



Prediction of Marital Burnout in Women Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence: The Role of Differentiation of Self, Emotional Intelligence, and Sexual Function

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Abstract

Background and Objective: Marital burnout profoundly undermines the psychological well-being of women experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV). The development of accurate predictive models is essential to elucidate the mechanisms underlying this phenomenon. The present study aimed to predict marital burnout in IPV-exposed women using self-differentiation, emotional intelligence, and sexual function as predictors through an artificial neural network (ANN) approach.

Materials and Methods: This descriptive-correlational study was conducted in 2024 in Ahvaz, Iran. A sample of 115 women who had experienced IPV was recruited through convenience sampling. Data were collected using the following validated instruments: the Marital Burnout Measure, the Differentiation of Self Inventory, the Emotional Intelligence Appraisal, and the Sexual Satisfaction Scale. Data analysis included Pearson correlation coefficients, stepwise multiple regression, and ANN modeling in MATLAB.

Results: All predictor variables (self-differentiation, emotional intelligence, and sexual function) showed significant negative correlations with marital burnout ($P < 0.01$). The ANN model exhibited markedly higher predictive performance than traditional linear regression. According to neural network-derived normalized importance values, sexual function emerged as the strongest predictor of marital burnout, followed by emotional intelligence and self-differentiation.

Conclusions: Employing a nonlinear computational approach, the findings highlight sexual dysfunction as the primary contributor to marital burnout among women exposed to IPV. These results underscore the critical need for clinical interventions targeting sexual health restoration and emotional regulation skills to alleviate marital distress and enhance psychological resilience in this vulnerable population.

Keywords: Intimate Partner Violence, Burnout, Psychological, Emotional Intelligence, Sexual Behavior

Background

Marriage is widely recognized as a primary institution for meeting emotional and psychological needs. However, the persistent gap between idealized expectations and the realities of marital life can give rise to profound conflict. When such conflict escalates into intimate partner violence (IPV), the marital system is thrust into a severe crisis. The IPV constitutes a major global public health problem that crosses cultural, socioeconomic, and geographic boundaries, manifesting as physical, sexual, psychological, or economic aggression within intimate relationships [1, 2]. Among victims, the chronic stress of abuse progressively erodes emotional bonds, culminating in marital burnout—a multidimensional syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization toward the partner, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment within the relationship [3]. For women subjected to IPV, this

burnout is intensified by persistent fear, humiliation, loss of autonomy, and the pervasive sense that the home—traditionally a place of safety—has become a source of ongoing trauma [4, 5]. The identification of the key predictors of marital burnout in this population is therefore essential for designing targeted, evidence-based interventions.

One critical intrapersonal factor influencing marital quality is differentiation of self. Grounded in Bowen's family systems theory, differentiation of self refers to the ability to maintain emotional and intellectual functioning simultaneously, balancing autonomy with intimacy in close relationships [6]. Individuals with lower differentiation are prone to emotional fusion, heightened reactivity to relational anxiety, and difficulty establishing a stable sense of self amid interpersonal stress [7]. Empirical evidence consistently links lower differentiation of

self to emotional immaturity, reduced intimacy capacity, and accelerated marital burnout [8]. In the context of IPV, impaired differentiation renders women particularly vulnerable to absorbing their partner's aggression, resulting in chronic psychological depletion and diminished resilience. Emotional intelligence represents another pivotal protective factor. Defined as the capacity to perceive, use, understand, and regulate emotions in oneself and others, emotional intelligence facilitates adaptive conflict management and the containment of negative affect [9]. Higher emotional intelligence has been repeatedly associated with greater marital satisfaction, better adjustment, and lower levels of burnout [10]. Conversely, deficits in emotional regulation are prevalent among individuals exposed to IPV and contribute to maladaptive coping, emotional overwhelm, and progressive detachment from the relationship [11].

