatric diagnoses were excluded from the sample. All participants completed the self-report questionnaires anonymously and voluntarily after providing informed consent.

Measures

Marital Burnout was measured using the Marital Burnout Questionnaire developed by Pines (1996). This self-report instrument consists of 21 items designed to assess emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion resulting from prolonged marital conflict and dissatisfaction. The scale is composed of three subscales: Emotional Exhaustion, Physical Exhaustion, and Mental Exhaustion, each comprising seven items. Respondents rate their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always), with higher scores indicating greater levels of marital burnout. The scale has demonstrated strong psychometric properties in prior research. Pines (1996) reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients above 0.90 for the total scale, and its construct validity has been confirmed through factor analysis and its significant correlations with marital satisfaction and stress measures in various studies.

Emotional instability was assessed using the Neuroticism subscale of the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI), developed by Costa and McCrae (1992). This inventory is a widely used measure of the Big Five personality traits, with the Neuroticism

subscale specifically designed to assess tendencies toward anxiety, moodiness, and emotional volatility. The subscale includes 12 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting greater emotional instability. The NEO-FFI has been extensively validated across cultures and populations. Internal consistency for the Neuroticism subscale is high ($\alpha > 0.85$), and test-retest reliability over several months has also been confirmed. Numerous studies have supported its convergent and discriminant validity, making it a reliable tool for assessing emotional instability in psychological and marital research.

Affective Rumination was measured using the Affective Rumination Scale developed by Cropley and Zijlstra (2011). This scale includes 5 items that assess the extent to which individuals experience persistent, emotion-laden thoughts related to stressful or emotionally charged events. Participants rate items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating a greater tendency to engage in affective rumination. The scale focuses on the emotional aspect of repetitive thinking, distinguishing it from problem-solving or neutral reflection. The Affective Rumination Scale has demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha typically above 0.80) and construct validity, with strong correlations found with emotional exhaustion, negative affect, and other forms of maladaptive cognitive processing. Its reliability and validity have been confirmed in workplace and clinical contexts, making it suitable for marital and psychological research.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 21. First, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage) were computed for all study variables and demographic characteristics. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to evaluate the bivariate relationships between the dependent variable (marital burnout) and independent variables (emotional instability and affective rumination). Subsequently, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was applied to test the hypothesized mediating role of affective rumination in the relationship between emotional instability and marital burnout. Model fit indices including CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and χ^2/df were used to evaluate the adequacy of the structural model. A significance level of $p < 0.01$ was applied throughout.

Findings and Results

Among the 300 participants, 148 individuals (49.3%) were female and 152 (50.7%) were male. The participants' age ranged from 25 to 54 years, with the majority aged between 30 and 39 years ($n = 124$, 41.3%), followed by those aged 40–49 ($n = 97$, 32.3%), 25–29 ($n = 51$, 17.0%), and over 50 ($n = 28$, 9.3%). Regarding education, 33.7% ($n = 101$) held a bachelor's degree, 27.3% ($n = 82$) had a high school diploma, 21.0% ($n = 63$) had a master's degree, and 18.0% ($n = 54$) reported primary or vocational education. The average marriage duration was 10.4 years ($SD = 5.27$), with 45.7% ($n = 137$) married for 6–15 years, 32.0% ($n = 96$) for less than 5 years, and 22.3% ($n = 67$) for more than 15 years.

Prior to conducting statistical analyses, assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity were evaluated. Skewness and kurtosis values for all continuous variables were within the acceptable range of ± 1.5 , indicating approximate normal distribution (e.g., marital burnout: skewness = 0.48, kurtosis = 0.71; emotional instability: skewness = -0.29, kurtosis = 0.64). Linearity was confirmed through inspection of scatterplots, which showed linear trends between predictor and outcome variables. The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for all predictors were below 1.74, indicating no multicollinearity. Levene's test for equality of variances was non-significant ($p > 0.05$) across key groupings, and the residual plots showed homoscedastic distribution, fulfilling the assumption of equal variances. These results support the appropriateness of using Pearson correlation and SEM for further analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 300)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Emotional Instability	36.74	6.32
Affective Rumination	17.59	4.15
Marital Burnout	92.46	13.81

Participants scored an average of 36.74 (SD = 6.32) on emotional instability, reflecting moderate variability in dispositional emotional reactivity. Affective rumination showed a mean of 17.59 (SD = 4.15), indicating a moderate tendency toward emotion-focused repetitive thinking. Marital burnout had the highest mean of 92.46 (SD = 13.81), suggesting that a considerable proportion of the sample experienced elevated levels of relational exhaustion.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Matrix Among Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Emotional Instability	–		
2. Affective Rumination	.51** (p < .001)	–	
3. Marital Burnout	.48** (p < .001)	.56** (p < .001)	–

Note: p < .01.

