

MARITAL VULNERABILITY TO EXTRAMARITAL INCLINATIONS AMONG MARRIED POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS: AN INTEGRATED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Marital infidelity remains a significant relational transgression with far-reaching psychological, familial, and societal consequences. Despite extensive empirical research, theoretical explanations linking interpersonal deficits to extramarital inclinations remain fragmented. This paper develops the Interpersonal Vulnerability-to-Infidelity (IVI) Model, integrating Attachment Theory, the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Sexual Script Theory, and Interpersonal Communication Theory. The model identifies eight interpersonal variables as distal predictors operating through three mediating pathways—attachment insecurity, attitude formation, and sexual dissatisfaction—to influence extramarital inclinations. Particular emphasis is placed on married postgraduate students, a population exposed to unique academic and relational stressors. Seven theoretical propositions are advanced to guide future empirical research. The findings indicate that extramarital inclinations are not random but emerge from interacting interpersonal vulnerabilities operating through identifiable psychological mechanisms, particularly within the high-stress context of married postgraduate students. The model provides a coherent, mechanism-based framework that advances theoretical integration and contextual understanding of infidelity risk. It is concluded that interpersonal processes play a central and structured role in shaping extramarital outcomes under conditions of relational and academic strain. Future research should empirically test the proposed model using longitudinal and dyadic designs, while counselling and institutional interventions should target modifiable pathways such as attachment insecurity, maladaptive attitudes, and sexual dissatisfaction.

Keywords: Marital infidelity, interpersonal variables, attachment insecurity, attitude formation, and sexual dissatisfaction

1. Introduction

Marital infidelity remains one of the most consequential violations of relational trust, with far-reaching implications for individual well-being, family stability, and broader social cohesion. Empirical research consistently links infidelity to psychological distress, diminished relationship satisfaction, and increased likelihood of marital dissolution (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Despite this extensive body of work, theoretical explanations of how interpersonal deficits within marriage translate into extramarital inclinations remain fragmented. Existing studies have identified a range of relational correlates—such as communication breakdown, emotional disconnection, and sexual dissatisfaction—but these factors are often examined in

isolation, limiting a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which marital vulnerability develops (Allen et al., 2005; Mark, Janssen & Milhausen, 2011).

This limitation is particularly pronounced in the context of married postgraduate students, a population that occupies a unique intersection of developmental, academic, and relational demands. Postgraduate education is characterized by intensive cognitive engagement, prolonged time commitments, financial strain, and uncertainty regarding future career trajectories. These demands frequently generate stress that spills over into intimate relationships, reducing opportunities for communication, emotional intimacy, and relationship maintenance. In many cases, additional pressures such as geographic separation due to fieldwork or institutional mobility further compound relational strain. While these contextual stressors suggest heightened vulnerability to extramarital inclinations (Fincham & Beach, 2010), scholarly attention to this specific population remains limited.

The scarcity of focused research is especially notable within African contexts, where marriage often precedes or coincides with advanced education and is embedded within broader cultural and familial systems. Normative expectations surrounding marriage, gender roles, and sexual behavior may shape both the experience of marital strain and responses to it, including attitudes toward extramarital relationships. However, most existing theoretical models of infidelity have been developed in Western settings and do not adequately account for these cultural dynamics (Fincham & Beach, 2010), thereby limiting their explanatory power across diverse populations. In response to these gaps, this paper advances the Interpersonal Vulnerability-to-Infidelity (IVI) Model, a theoretically integrated framework that explains how deficits in core interpersonal domains create susceptibility to extramarital inclinations. The model synthesizes four major theoretical perspectives—Attachment Theory, the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Sexual Script Theory, and Interpersonal Communication Theory—to provide a multi-level explanation of marital vulnerability. Specifically, it identifies eight interpersonal variables as distal predictors that operate through three mediating psychological pathways—attachment insecurity, attitude formation toward infidelity, and sexual dissatisfaction (Bowlby, 1969; Ajzen, 1991; Gagnon & Simon, 1973)—to shape extramarital inclinations.