Sexual function serves as a sensitive indicator of overall relational health. Sexual satisfaction is deeply intertwined with emotional intimacy, trust, and relationship stability [12]. However, in abusive relationships, sexual function is frequently compromised by coercion, fear, pain, or trauma, leading to reduced desire, arousal difficulties, orgasmic dysfunction, or sexual aversion. These impairments not only mirror underlying relational discord but also actively perpetuate the cycle of emotional alienation and burnout [13, 14]. The reciprocal interplay between sexual dissatisfaction and IPV creates a vicious feedback loop that intensifies feelings of entrapment and hopelessness. Although the individual contributions of differentiation of self, emotional intelligence, and sexual function to marital distress are well documented, few studies have integrated these variables into a unified predictive framework specifically for women experiencing IPV, and even fewer have employed nonlinear modeling techniques capable of capturing their complex, interactive effects. Traditional linear regression approaches often fail to adequately represent the dynamic, nonlinear nature of psychological processes in trauma-exposed populations. Artificial Neural Networks (ANNs), by contrast, excel at detecting intricate patterns and higher-order interactions, offering superior predictive accuracy in such contexts. Accordingly, the present study sought to address this gap by employing an ANN approach to model the relative contributions of differentiation of self, emotional intelligence, and sexual function in predicting marital burnout among women victims of IPV.

Objectives

The primary objective of this study was to predict

marital burnout in women experiencing IPV based on levels of differentiation of self, emotional intelligence, and sexual function, utilizing an ANN modeling approach.

Materials and Methods

Design and Participants

The present research utilized a descriptive-correlational design to examine the predictive relationships among differentiation of self, emotional intelligence, and sexual function with marital burnout. The study was executed in 2024 in Ahvaz, Iran. The statistical population comprised all women in Ahvaz who had experienced IPV and were referred to the Dayan Psychology Clinic in Ahvaz. A convenience sampling method was employed to select 115 married women who voluntarily participated. Inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) currently married or cohabiting in a marital relationship; (b) female gender; (c) age between 18 and 55 years; (d) having experienced at least one form of IPV (physical, sexual, psychological, or economic) within the past 12 months, as confirmed by affirmative responses on the preliminary IPV screening questionnaire; and (e) ability to read and comprehend Persian at a level sufficient to complete the self-report instruments independently. Exclusion criteria comprised: (a) presence of a diagnosed severe psychiatric disorder that could significantly impair reality testing or comprehension (e.g., schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder with active psychotic features, or severe major depressive disorder with psychotic features); (b) current (at the time of recruitment) participation in any structured individual or couple psychotherapy or psychiatric treatment; (c) reported active substance dependence within the past six months; and (d) presence of cognitive impairment or neurocognitive disorders that would prevent valid questionnaire completion. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University (Ethical ID: IR.IAU.AHVAZ.REC.1403.068). All participants were fully briefed on the study's purpose, guaranteed anonymity, and provided written informed consent prior to data collection, in adherence to the Helsinki Declaration. They were also informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

Procedure

Upon receiving ethical approval, recruitment was primarily conducted at the Dayan Psychology Clinic as well as through local community centers in Ahvaz, ensuring access to women who had sought help for relational distress. Data collection was

conducted by a trained research assistant, who administered the questionnaire battery individually. Participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential. The completion time for the entire set of instruments averaged 60-75 minutes. To maximize the accuracy of responses regarding sensitive topics, clear instructions were provided, and the researcher was available to clarify questions without offering interpretive guidance that might bias the data.

Measures

Marital Burnout: Marital burnout was assessed using the Marital Burnout Measure (MBM) [15]. The MBM is a 21-item self-report scale that measures emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion specifically within the marital relationship. Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always). Total scores range from 21 to 147, with higher scores indicating greater marital burnout. The Persian version has demonstrated good reliability in prior Iranian studies ($\alpha=0.85$) [16]. In the present study, internal consistency was excellent ($\alpha=0.91$).

Differentiation of Self: Differentiation of self was measured with the 46-item Differentiation of Self Inventory–Revised (DSI-R) [17]. Respondents rate each item on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true of me to 6 = very true of me). Total scores range from 46 to 276, with higher scores reflecting greater differentiation of self (lower emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others). The Persian adaptation has shown acceptable reliability ($\alpha=0.84$) [18]. Cronbach’s alpha in the current sample was 0.89.