As shown, emotional instability is significantly and positively correlated with affective rumination ($r = .51, p < .001$) and marital burnout ($r = .48, p < .001$). Affective rumination is also strongly correlated with marital burnout ($r = .56, p < .001$). These significant correlations support the hypothesized relationships among the study variables and justify the structural model analysis.

Table 3. Fit Indices for the Structural Equation Model

Fit Index	Value	Acceptable Threshold
χ^2	94.68	–
df	48	–
χ^2/df	1.97	< 3.00
GFI	0.94	≥ 0.90
AGFI	0.91	≥ 0.90
CFI	0.96	≥ 0.90
TLI	0.95	≥ 0.90
RMSEA	0.054	≤ 0.08

The model demonstrated good fit to the data. The Chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio was 1.97, and values for GFI (0.94), AGFI (0.91), CFI (0.96), and TLI (0.95) all exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.90. The RMSEA value of 0.054 indicated a close fit of the model to the population covariance matrix. These results confirm the adequacy of the model structure for further interpretation of path coefficients.

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

Path	B	S.E.	β	p
Emotional Instability → Affective Rumination (Direct)	0.38	0.06	0.51	< .001
Emotional Instability → Marital Burnout (Direct)	0.22	0.07	0.28	< .001
Affective Rumination → Marital Burnout (Direct)	0.41	0.08	0.39	< .001
Emotional Instability → Marital Burnout (Indirect via Affective Rumination)	0.16	0.05	0.20	< .001
Emotional Instability → Marital Burnout (Total)	0.38	0.06	0.48	< .001

The direct path from emotional instability to affective rumination was significant ($\beta = 0.51, p < .001$), as was the path from emotional instability to marital burnout ($\beta = 0.28, p < .001$). Affective rumination also had a significant direct effect on marital burnout ($\beta = 0.39, p < .001$). The indirect path from emotional instability to marital burnout through affective rumination was

statistically significant ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < .001$), indicating partial mediation. The total effect of emotional instability on marital burnout was $\beta = 0.48$, confirming the central role of affective rumination in amplifying the impact of emotional instability on marital outcomes.