A key conceptual decision in this study is the focus on extramarital inclinations rather than behavior. Extramarital inclinations are defined as cognitive, affective, and motivational orientations toward engaging in romantic or sexual relationships outside one's primary marital bond. This includes a continuum ranging from fleeting attractions and fantasies to deliberate intentions and plans. Focusing on inclinations is theoretically and methodologically justified for three reasons. First, inclinations represent the most proximal psychological antecedent of behavior and therefore constitute a critical point of intervention. Second, inclinations are more amenable to reliable self-report measurement than actual behavior, which is often underreported due to social desirability bias. Third, examining inclinations enables the identification of vulnerability processes before behavioral transgressions occur, thereby supporting preventive intervention (Fincham & Beach, 2010).

Within this framework, marital vulnerability is conceptualized as a state of heightened susceptibility to relational threats arising from deficits in one or more interpersonal domains. This perspective shifts the focus from individual pathology to relational processes, emphasizing that extramarital inclinations emerge from systemic weaknesses in the marital relationship rather than isolated personal characteristics. Such an approach aligns with contemporary relationship science, which increasingly recognizes the dynamic interplay between interpersonal processes and individual cognition in shaping relational outcomes (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Bradbury et al., 2000).

The present paper makes several contributions to the literature. First, it integrates multiple theoretical traditions into a unified model that explicates both distal relational predictors and

proximal psychological mechanisms. Second, it specifies distinct mediating pathways through which interpersonal deficits translate into extramarital inclinations, thereby advancing a more nuanced understanding of vulnerability processes. Third, it contextualizes these processes within the cultural realities of African marital systems and the situational demands of postgraduate education, enhancing the model's ecological validity. Finally, it provides a foundation for future empirical research by articulating a coherent framework that can be operationalized and tested across diverse populations.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the theoretical foundations underlying the IVI Model and articulates their integration. Subsequent sections present the model architecture, develop testable theoretical propositions, and apply the framework to married postgraduate students. The paper concludes by discussing implications for research, practice, and policy, as well as directions for future theoretical development.

2. Theoretical Framework: Development of the Interpersonal Vulnerability-to-Infidelity (IVI) Model

2.1 Overview of the IVI Model

The Interpersonal Vulnerability-to-Infidelity (IVI) Model (see Figure 1) is a multilevel conceptual framework designed to explain how deficits in core marital interpersonal domains translate into extramarital inclinations through identifiable psychological and cognitive mechanisms. The model departs from single-theory explanations by integrating Attachment Theory, the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Sexual Script Theory, and Interpersonal Communication Theory into a unified explanatory structure.

