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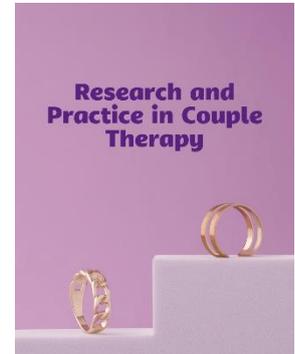
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# Core Beliefs About Love and Communication Effectiveness: The Mediating Role of Cognitive Flexibility

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the mediating role of cognitive flexibility in the relationship between core beliefs about love and communication effectiveness in romantic relationships. The research employed a descriptive correlational design with a sample of 385 adult participants from Iraq, selected based on Morgan and Krejcie's sample size table. Participants completed three standardized instruments: the Love Attitudes Scale (LAS), the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI), and the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ). Data were analyzed using SPSS-27 for descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients, and AMOS-24 for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Model fit was assessed using indices such as CFI, TLI, RMSEA, GFI, and  $\chi^2/df$ . Results indicated a significant negative correlation between core beliefs about love and communication effectiveness ( $r = -0.47, p < .001$ ), and between core beliefs and cognitive flexibility ( $r = -0.42, p < .001$ ). A significant positive correlation was found between cognitive flexibility and communication effectiveness ( $r = 0.52, p < .001$ ). SEM results showed an acceptable model fit ( $\chi^2/df = 2.02, CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.052$ ). Path analysis revealed that core beliefs significantly predicted both cognitive flexibility ( $\beta = -0.42, p < .001$ ) and communication effectiveness directly ( $\beta = -0.29, p < .001$ ), as well as indirectly through cognitive flexibility (indirect effect  $B = -0.32, p < .001$ ). The total effect of core beliefs on communication effectiveness was  $\beta = -0.52$ . The findings support the mediating role of cognitive flexibility in the association between core beliefs about love and communication effectiveness. Enhancing cognitive flexibility may mitigate the adverse effects of rigid love schemas and improve relational communication, particularly in culturally conservative contexts.

**Keywords:** Core beliefs about love; cognitive flexibility; communication effectiveness; romantic relationships.

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## Introduction

Effective communication plays a foundational role in the quality and stability of romantic relationships, acting as a bridge between partners' inner beliefs and their outward relational dynamics. Scholars have emphasized that communication effectiveness is not merely a matter of verbal skill, but a deeper reflection of cognitive-emotional processes shaped by individuals' core beliefs, especially those surrounding love and attachment. These beliefs—ranging from idealistic romantic notions to pragmatic conceptions of partnership—often shape how partners interpret one another's messages and emotional expressions, ultimately influencing relational satisfaction and cohesion (Jen et al., 2018; TÛYsÛZ et al., 2023).

Core beliefs about love are enduring schemas or mental representations developed through familial, cultural, and media influences, which dictate expectations and behaviors in intimate partnerships. These beliefs, whether conscious or not, act as



interpretive lenses in communication. For example, individuals with romantic idealism may interpret emotional distance as rejection, while those with more pragmatic beliefs might perceive the same behavior as temporary stress-related withdrawal. As such, distortions or rigidity in these beliefs often lead to miscommunication, heightened sensitivity, and interpersonal conflict (Li & Chu, 2022; Sezgin & Gürbüz, 2022). Moreover, discrepancies between partners' love-related schemas can generate cognitive-emotional tension, making it more difficult to maintain healthy, adaptive communication patterns (Gür, 2023; Uslu & Güler, 2021).

An emerging body of literature has identified **cognitive flexibility** as a critical meta-cognitive skill that facilitates adaptive interpersonal functioning. Defined as the mental ability to shift perspectives, consider multiple viewpoints, and modify thoughts and behaviors in response to changing interpersonal demands, cognitive flexibility is particularly important in close relationships where interpretation of emotional signals is often ambiguous and context-dependent (Haft et al., 2019; Howlett et al., 2022). It allows individuals to move beyond rigid love schemas, reinterpret messages more accurately, and engage in perspective-taking, thereby enhancing communication effectiveness (Hayatbini et al., 2021; Park & Kim, 2021). In essence, cognitive flexibility serves as a mediating mechanism through which internal belief systems interface with interpersonal behavior.