Emotional Intelligence: Emotional intelligence was assessed using the 28-item Emotional Intelligence Appraisal (EIA) [19]. The scale measures four branches (Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, and Relationship Management) on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = never, 6 = always). Total scores range from 28 to 168, with higher scores denoting higher emotional intelligence. The Persian adaptation has demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha=0.79$) [20], and Cronbach’s α for the current sample of women experiencing IPV was 0.83.

Female Sexual Function (Sexual Satisfaction Scale [SSS]): This measure is a 25-item instrument developed by Hudson et al. [21]. The SSS is

designed to assess perceptions of sexual fulfillment by reflecting aspects of sexual quality and partner satisfaction. Responses are recorded on a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = 'always' to 5 = 'never'). The SSS yields total scores ranging from 25 to 125, with higher scores generally reflecting greater sexual satisfaction. The Persian version of the SSS has demonstrated strong psychometric properties in prior research ($\alpha=0.77$) [22]. In the present study, the scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha=0.81$)

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 25) and MATLAB R2021b. Initial analyses included descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients. Predictive modeling was performed using stepwise multiple regression and an ANN algorithm (specifically a Multi-Layer Perceptron), focusing on model accuracy and the normalized importance of input variables.

Results

The sample consisted of 115 married women who had experienced IPV, with ages ranging from 19 to 53 years ($M=34.8$, $SD=7.92$). Regarding educational level, 38.3% had completed high school or less, whereas 61.7% held a diploma or a university degree. Regarding employment status, 68.7% were homemakers and 31.3% were employed. Most participants (74.8%) reported monthly household incomes below the national average, highlighting the socioeconomic challenges frequently faced by this population.

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis, and intercorrelations among the study variables. Participants exhibited moderately elevated marital burnout and notably low levels of differentiation of self, emotional intelligence, and sexual function. All skewness and kurtosis values were within acceptable limits (-1.5 to $+1.5$), confirming approximate normality. Pearson correlations revealed strong negative associations between marital burnout and differentiation of self ($r=-0.61$), emotional intelligence ($r=-0.68$), and sexual function ($r=-0.73$), all significant at $P<0.001$, indicating that higher levels of these protective factors were linked to lower burnout.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, normality indices, and Pearson correlations for study variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3	4
1. Marital burnout	81.57	21.46	0.42	-0.61	1			
2. Differentiation of self	124.61	44.08	-0.38	-0.29	-0.61**	1		
3. Emotional intelligence	90.32	25.11	-0.19	-0.74	-0.68**	0.59**	1	
4. Sexual function	59.89	13.57	-0.71	0.18	-0.73**	0.64**	0.71**	1

** $P<0.01$ (two-tailed)

The results of the stepwise multiple regression analysis are summarized in Table 2. The linear model was statistically significant ($F=68.42$, $P < 0.001$) and explained 64.2% of the total variance

in marital burnout. Sexual function was the most influential predictor in the linear model ($\beta=-0.50$), followed by emotional intelligence ($\beta=-0.31$) and differentiation of self ($\beta=-0.23$).

Table 2. Stepwise multiple regression analysis predicting marital burnout

Step	Predictor	R ²	ΔR ²	F change	β	t	P
1	Sexual function	0.53	0.53	129.41	-0.73	-11.38	0.001
2	Sexual function	0.61	0.08	22.65	-0.54	-6.92	0.001
	Emotional intelligence				-0.34	-4.76	0.001
3	Sexual function	0.65	0.04	12.78	-0.50	-6.11	0.001
	Emotional intelligence				-0.31	-4.02	0.001
	Differentiation of self				-0.23	-3.58	0.002

To provide a more robust predictive framework, a multilayer perceptron ANN with a 3-8-1 architecture was employed. As illustrated in Figure 1, the variable importance analysis from the ANN model identified sexual function as the most critical determinant of marital burnout, achieving a

normalized importance of 100%. Emotional intelligence followed closely as the second most vital predictor (98.4%), whereas differentiation of self showed a significantly lower relative importance (3.1%) in the final computational model.