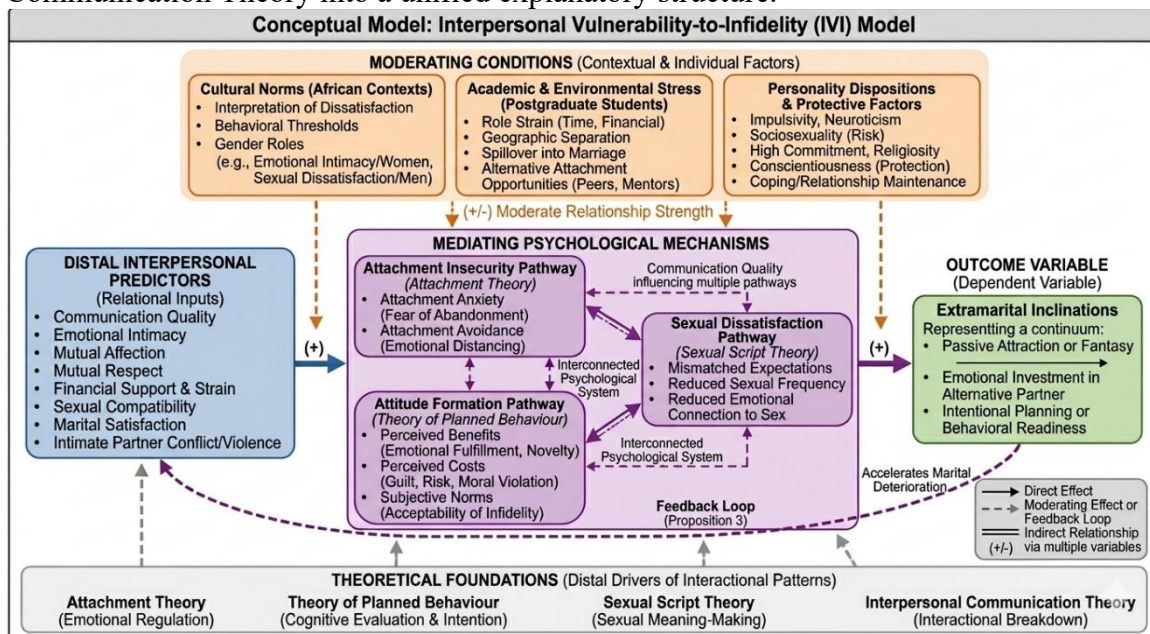


Figure 1: Conceptual illustration of the IVI Model

At its core, the IVI Model proposes that extramarital inclinations do not emerge spontaneously but are the outcome of systematic relational deterioration operating through three mediating psychological pathways: Attachment insecurity, Attitude formation toward infidelity, Sexual dissatisfaction. These mediators are activated by eight distal interpersonal conditions within marriage and are further shaped by cultural, contextual, and individual-level moderators.

2.2 Structural Architecture of the Model

The IVI Model is structured into four hierarchical layers:

(1) Distal Interpersonal Predictors (Relational Inputs)

These represent foundational marital conditions that shape relational stability. They include: Communication quality, emotional intimacy, mutual affection, mutual respect, financial support and strain, sexual compatibility, marital satisfaction, intimate partner conflict or violence. These variables reflect the overall functioning of the marital system and determine the degree of relational security or strain experienced by partners (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Bradbury et al., 2000).

(2) Mediating Psychological Mechanisms

The model posits that interpersonal deficits do not directly produce extramarital inclinations. Instead, they operate through three internal psychological systems.

3.2.1 Attachment Insecurity Pathway

Attachment insecurity represents disruptions in emotional bonding and perceived relational safety, rooted in internal working models of self and others (Bowlby, 1969). Within the IVI Model, poor communication, emotional neglect, and reduced intimacy activate: Attachment anxiety (fear of abandonment) and attachment avoidance (emotional distancing). These states increase susceptibility to external emotional or sexual validation, thereby elevating extramarital inclinations.

3.2.2 Attitude Formation Pathway

The second mechanism derives from the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Here, relational dissatisfaction reshapes cognitive evaluations of infidelity by altering: Perceived benefits (e.g., emotional fulfillment, novelty), perceived costs (e.g., guilt, risk, moral violation) and subjective norms (perceived acceptability of infidelity). When marital dissatisfaction intensifies, attitudes toward extramarital involvement become increasingly permissive, strengthening behavioral intentions.

3.2.3 Sexual Dissatisfaction Pathway

Sexual dissatisfaction arises when partners experience mismatched expectations, reduced sexual frequency, or poor sexual communication. Drawing from Sexual Script Theory, sexual behavior is understood as culturally and socially constructed rather than purely biological (Gagnon & Simon, 1973).

When marital sexual scripts are misaligned, individuals may experience: Reduced sexual fulfillment, perceived incompatibility, and emotional detachment from sexual activity. This condition increases openness to alternative sexual or emotional partners.

3.3 Integration of Theoretical Mechanisms

The IVI Model posits that each mediating pathway corresponds to a distinct theoretical tradition but operates in a dynamically interconnected system:

- Attachment theory explains emotional regulation and dependency dynamics
- TPB explains cognitive evaluation and intention formation
- Sexual script theory explains sexual meaning-making and dissatisfaction
- Communication theory explains interactional breakdown and relational erosion

Importantly, these mechanisms do not function independently. For example, poor communication increases attachment insecurity, which in turn influences attitudes toward infidelity and sexual disengagement. This creates a feedback loop of relational degradation, reinforcing vulnerability over time (Gottman, 1994).

3.4 Outcome Variable: Extramarital Inclinations

The dependent construct in the IVI Model is extramarital inclinations, defined as the cognitive, emotional, and motivational disposition toward engaging in romantic or sexual involvement outside the marital relationship.

This construct is conceptualized as a continuum: Passive attraction or fantasy, emotional investment in an alternative partner, and intentional planning or behavioral readiness. This aligns with prior research suggesting that infidelity is preceded by progressive psychological stages rather than abrupt behavioral shifts (Fincham & Beach, 2010).

3.5 Moderating Conditions

The strength and direction of relationships within the IVI Model are shaped by contextual and individual moderators:

3.5.1 Cultural Norms

Cultural expectations regarding marriage, gender roles, and sexuality influence both the interpretation of dissatisfaction and behavioral thresholds for infidelity. In some contexts, normative ambiguity surrounding male extramarital behavior may reduce perceived behavioral constraints.