Studies have shown that individuals with high cognitive flexibility are better equipped to navigate misunderstandings, regulate emotional responses, and adjust communication strategies based on feedback and relational cues (Çankaya & Aydoğan, 2022; Tuncer & Tanaş, 2022). Conversely, cognitive rigidity has been associated with defensiveness, misinterpretation, and lower communication satisfaction, particularly in emotionally charged discussions (Bir et al., 2022; Er & Deniz, 2022). Cognitive flexibility is not only relevant in conflict resolution but also facilitates self-regulation and openness to feedback, both of which are essential to maintaining a positive communication climate in romantic contexts (Klein & Lancaster, 2017; Yu & Lee, 2016).

Furthermore, core beliefs about love are often influenced by broader emotional and cognitive styles that are themselves moderated by flexibility-related traits. For instance, perfectionism, emotional dysregulation, and black-and-white thinking styles tend to reinforce rigid relationship schemas that inhibit effective communication (Hayatbini et al., 2021; Park & Shin, 2022). In contrast, emotional resilience and the capacity to revise interpersonal expectations dynamically are strongly linked with cognitive adaptability (Hwan et al., 2021; TÜYsÜZ et al., 2023). In these frameworks, cognitive flexibility becomes the linchpin that allows for negotiation between internalized romantic ideals and the often unpredictable nature of real-life relationship interactions.

Neuroscientific and developmental studies support the assertion that flexibility-related cognitive processes such as attentional control, emotional regulation, and mentalization are essential to social adjustment and interpersonal success. These capacities are rooted in executive functions, which allow individuals to switch attention, suppress impulsive reactions, and consider alternate interpretations in moments of relational stress or miscommunication (Hu et al., 2018; Varangis et al., 2021). Such mechanisms underscore the developmental significance of cognitive flexibility in adapting to complex and often contradictory interpersonal realities.

In the context of couple dynamics, the mediating role of cognitive flexibility has been increasingly supported by empirical models linking it to forgiveness, self-compassion, and relationship satisfaction. Gür (2023) found that emotional dysregulation and cognitive inflexibility mediated the relationship between self-compassion and the ability to forgive one's partner, suggesting that flexibility is crucial for adaptive emotional responses in romantic relationships (Gür, 2023). Similarly, Jen et al. (2018) highlighted the role of a flexible mindset in promoting psychological health and reducing relational tension in families, further reinforcing the relevance of this construct (Jen et al., 2018).

A growing body of cross-sectional and longitudinal research has also examined how cognitive flexibility mitigates the negative effects of stress and maladaptive schemas on communication. Kaur and Loomba (2022), for instance, demonstrated that high school students with greater cognitive flexibility reported better overall well-being and interpersonal functioning (Kaur & Loomba, 2022). Meanwhile, Khodarahimi (2018) showed that cognitive flexibility correlated positively with executive functioning and self-perceived mental health among adults, reinforcing its relevance in emotional and relational domains (Khodarahimi, 2018). These findings suggest that flexibility may not only influence how individuals think but also how they communicate and connect with others in intimate settings.

The role of cultural context is also important when examining beliefs about love and communication styles. Cultural norms shape not only what individuals believe about love but also how they express affection, resolve conflict, and perceive commitment. In Eastern and collectivist cultures, for instance, communication often emphasizes harmony and indirect expression, while Western cultures may valorize assertiveness and emotional openness (Park & Shin, 2022; TÜYsÜZ et al., 2023). Such cultural underpinnings interact with individual cognitive traits to produce unique relational outcomes. For instance, Yu and Lee (2016) found that cognitive flexibility moderated the relationship between hopelessness and mental health across different time frames, underscoring its cross-cultural adaptability (Yu & Lee, 2016).

This study aims to contribute to this growing literature by investigating the mediating role of cognitive flexibility in the relationship between core beliefs about love and communication effectiveness in a sample of adults from Iraq.

## Methods and Materials

### Study Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive correlational design to examine the relationships among core beliefs about love, communication effectiveness, and cognitive flexibility. The target population consisted of adults residing in Iraq. A total of 385 participants were selected through a stratified random sampling method, based on the guidelines provided by Morgan and Krejcie (1970) for determining adequate sample size in correlational research. Participation was voluntary, and all individuals were informed about the purpose of the study and confidentiality of their responses. Eligibility criteria included being at least 18 years old and currently involved in a romantic relationship. Efforts were made to ensure demographic diversity in terms of age, gender, and education level.