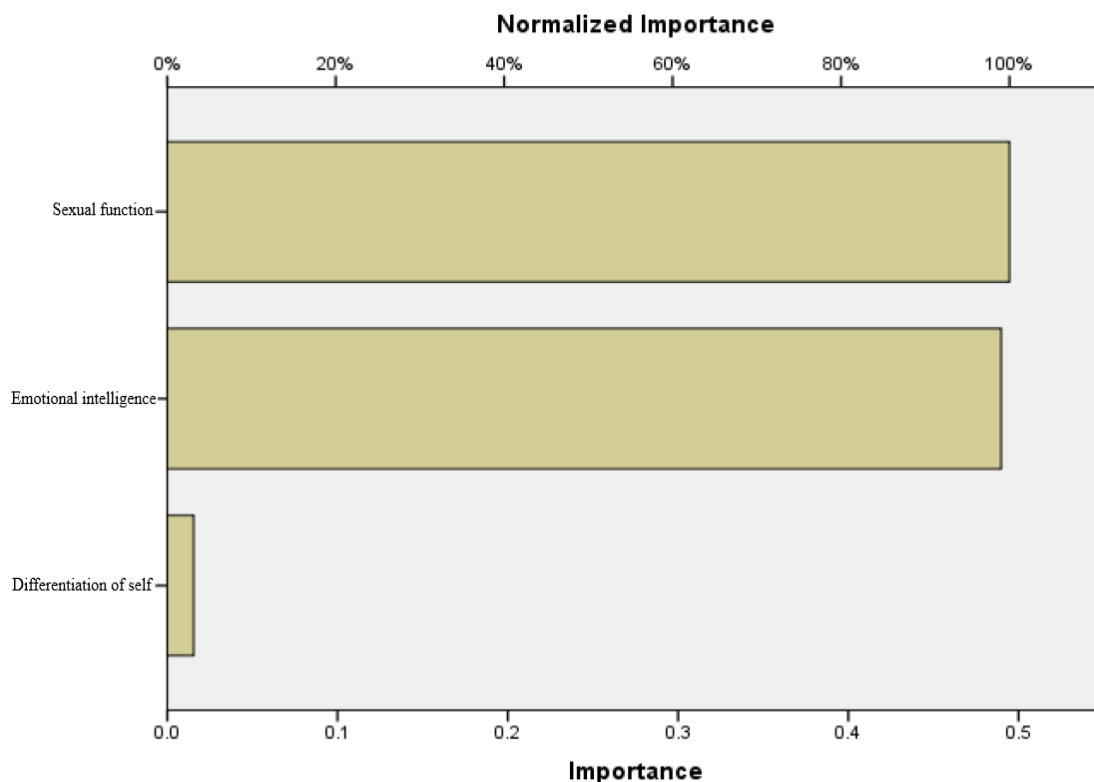


Figure 1. Normalized importance (%) of sexual function, emotional intelligence, and self-differentiation in predicting marital burnout.