3.5.2 Academic and Environmental Stress

Among married postgraduate students, academic pressure introduces role strain, time scarcity, and psychological fatigue, which reduce relational investment and increase vulnerability to emotional disengagement.

3.5.3 Personality Dispositions

Stable traits such as impulsivity, neuroticism, and sociosexuality influence susceptibility to extramarital inclinations by moderating cognitive restraint and emotional regulation capacity.

3.6 Dynamic Nature of the Model

The IVI Model is explicitly process-oriented rather than static. It assumes that marital vulnerability develops over time through cumulative interpersonal deficits rather than isolated events. Feedback loops are central: Poor communication reduces intimacy, reduced intimacy increases attachment insecurity, and attachment insecurity distorts attitudes and sexual satisfaction. These reinforce further communication breakdown. This cyclical deterioration increases the probability of extramarital inclinations emerging over time.

3.7 Summary of the Model Logic

In summary, the IVI Model proposes the following causal chain:

Interpersonal marital deficits → Psychological mediators (attachment insecurity, attitude formation, sexual dissatisfaction) → Extramarital inclinations

This relationship is moderated by cultural, academic, and personality factors and reinforced through dynamic feedback processes.

4. Theoretical Propositions

Building on the conceptual structure of the Interpersonal Vulnerability-to-Infidelity (IVI) Model, this section articulates seven testable theoretical propositions that specify the mechanisms, moderators, and temporal dynamics through which interpersonal variables influence extramarital inclinations. These propositions integrate empirical evidence and theoretical insights from Attachment Theory, Theory of Planned Behaviour, Sexual Script Theory, and Interpersonal Communication Theory.

Proposition 1: Interpersonal Deficits and Mediating Pathways

1a. Deficits in the eight core interpersonal variables—communication quality, mutual respect, mutual affection, financial support, intimate partner conflict, spousal satisfaction, sexual compatibility, and emotional intimacy—predict extramarital inclinations indirectly through three mediating pathways: Attachment insecurity activation, attitude formation toward infidelity, and sexual dissatisfaction.

1b. The three mediating pathways operate partially independently:

- Attachment insecurity pathway: Activated primarily by deficits in communication quality, mutual respect, mutual affection, and emotional intimacy.
- Attitude formation pathway: Activated primarily by deficits in communication quality, mutual affection, financial support, spousal satisfaction, and emotional intimacy.
- Sexual dissatisfaction pathway: Activated primarily by deficits in sexual compatibility, emotional intimacy, and communication quality.

1c. The pathways have additive effects: individuals vulnerable through multiple pathways are at highest risk of extramarital inclinations.

Rationale: This proposition integrates relational, cognitive, and sexual perspectives, highlighting that interpersonal deficits operate through distinct psychological mechanisms to shape vulnerability (Bowlby, 1969; Ajzen, 1991; Gagnon & Simon, 1973).

Proposition 2: Differential Predictive Strength of Interpersonal Variables

Among the eight interpersonal variables: Sexual compatibility, spousal satisfaction, and emotional intimacy are expected to exert the strongest direct and indirect effects on extramarital inclinations. Communication quality exerts the strongest indirect effects by influencing multiple mediating pathways and other interpersonal variables.

Rationale: Empirical evidence indicates sexual satisfaction is the strongest predictor of infidelity ($r = 0.41\text{--}0.51$), followed by marital satisfaction and emotional intimacy.

Proposition 3: Reciprocal Causation and Negative Feedback Loops

The relationship between interpersonal deficits and extramarital inclinations is reciprocal: Interpersonal deficits increase extramarital inclinations. Presence of extramarital inclinations or behavior further erodes relational quality, accelerating marital deterioration.

Rationale: This feedback loop amplifies vulnerabilities over time, creating a cyclical process of relational decline (Gottman, 1994).

Proposition 4: Cultural Moderation of Pathways

4a. Norms against infidelity weaken the attitude formation pathway.

4b. Restrictive sexual norms intensify the sexual dissatisfaction pathway.

4c. Gender role expectations moderate pathway salience: emotional intimacy deficits may predict extramarital inclinations more in women, while sexual dissatisfaction may be stronger in men.