### Measures

To assess communication effectiveness, the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ) developed by Christensen and Sullaway (1984) was utilized. This widely used self-report instrument measures how couples manage conflict and communication, with particular emphasis on demand/withdraw patterns and mutual constructive communication. The short form of the CPQ consists of 35 items rated on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 9 (very likely), with higher scores indicating greater communication effectiveness. The questionnaire includes subscales such as Mutual Constructive Communication, Demand/Withdraw, and Avoidance. The CPQ has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, with reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.72 to 0.87 across subscales, and its validity has been confirmed in both clinical and non-clinical samples.

Core beliefs about love were measured using the Love Attitudes Scale (LAS) developed by Hendrick and Hendrick (1986), which evaluates individuals' fundamental beliefs and ideologies about romantic love. The scale comprises 42 items and is divided into six subscales corresponding to different love styles: Eros (passionate love), Ludus (game-playing love), Storge

(friendship-based love), Pragma (practical love), Mania (possessive love), and Agape (selfless love). Respondents rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores in each subscale reflect a stronger endorsement of that love belief. The LAS has shown good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alphas typically ranging from 0.70 to 0.85, and its validity has been supported through correlations with relationship satisfaction and attachment measures in multiple studies.

Cognitive flexibility was assessed using the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI) developed by Dennis and Vander Wal (2010). This 20-item self-report scale measures an individual's ability to adapt cognitive processing strategies to face stressful or challenging situations. It includes two subscales: Alternatives (reflecting the ability to generate multiple solutions) and Control (indicating the ability to perceive difficult situations as controllable). Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater cognitive flexibility. The CFI has demonstrated excellent internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91 for the total scale) and has been validated in diverse populations, including clinical and academic samples, supporting its utility in psychological research.

### Data analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 24. Initially, descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were calculated for demographic variables and study measures. To examine the bivariate associations between variables, Pearson correlation coefficients were computed between the dependent variable (communication effectiveness) and each independent variable (core beliefs about love and cognitive flexibility). Subsequently, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted to test the hypothesized mediating role of cognitive flexibility in the relationship between core beliefs about love and communication effectiveness. Model fit indices such as CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and  $\chi^2/df$  were evaluated to determine the adequacy of the model.

### **Findings and Results**

Of the 385 participants, 216 individuals (56.1%) were female and 169 individuals (43.9%) were male. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 54 years, with a mean age of 31.8 years ( $SD = 8.67$ ). In terms of education, 127 participants (33.0%) held a bachelor's degree, 94 (24.4%) had completed secondary school, 88 (22.9%) had a diploma, and 76 (19.7%) had a postgraduate qualification. Regarding relationship duration, 142 participants (36.9%) had been in a relationship for less than two years, 117 (30.4%) for two to five years, and 126 (32.7%) for more than five years. This distribution reflects a relatively diverse and balanced sample in terms of gender, education, and relationship experience.

**Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Research Variables (N = 385)**

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Core Beliefs About Love	3.74	0.58
Cognitive Flexibility	5.13	0.69
Communication Effectiveness	6.01	0.74

As shown in Table 1, participants reported a moderately high endorsement of core beliefs about love ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ), suggesting an overall tendency toward idealistic or structured views of romantic relationships. The mean cognitive flexibility score was relatively high ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ), indicating that participants generally perceived themselves as adaptive and capable of shifting perspectives. Communication effectiveness scores were also above the scale midpoint ( $M = 6.01$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ), reflecting satisfactory relational communication among the sample.

**Table 2. Pearson Correlation Coefficients and p-values Among Study Variables (N = 385)**

Variables	1	2	3
1. Core Beliefs About Love	—	-.42** (p < .001)	-.47** (p < .001)
2. Cognitive Flexibility	—	—	.52** (p < .001)
3. Communication Effectiveness	—	—	—

Table 2 demonstrates significant correlations between the study variables. Core beliefs about love were negatively correlated with cognitive flexibility ( $r = -.42, p < .001$ ) and communication effectiveness ( $r = -.47, p < .001$ ), indicating that stronger rigid or idealized beliefs were associated with reduced flexibility and poorer communication. Conversely, cognitive flexibility was positively and significantly associated with communication effectiveness ( $r = .52, p < .001$ ), supporting the hypothesized mediating role.