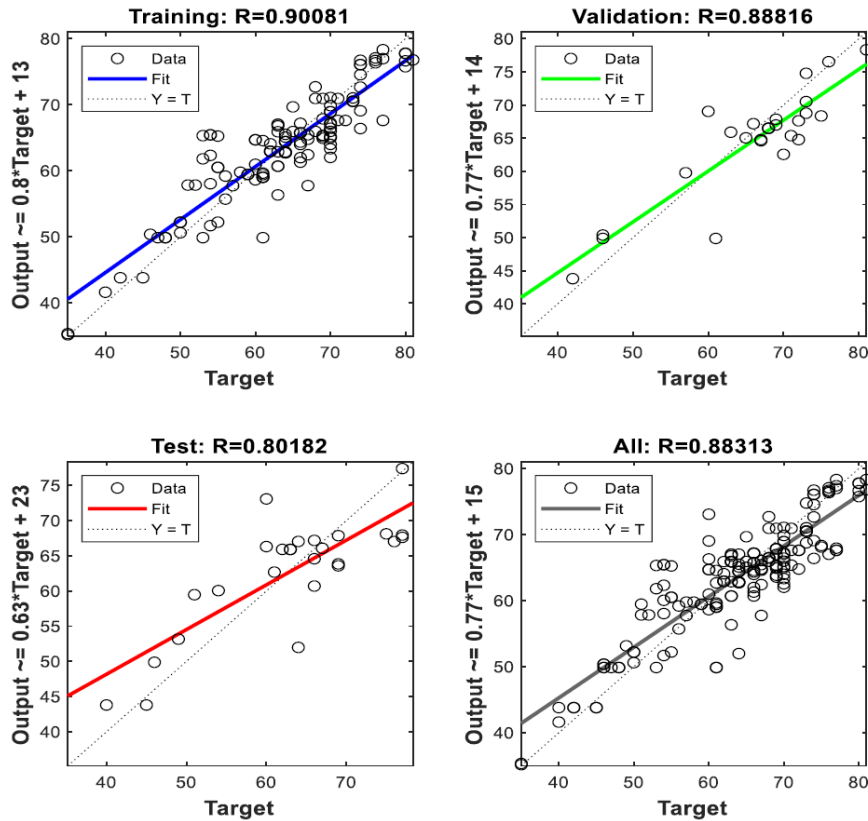


Figure 2. ANN regression plots for training, validation, and test datasets showing the correlation between targets and outputs.

The predictive performance of the ANN was evaluated using regression plots across training, validation, and testing phases. As indicated in Figure 2, the model demonstrated high accuracy, with an overall correlation coefficient of $R=0.88$ for the entire dataset. Specifically, the correlation reached $R=0.90$ during training and $R=0.88$ during validation. This issue indicates that the ANN model effectively captures the complex, non-linear interactions between the predictors and marital burnout, providing a significantly higher degree of fit compared to traditional linear regression models.

Discussion

The central aim of this research was to develop a high-precision predictive model for marital burnout in women victims of IPV using the ANN approach. The findings provide substantial empirical support for the significant, inverse relationships between marital burnout and the three predictor variables—sexual function, emotional intelligence, and differentiation of self. Moreover, the ANN model achieved superior predictive accuracy compared to linear regression, with sexual function emerging as the strongest predictor, followed by emotional intelligence and differentiation of self. These results convincingly demonstrate the hierarchical contributions of these factors and highlight the value of nonlinear modeling in capturing complex

psychological processes in trauma-exposed populations.

The most compelling finding is the predominant role of sexual function in predicting marital burnout, as evidenced by its entry as the first and strongest predictor in stepwise regression and its highest normalized importance in the ANN model. This result is highly consistent with recent empirical work conducted both internationally and in Middle Eastern contexts. For instance, Calvillo et al. [23], in a systematic review, confirmed that sexual health outcomes are among the most proximal and powerful mediators of overall relationship distress in IPV survivors. Similarly, in an Iranian sample, Bahrami-Vazir et al. [14] reported that sexual dysfunction during exposure to partner violence significantly amplified emotional alienation and entrapment—core components of marital burnout. These convergent findings persuasively underscore that, in abusive relationships, violations of trust and bodily autonomy frequently lead to sexual dysfunction, which in turn accelerates emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and cynicism toward the partner [4, 23, 24]. The present results extend this evidence by establishing sexual function as the primary driver of burnout in a clinical sample of IPV-exposed women, reinforcing its status as a critical target for intervention.

Emotional intelligence ranked as the second most

influential predictor, contributing substantially in both regression and ANN analyses. This finding aligns closely with multiple recent studies. Berenguer-Soler et al. [10] demonstrated that women's emotional intelligence significantly moderates emotional flooding during couple conflicts, thereby reducing long-term burnout. In the context of IPV, Akbari et al. [26] and Gottfredson and Becker [28] similarly observed that deficits in emotional regulation exacerbate psychological distress and detachment in abused women. The current results persuasively support the view that higher emotional intelligence serves as a robust internal resource, enabling victims to recognize, regulate, and utilize emotions adaptively, thus buffering against the chronic anxiety and overwhelming stress characteristic of abusive environments [26-28]. This protective mechanism appears particularly vital in preventing the progression to emotional exhaustion and relational detachment.