Rationale: Cultural context shapes both the perceived acceptability of infidelity and available strategies for marital repair.

Proposition 5: Academic Stressors as Amplifiers

Among married postgraduate students: Time, financial pressures, and geographic separation amplify the effects of interpersonal deficits. Academic peers and mentors may provide alternative attachment opportunities, increasing vulnerability. Academic stress activates attachment insecurities, spilling over into marital dissatisfaction.

Rationale: Postgraduate environments impose dual pressures—strain and opportunity—that heighten susceptibility to extramarital inclinations.

Proposition 6: Protective Factors and Resilience

Protective factors buffer vulnerability: High commitment, religiosity, and conscientiousness strengthen moral constraints and self-regulation. Effective coping strategies and social support mitigate the effects of academic stress. Proactive relationship maintenance behaviors enhance resilience to relational deficits.

Rationale: Not all individuals experiencing deficits develop extramarital inclinations; protective factors moderate the impact of vulnerabilities (Fincham & Beach, 2010; Bradbury et al., 2000).

Proposition 7: Temporal Dynamics and Developmental Trajectories

7a. Chronic interpersonal deficits exert stronger effects than acute deficits.

7b. The salience of specific interpersonal variables varies across the marital life course: sexual compatibility is more critical in early marriage, emotional intimacy in mid-marriage, and overall satisfaction in later marriage.

7c. Married postgraduate students exhibit peak vulnerability during periods of maximum academic stress (e.g., dissertation writing, job market preparation).

Rationale: Vulnerability is dynamic, shaped by life-course stages, stress exposure, and relational history (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

5. Application of the IVI Model to Married Postgraduate Students

5.1 Contextual Rationale for Focusing on Postgraduate Students

Married postgraduate students represent a distinct relational population situated at the intersection of intense academic demands, evolving career trajectories, and ongoing marital responsibilities. Unlike general married populations, this group simultaneously navigates cognitive overload, financial constraints, and temporal scarcity, all of which directly affect the quality and stability of intimate relationships.

Within the Interpersonal Vulnerability-to-Infidelity (IVI) Model, this population is particularly relevant because the model assumes that extramarital inclinations are not solely determined by stable personality traits, but are also significantly shaped by contextual stress exposure and relational opportunity structures.

5.2 Academic Stress as a Catalyst for Interpersonal Deterioration

Postgraduate education introduces sustained academic pressure, including coursework intensity, research demands, dissertation completion, and performance evaluation. These stressors reduce the cognitive and emotional resources available for marital maintenance.

Within the IVI framework, academic stress operates as an upstream contextual stressor that indirectly influences all three mediating pathways: It reduces communication frequency and quality due to time scarcity. It increases emotional exhaustion, weakening attachment security. It contributes to irritability and relational withdrawal. It reduces sexual availability and intimacy consistency. This aligns with stress spillover processes documented in relationship science, where external stressors negatively affect marital functioning (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

5.3 Attachment Disruption in Academic Contexts

For married postgraduate students, attachment insecurity is often activated not only by internal relational dynamics but also by external role strain. Prolonged absence, reduced responsiveness, and emotional fatigue can be misinterpreted as rejection or disengagement.

Within the IVI Model: Attachment anxiety may increase due to perceived neglect or reduced partner responsiveness and attachment avoidance may increase as individuals cope by emotionally distancing themselves. This dual activation increases susceptibility to seeking emotional validation outside the marital relationship, particularly in environments where alternative social bonds (e.g., peers, supervisors, research collaborators) are readily available (Bowlby, 1969).

5.4 Cognitive Reframing and Attitude Formation

The Theory of Planned Behaviour component of the IVI Model becomes particularly salient in postgraduate contexts due to increased exposure to diverse social norms and ideological flexibility.

Academic environments may contribute to: Exposure to peers with liberal attitudes toward relationships. Increased rationalization of relational dissatisfaction. Cognitive reframing of infidelity as “situational” rather than moral deviation. These cognitive shifts can alter

subjective norms and perceived acceptability of extramarital involvement, thereby strengthening behavioral intentions (Ajzen, 1991).

5.5 Sexual Dissatisfaction Under Conditions of Role Strain

Sexual intimacy is highly sensitive to stress, fatigue, and time constraints. In married postgraduate students, irregular schedules, psychological exhaustion, and emotional preoccupation often lead to reduced sexual frequency and quality.