**Table 3. Fit Indices for the Structural Equation Model**

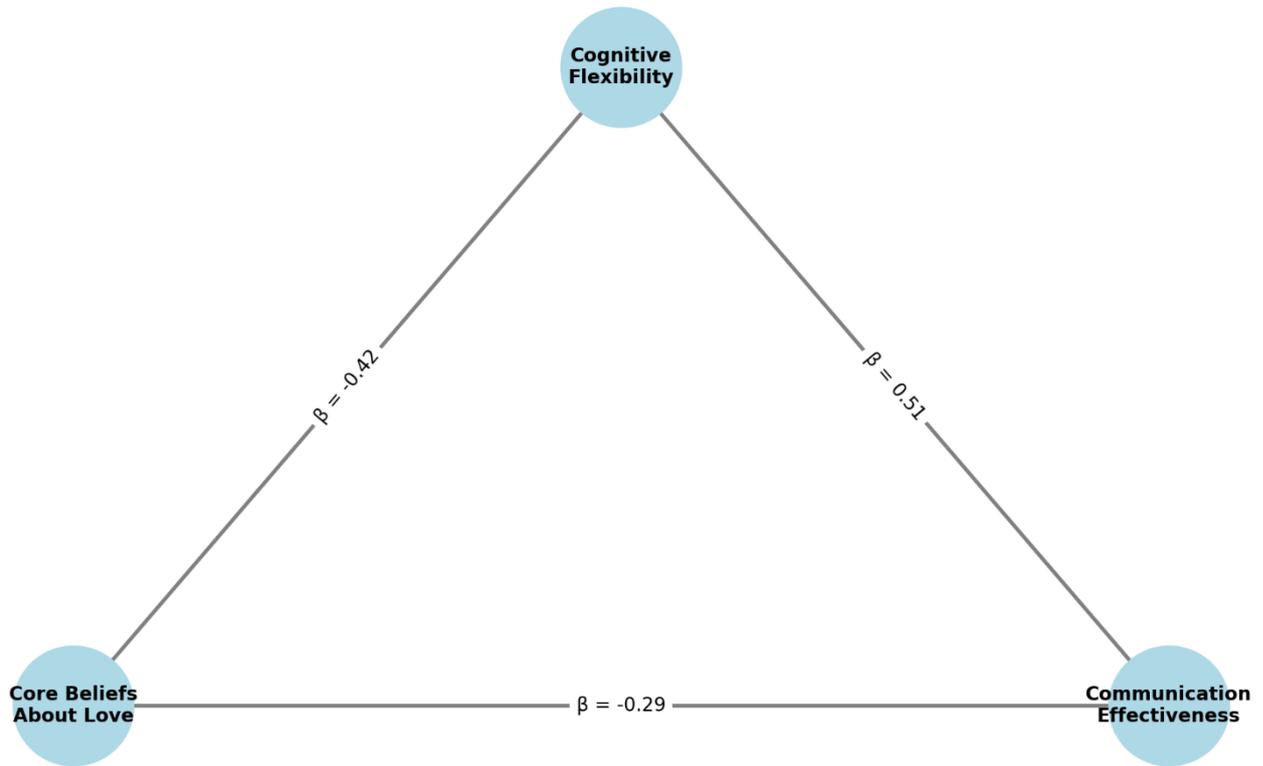
Fit Index	Value	Recommended Threshold
$\chi^2$ (Chi-Square)	163.42	—
df	81	—
$\chi^2/df$	2.02	< 3.00
GFI	0.94	> 0.90
AGFI	0.91	> 0.90
CFI	0.96	> 0.95
TLI	0.95	> 0.95
RMSEA	0.052	< 0.06

As shown in Table 3, the structural equation model demonstrated an excellent fit to the data. The chi-square value was 163.42 with 81 degrees of freedom ( $\chi^2/df = 2.02$ ), indicating an acceptable ratio. The values for GFI (0.94), AGFI (0.91), CFI (0.96), and TLI (0.95) all exceeded recommended thresholds, while RMSEA was 0.052, well within acceptable limits. These indices collectively suggest the model fits the observed data well.