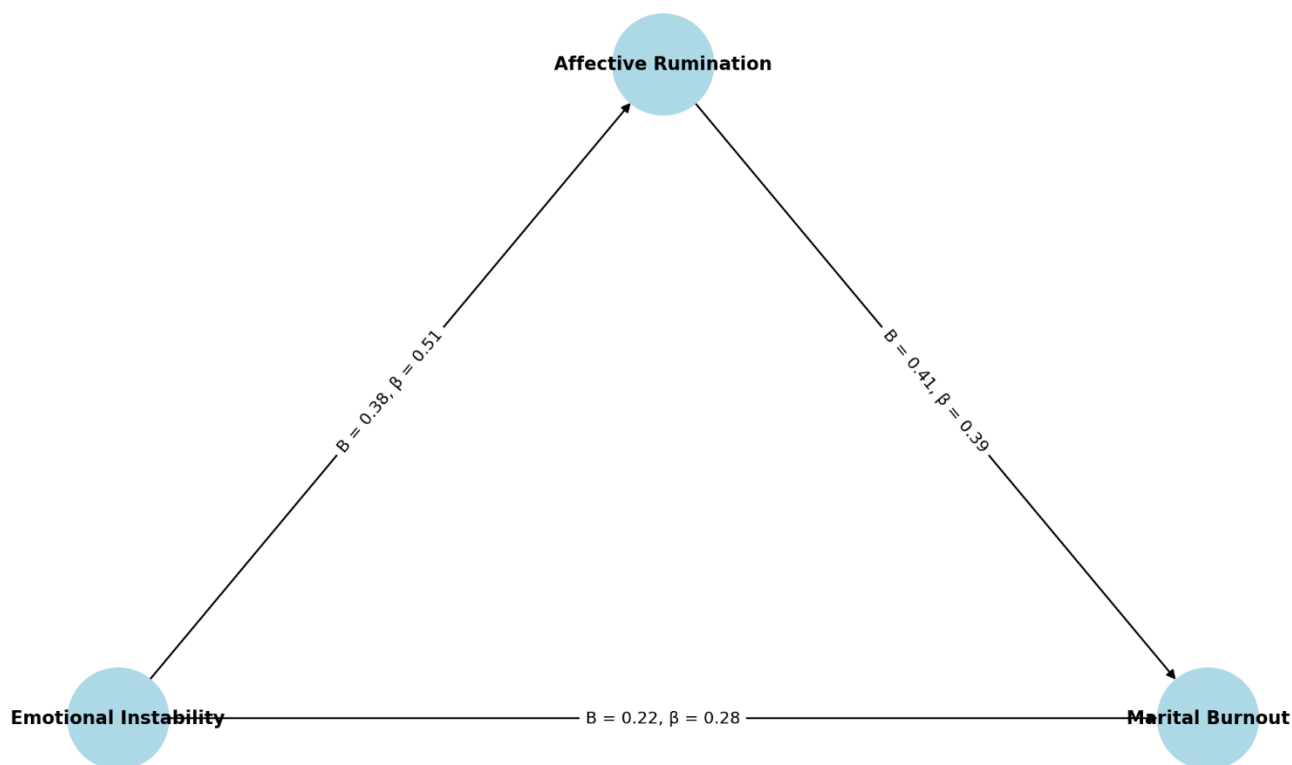


Figure 1. Final Model of the Study

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to investigate the relationship between emotional instability and marital burnout, with a specific focus on the mediating role of affective rumination. The findings support the hypothesized structural model: emotional instability was significantly and positively associated with both affective rumination and marital burnout. Moreover, affective rumination significantly mediated the relationship between emotional instability and marital burnout, suggesting that emotionally unstable individuals are more prone to repetitive, emotion-laden thoughts that intensify relational fatigue and detachment.

The direct effect of emotional instability on marital burnout ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < .01$) aligns with previous literature suggesting that individuals who are more emotionally volatile and sensitive to stress experience higher levels of marital dissatisfaction and exhaustion. This finding confirms that emotional instability is not only a personality vulnerability but also a significant relational risk factor (Bijani et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2025). As emotionally unstable individuals tend to perceive neutral situations as threatening and are more reactive to marital stressors, they are more likely to develop the core symptoms of marital burnout, including emotional exhaustion and disillusionment.

Additionally, the significant path between emotional instability and affective rumination ($\beta = 0.51$, $p < .01$) suggests that individuals with higher levels of emotional instability are more inclined to engage in ruminative thinking. This finding is consistent with earlier studies highlighting how emotionally reactive individuals often experience intrusive and repetitive thoughts related to interpersonal distress (Cho & Lee, 2022; Eisenberg et al., 2025). Such thought patterns serve to prolong

emotional arousal and prevent resolution, keeping individuals mentally fixated on perceived marital shortcomings or conflicts. The tendency to ruminate, especially in emotionally laden contexts like marital disagreements, exacerbates the intensity of negative affect and undermines problem-solving.

Crucially, affective rumination was found to significantly predict marital burnout ($\beta = 0.39, p < .01$), confirming its role as a cognitive-emotional conduit through which personality traits affect relational outcomes. This finding resonates with research by Stulz et al. (Stulz et al., 2022), who emphasized the maladaptive role of persistent emotional rumination in couples dealing with chronic stress. Moreover, this aligns with the work of Eisenberg et al. (Eisenberg et al., 2025), who reported that emotional reactivity, when coupled with rumination, predicts broader negative health and relational outcomes in women under family-related stress. These studies collectively underscore that it is not emotional instability alone, but its interaction with maladaptive cognitive processes like rumination, that culminates in burnout.

The mediation model further supports the theoretical proposition that affective rumination serves as a psychological mechanism linking trait-based emotional vulnerability to outcome-based marital fatigue. The indirect effect of emotional instability on marital burnout via affective rumination confirms the model's predictive utility. This pattern is consistent with emotion regulation theories, which posit that ruminative responses to stress amplify and prolong emotional dysregulation (Cho & Lee, 2022; He et al., 2018). When such tendencies are activated in relational contexts, the result is a progressive depletion of emotional and cognitive resources, thereby heightening the risk of marital burnout.

These findings also have contextual relevance. In collectivist societies such as Uzbekistan, where emotional restraint and family obligation are emphasized, individuals may have fewer adaptive outlets for managing internal distress. This sociocultural dynamic may further reinforce the use of internalized cognitive strategies such as rumination, rather than open expression or help-seeking behaviors, thus creating a feedback loop that intensifies burnout symptoms. The sociocultural influence aligns with research by Singh and Shanbhag (Singh & Shanbhag, 2025), who found that parental and societal expectations contribute significantly to relational distress and instability in collectivist contexts.