Within the Sexual Script Theory framework, these disruptions result in: Breakdown of expected sexual routines, reduced opportunity for erotic engagement, mismatch between partners' sexual expectations, and reduced emotional connection during sexual activity.

Over time, this may produce sexual dissatisfaction that increases openness to alternative sexual or emotional experiences (Gagnon & Simon, 1973).

5.6 Communication Breakdown and Emotional Disengagement

Communication quality is particularly vulnerable in this population due to logistical constraints such as distance, time scarcity, and competing priorities.

Common patterns include: Delayed or infrequent communication, functional rather than emotional interactions, conflict avoidance due to fatigue, and reduced depth of emotional disclosure. Consistent with Gottman's relational research, such communication patterns contribute to emotional disengagement and gradual relational erosion (Gottman, 1994). Within the IVI Model, this breakdown acts as a cross-cutting trigger, simultaneously activating attachment insecurity, dissatisfaction, and cognitive openness to alternatives.

5.7 Opportunity Structures and Social Environment

Postgraduate environments also introduce unique opportunity structures that may facilitate extramarital inclinations: Frequent interaction with intellectually and socially compatible peers, extended academic collaboration (e.g., research groups, conferences), travel, fieldwork, and institutional mobility, and reduced spousal monitoring due to physical separation.

These structural conditions do not cause infidelity directly but reduce barriers and increase exposure to alternative relational options, thereby interacting with internal vulnerabilities.

5.8 Cultural Embeddedness in the Postgraduate Context

In many African contexts, including Nigeria, marriage remains strongly embedded within extended family and communal expectations. However, postgraduate education often introduces exposure to more individualistic relational norms, potentially creating cognitive dissonance.

This tension may manifest as: Conflicting expectations between traditional marital roles and academic independence, reduced willingness to disclose marital dissatisfaction, and increased privatization of relational struggles, and differential gender expectations regarding fidelity and autonomy. Such cultural transitions intensify the complexity of marital vulnerability in this group.

5.9 Protective Mechanisms in Postgraduate Marriages

Despite heightened vulnerability, several protective mechanisms may buffer against extramarital inclinations: Strong marital commitment and shared long-term goals, effective dyadic coping strategies, religious or moral belief systems, intentional communication routines (e.g., scheduled check-ins) and social support from family and peers.

These factors reduce the intensity of mediating pathways by reinforcing relational stability and cognitive restraint (Fincham & Beach, 2010).

6. Implications of the IVI Model

The Interpersonal Vulnerability-to-Infidelity (IVI) Model provides a structured basis for future empirical investigation by clarifying both predictor structure and mechanistic pathways. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and dyadic approaches, as cross-sectional designs are insufficient for capturing the temporal and reciprocal dynamics proposed in the model (Karney

& Bradbury, 1995). Structural equation modeling (SEM) or cross-lagged panel models would be particularly appropriate for testing indirect pathways and feedback loops between interpersonal deficits and extramarital inclinations.

The IVI Model has direct relevance for couple-based interventions, particularly in marital and family therapy contexts. Its primary contribution is the identification of multiple entry points for intervention, rather than a single causal factor. Clinical interventions can be structured around the three mediating pathways: strengthening attachment security, correcting maladaptive infidelity attitudes, and improving sexual and emotional communication (Johnson, 2004).

Given the specific focus on married postgraduate students, the IVI Model also has implications for university policy and student support systems. Institutions of higher learning should recognize that postgraduate education creates relational strain conditions that may indirectly affect students' marital stability. Key institutional recommendations include:

- Establishment of family-supportive postgraduate policies, including flexible scheduling and reduced structural rigidity where possible
- Provision of accessible counseling services for married students and families
- Integration of stress management and relationship education programs into postgraduate orientation and student support frameworks

7. Conclusion

The IVI Model provides an integrated theoretical explanation of how marital interpersonal deficits translate into extramarital inclinations through structured psychological pathways. By combining attachment processes, cognitive attitude formation, sexual scripting, and communication dynamics, the model advances a unified framework for understanding marital vulnerability.

It further highlights that extramarital inclinations are not isolated decisions but emergent outcomes of cumulative relational strain moderated by contextual stressors such as postgraduate education demands. This framework provides a foundation for future empirical testing and intervention design.

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