**Table 4. Standardized and Unstandardized Path Coefficients in the Structural Model**

Path	B	SE	$\beta$	p
Core Beliefs → Cognitive Flexibility	-0.48	0.06	-0.42	< .001
Cognitive Flexibility → Communication Effectiveness	0.67	0.08	0.51	< .001
Core Beliefs → Communication Effectiveness (Direct)	-0.33	0.07	-0.29	< .001
Core Beliefs → Communication Effectiveness (Indirect via Cognitive Flexibility)	-0.32	0.05	—	< .001
Core Beliefs → Communication Effectiveness (Total Effect)	-0.65	0.08	-0.52	< .001

The structural model results in Table 4 show that core beliefs about love significantly predicted cognitive flexibility ( $\beta = -0.42, p < .001$ ), and cognitive flexibility, in turn, significantly predicted communication effectiveness ( $\beta = 0.51, p < .001$ ). The direct path from core beliefs about love to communication effectiveness remained significant ( $\beta = -0.29, p < .001$ ), indicating partial mediation. The indirect effect through cognitive flexibility was also significant ( $B = -0.32, SE = 0.05, p < .001$ ), confirming the mediating role of cognitive flexibility in the relationship. The total effect was strong and significant ( $\beta = -0.52$ ), emphasizing the substantial impact of core beliefs on communication through both direct and indirect pathways.



**Figure 1. Final Model with Standardized Coefficients**

## Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study revealed that core beliefs about love were significantly and negatively associated with communication effectiveness. In other words, individuals who endorsed more rigid or idealistic beliefs about love tended to report lower levels of effective communication in their romantic relationships. This association highlights the interpretative role that internalized schemas play in shaping relational dynamics. More importantly, the results indicated that cognitive flexibility significantly mediated the relationship between core beliefs about love and communication effectiveness, suggesting that individuals who possess higher cognitive flexibility are better able to navigate the influence of maladaptive love schemas and communicate more effectively with their partners.

This pattern of findings is consistent with prior research demonstrating the functional role of cognitive flexibility in romantic and interpersonal contexts. For instance, previous studies have shown that rigid or idealized cognitive schemas about relationships may distort the interpretation of partners' behaviors, thereby inhibiting healthy communication (Sezgin & Gürbüz, 2022; Tüysüz et al., 2023). When these schemas are filtered through inflexible cognitive styles, individuals become more prone to misinterpretation, overgeneralization, and negative affective responses. However, those with greater cognitive flexibility can reinterpret relational cues and integrate diverse perspectives, leading to more adaptive interpersonal strategies (Haft et al., 2019; Howlett et al., 2022). In this study, participants with higher levels of cognitive flexibility appeared to buffer the maladaptive effects of dysfunctional love beliefs, thereby enhancing their communication effectiveness.

These results also align with the notion that flexibility supports not only cognitive adaptation but also emotional resilience in the context of close relationships. Gür (2023) emphasized that cognitive flexibility mediates the association between self-compassion and interpersonal forgiveness, indicating its role in modulating interpersonal stress and promoting relational repair (Gür, 2023). Similarly, Usluca and Güler (2021) found that individuals with rigid cognitive schemas exhibited more emotional

dysfunction and less effective communication, especially under relational strain (Usluca & GÜler, 2021). The findings from the present study corroborate these associations and suggest that cognitive flexibility serves as a dynamic process that enables reinterpretation and strategic regulation of emotional responses during romantic interactions.

The mediating role of cognitive flexibility was also theoretically anticipated given its neurocognitive underpinnings. Research by Varangis et al. (2021) and Hu et al. (2018) indicates that cognitive flexibility is rooted in executive functions, allowing for perspective-shifting, inhibition of automatic responses, and reappraisal of emotionally charged stimuli (Hu et al., 2018; Varangis et al., 2021). In the context of this study, such mechanisms may have facilitated more accurate understanding and adaptive communication in individuals otherwise predisposed to rigid love ideologies. Notably, cognitive flexibility may act as a "cognitive moderator," mitigating the dysfunctional aspects of certain love beliefs that might otherwise impair relational functioning.

Furthermore, the cultural backdrop of the study adds significance to the findings. Given that the sample was drawn from an Iraqi population, it is important to consider the sociocultural dynamics that inform romantic beliefs and communication norms. In many collectivist or conservative societies, ideals surrounding love, duty, and emotional expression are more prescriptive, potentially reinforcing rigid relational schemas (Li & Chu, 2022; Park & Shin, 2022). The results suggest that in such contexts, cognitive flexibility becomes even more vital for maintaining open and constructive communication. This is especially important in environments where social expectations may discourage direct emotional expression or favor hierarchical gender dynamics in communication.