The role of affective rumination in mediating relational outcomes has also been indirectly supported in studies on emotional intelligence and coping. For instance, Siddiqi and Majeed (Siddiqi & Majeed, 2021) reported that couples with lower emotional intelligence and poor coping strategies were more likely to suffer marital adjustment issues. This supports the notion that a lack of adaptive cognitive-emotional processing mechanisms exacerbates relationship fatigue. Similarly, Golandam (Golandam, 2021) emphasized that newly married women with higher emotional intelligence had greater marital stability, likely because they engaged in less ruminative and emotionally dysregulated thinking.

The findings also resonate with broader systemic and dyadic models of marital functioning. For example, Tuttle et al. (Tuttle et al., 2018) demonstrated how stress from external domains (e.g., work) spills over into the marital relationship, contributing to emotional exhaustion and disconnection. Although the current study did not assess external stressors directly, emotional instability can be conceptualized as amplifying the subjective experience of such stressors, thereby magnifying their impact on marital health. Likewise, the longitudinal studies by Li et al. (Li, Guo, et al., 2023) showed that external stressors and perceived lack of support predicted marital instability, reinforcing the interconnected nature of personality, cognition, and context in shaping marital outcomes.

From a developmental perspective, Im and Do (Im & Do, 2025) provided evidence that parental marital conflict contributes to adolescent depression via parenting stress, demonstrating how unresolved emotional tension in the marital subsystem can cascade into other family subsystems. Although their focus was on parenting outcomes, their findings reinforce the notion that emotionally unstable and ruminative spouses may contribute to a broader climate of relational and familial distress.

The interplay of forgiveness, commitment, and external stressors also offers potential moderating factors in the burnout trajectory. Li et al. (Li, Xun, et al., 2023) emphasized the importance of forgiveness and commitment in buffering the effects of early marital conflict on long-term relational outcomes. While these protective factors were not assessed in the current study, their presence might potentially moderate the path between emotional instability and marital burnout, offering a direction for future exploration.

Moreover, the findings can be situated within resilience theory, which posits that couples who develop adaptive emotional and cognitive coping strategies are better equipped to navigate stressors. Wickle et al. (Wickle et al., 2024) found that positive family leisure buffered the adverse effects of family-of-origin adversity on marital satisfaction, highlighting the potential for compensatory relational behaviors. In contrast, affective rumination, as demonstrated in the present study, represents a maladaptive response that undermines such resilience-building processes.

Finally, Kakolian et al. (Kakolian et al., 2024) emphasized the centrality of emotional maturity and realistic expectations in marital satisfaction. The emotional instability observed in this study reflects a developmental deficit in emotional maturity, while the cognitive inflexibility associated with rumination suggests unrealistic or rigid expectations that hinder relational adaptability. Together, these findings point toward the importance of psychological interventions focused on emotional regulation and cognitive restructuring to prevent or reduce marital burnout.

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to draw causal inferences among the study variables. While structural equation modeling permits the testing of indirect effects, the temporal sequence between emotional instability, rumination, and burnout cannot be definitively established. Second, the use of self-report instruments may have introduced biases such as social desirability or common method variance. Third, the study focused exclusively on married adults in Uzbekistan, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts. Future studies using longitudinal and multi-informant designs would help to address these concerns and enhance the robustness of the findings.

Future research should explore the longitudinal progression of marital burnout and how individual traits like emotional instability evolve within the context of marital dynamics. It would be valuable to examine whether interventions targeting emotion regulation skills can reduce affective rumination and thus prevent burnout. Additionally, researchers should investigate potential moderating variables such as marital forgiveness, spousal support, or communication style, which may buffer or amplify the impact of emotional instability on marital outcomes. Expanding the sample to include diverse cultural settings would also help clarify the cultural specificity or universality of the proposed mediation model.

The findings of this study suggest practical implications for couples counseling and marital enrichment programs. Interventions should prioritize the development of emotional regulation strategies and cognitive flexibility in emotionally vulnerable individuals. Specific training to reduce affective rumination—such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy or acceptance and commitment therapy—may be effective in interrupting maladaptive thought cycles. Marital therapy could also incorporate psychoeducation on the impact of personality traits on relational dynamics and promote skills for constructive emotional expression, stress management, and mutual support. Enhancing these capacities may ultimately reduce the emotional burden experienced in marriage and protect against long-term burnout.

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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