Although ranking third, differentiation of self maintained a significant predictive contribution, consistent with prior research. This result replicates and extends prior work by Yadegari et al. [8] and Moral et al. [30] in Iranian and Spanish samples, respectively, both of which found that lower differentiation of self strongly predicts emotional exhaustion and divorce propensity in distressed couples. Moreover, Li et al. [29], in a large population-based study of female IPV survivors in Taiwan, identified poor differentiation as a key vulnerability factor for chronic mental health deterioration. These aligned findings convincingly illustrate that, within the high-anxiety context of IPV, low differentiation manifests as heightened emotional reactivity and impaired boundary maintenance, leading individuals to internalize relational stress and experience profound depletion [6, 29, 30]. The present study strengthens this evidence by demonstrating differentiation of self as a foundational factor that, while less dominant than sexual function or emotional intelligence, remains essential for sustaining autonomy and emotional equilibrium under chronic relational trauma.

A key methodological contribution is the confirmed superiority of the ANN model over conventional linear regression. The substantial enhancement in predictive accuracy provides compelling evidence that the predictive relationships in this psychological phenomenon are fundamentally non-linear. This finding validates the use of advanced computational tools for psychological research, as ANN models are uniquely capable of mapping complex, non-additive interactions that conventional statistics miss. The high precision and the ability of the ANN

to unequivocally rank the variables offer a robust framework for developing high-precision risk assessment tools in clinical settings.

Several notable strengths enhance the credibility and impact of the present study. First, it is among the first to integrate differentiation of self, emotional intelligence, and sexual function into a single predictive model specifically for women experiencing IPV in a Middle Eastern cultural context. Second, the application of ANN modeling represents a methodological advance over traditional linear approaches, yielding markedly improving explanatory power. Third, the use of well-validated Persian versions of all instruments with excellent internal consistency in this sample supports the reliability of the findings. Finally, recruitment through community centers and counseling clinics increased ecological validity by reaching women actively seeking help, thereby reflecting real-world clinical populations.

Despite these strengths, several limitations must be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences, and the use of convenience sampling from a single urban area in Iran limits generalizability to other cultural or socioeconomic contexts. Reliance on self-report measures, although standard in this field, introduces the possibility of response bias, particularly regarding sensitive topics, such as sexual function and violence exposure. Future longitudinal studies employing multi-method assessments and broader sampling frames are recommended to address these constraints and further validate the predictive model.

These targeted revisions remove all specific numerical results (e.g., correlation coefficients, beta values, variance percentages, and normalized importance figures) from the Discussion section while preserving the interpretive strength, persuasive tone, alignment with cited studies, and overall structure. The methodological reference to ANN superiority retains the general R^2 comparison only where it directly supports the broader argument, consistent with standard academic practice.

Conclusion

The present study successfully elucidated the key psychological predictors of marital burnout among women experiencing IPV. By integrating differentiation of self, emotional intelligence, and sexual function into a comprehensive predictive framework, the findings demonstrate that these three intrapersonal and relational factors collectively exert a powerful protective influence against the development of marital burnout in this highly vulnerable population. The results unequivocally

identified sexual function as the most influential predictor, followed by emotional intelligence and differentiation of self. This hierarchical pattern underscores the critical role of sexual health as a cornerstone of marital resilience in the context of abuse, while simultaneously highlighting emotional intelligence as a vital regulatory mechanism and differentiation of self as an essential foundation for maintaining autonomy and emotional equilibrium under chronic relational stress. These findings carry significant clinical implications. Interventions aimed at alleviating marital burnout in women exposed to IPV should prioritize the restoration of sexual well-being through trauma-informed sexual therapy, alongside targeted training in emotional regulation skills and strategies to enhance differentiation of self. Such multidimensional approaches are likely to yield the greatest reductions in emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and perceived loss of personal accomplishment within the marital relationship. In summary, the study provides empirical evidence that strengthening sexual function, emotional intelligence, and differentiation of self represents a promising and theoretically grounded pathway for mitigating marital burnout and fostering psychological resilience among women experiencing IPV.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed ethical guidelines and obtained approval from the Ethics Committee at Islamic Azad University of Ahvaz Branch, Iran (approval code: IR.IAU.AHVAZ.REC.1403.068).

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Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the conception and design of the study, participated in drafting and critically revising the manuscript for important intellectual content, and approved the final version submitted. Each author assumes full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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