The positive association between cognitive flexibility and communication effectiveness is further supported by empirical work linking flexibility to mental well-being and social adaptability. For instance, Çankaya and Aydoğan (2022) found that cognitive flexibility significantly predicted argumentation skills in pre-service teachers, a finding which supports the notion that flexibility enhances not only intrapersonal insight but also interpersonal reasoning (Çankaya & Aydoğan, 2022). Additionally, Jen et al. (2018) found that flexible mindsets in familial settings correlated with improved mental health outcomes and relationship harmony, echoing the core themes of this study (Jen et al., 2018).

Interestingly, the findings also resonate with psychological models that emphasize the interaction between belief systems and self-regulation. Klein and Lancaster (2017) noted that mindfulness and cognitive control predict stronger cognitive performance, including the capacity for flexible thinking and adaptive relational strategies (Klein & Lancaster, 2017). In this context, the current results suggest that enhancing cognitive flexibility may serve as a mechanism through which individuals can deconstruct maladaptive core beliefs and build more effective communication patterns. Park and Kim (2021) likewise proposed that flexibility mediates the association between emotional traits and interpersonal behavior, reinforcing the mediational model explored here (Park & Kim, 2021).

Moreover, the implications of this study extend to therapeutic and psychoeducational interventions. As Er and Deniz (2022) highlighted, interventions targeting self-awareness, compassion, and flexibility have demonstrated efficacy in improving subjective well-being and interpersonal outcomes (Er & Deniz, 2022). The current findings suggest that enhancing cognitive flexibility in couples through structured programs—such as cognitive restructuring, mindfulness-based practices, and problem-solving skills training—could significantly improve communication dynamics, especially for individuals operating under dysfunctional romantic belief systems.

Finally, the observed relationships suggest important educational and developmental considerations. Cognitive flexibility is not a fixed trait; it can be cultivated through deliberate training and experiential learning (Hwan et al., 2021; Kaur & Loomba, 2022). Educators, counselors, and family therapists might benefit from incorporating flexibility-building exercises into their relational skills curricula, especially in cultures where relational norms are prescriptive and emotionally restrictive. By

facilitating reflective thought and adaptive behavior, such interventions may buffer against the interpersonal consequences of rigid love schemas and improve the quality of romantic relationships across diverse populations.

While this study provides valuable insights into the mediating role of cognitive flexibility, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional nature of the research design restricts causal interpretations of the observed relationships. Although structural equation modeling provides a robust framework for testing mediational pathways, longitudinal data would offer stronger evidence for the temporal ordering of variables. Second, the reliance on self-report instruments may have introduced social desirability or response biases, particularly given the sensitive nature of romantic beliefs and interpersonal communication. Third, the study sample consisted solely of participants from Iraq, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts. Differences in cultural norms regarding love, gender roles, and emotional expression may influence both cognitive flexibility and communication styles in meaningful ways. Lastly, potential confounding variables—such as attachment style, relationship duration, and personality traits—were not controlled for in the analysis and may have affected the results.

Future research should adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to establish causality and explore the developmental pathways through which core beliefs and cognitive flexibility evolve in romantic contexts. Longitudinal studies can help determine how changes in flexibility over time influence relationship satisfaction and communication patterns. Additionally, future studies should examine the role of cognitive flexibility across different types of intimate relationships, including marital, cohabitating, and dating partnerships, and account for factors such as age, gender identity, and cultural background. Incorporating qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews or diary studies, may also enrich understanding of the subjective experiences underlying love beliefs and communication dynamics. Finally, future research should investigate the efficacy of specific cognitive flexibility interventions—such as dialectical behavior therapy or cognitive-behavioral therapy—in enhancing communication effectiveness in clinical and non-clinical populations.

The findings of this study offer practical implications for therapists, relationship educators, and counselors. Cognitive flexibility training should be integrated into couple therapy programs as a core component to improve communication effectiveness. By helping individuals identify and challenge maladaptive beliefs about love and offering tools for flexible cognitive restructuring, practitioners can foster more adaptive interaction patterns. Psychoeducational workshops in schools, universities, and community centers could also incorporate content on cognitive flexibility, especially in relation to conflict resolution and relational schemas. In culturally conservative societies, practitioners should be especially mindful of cultural norms that influence love beliefs and communication expectations and tailor interventions accordingly. Empowering individuals with cognitive tools for flexibility may not only improve relational outcomes but also contribute to broader mental and emotional well-being.

### **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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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.

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