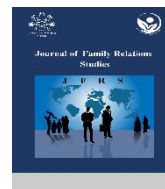




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Research Paper

Grounded Theory of Couples' Affectional Bond



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ABSTRACT

Objective: Affectional bonds are a key factor in the quality and continuity of couples' relationships. This study aims to develop a grounded theory to explain the dynamics of couples' affectional bonds.

Methods: This study employed the grounded theory approach, included 25 participants selected through purposive sampling with maximum variation until theoretical saturation was achieved. The participants shared the same national and religious background, but had different socio-economic backgrounds and varying marital relationship qualities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and data were analyzed using the constant comparative analysis method. The research's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were ensured.

Results: The study identified six main categories contributing to couples' affectionate bonds, organized within a grounded theoretical model (AFRIAS model): Attractiveness as the background factor, Fondness as the core factor, Responsiveness, Intimacy, Adjustment as the processes, and Marital Success as the outcome.

Conclusion: The study proposes the data-driven AFRIAS model to conceptualize and understand couples' affectional bonds, particularly within Iranian society.

1. Introduction

Marriage is a complex institution that significantly impacts individual well-being by providing acceptance, love, and support. While a couple's relationship shares some similarities with friendship, it is distinct due to its depth, commitment, and intricate nature. Through marriage, individuals engage in a lifelong partnership founded on mutual choice and shared experiences. This relationship includes various dimensions, with the emotional connection, often referred to as the affectional bond.

An affectional bond is a form of attachment behavior where individuals develop a deep emotional connection based on mutual fondness, support, and the desire to stay

close to each other (Bowlby, 2005; Beaird, 2013). The couples involved experience strong emotions in their marital relationship.

Researchers highlight the importance of affectional bonds for psychological, physical, and social well-being (Gouin & Dymarski, 2024). Strong affectional bonds contribute to relationship stability, effective communication, and marital satisfaction (Vaezi et al., 2008). In contrast, weakened bonds can lead to increased physical health risks (Heffner et al., 2004) and lower quality of life (Yazdani et al., 2013). Furthermore, children raised in environments with weak parental affectional bonds are more susceptible to psychological

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distress, behavioral disorders, and challenges in forming healthy relationships (Akbari & Akbari, 2013). The strength of this bond directly influences relationship satisfaction and longevity.

Over time, affectional bonds can evolve. The initial stages are marked by intense romantic expressions, frequent emotional exchanges, and joint efforts to nurture the relationship. However, various factors- including life stressors, responsibilities, and personality differences- can lead to shifts in affectional bonds. Without a concerted effort to maintain emotional closeness, couples may experience a decline in it, resulting in dissatisfaction and emotional detachment or divorce (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Mikaeili et al., 2023). Given the increasing divorce rates in Iranian society and the reluctance of many divorced people to remarry due to feelings of insecurity resulting from their first marriage (Ayadi et al., 2024), it is essential to understand the factors that influence couples' affectional bond. Previous research has examined attachment, love, intimacy, and marital satisfaction. However, overlap and conceptual ambiguity among these constructs underscore the need for a comprehensive and well-grounded theoretical model to enhance understanding and guide practical interventions.

Nowadays, the concept of couples' affectional bonds has become a significant focus of concern. To enhance our understanding and organize knowledge in this area, it is essential to identify the fundamental dimensions of affectional bonds as a human phenomenon. Ainsworth (1989) identified five key characteristics of the affectional bond: durability, dedication to a specific person, immutability, the emotional significance of the relationship, and a desire for contact and close connection. There is noticeable distress and confusion during separation. Similarly, Sternberg (1986) described the dimensions of love, identifying commitment, intimacy, and sexual passion as its three core components; however, he did not explicitly address the concept of the affectional bond. Furthermore, Conroy et al. (2016) examined four key qualities of communication in couples' relationships: intimacy, trust, impactful mutual communication, and conflict resolution. These studies, while informative, were conducted in specific contexts and demonstrated both conceptual misalignment and overlap with the idea of the affectional bond in couples. However, it seems that none of the existing models is sufficient to comprehensively explain the context, conditions, and processes of couples' affectional bond. Since the affectional bond is a psychological construct that depends on the context of human relationships within the family system, its meaning can vary across diverse cultural and relational settings. Given this complexity, qualitative research seems to be the most

appropriate method for exploring its underlying concepts and creating a specific model in different contexts. Several qualitative studies have examined the factors that influence the quality and continuity of emotional relationships in couples -marital intimacy (Reyhani et al., 2022), the theoretical foundations of the relational attachment model (Van Epp, 2013), the positive effects of loving marriages (Petty, 2010), men's perceptions of intimacy (Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009), and factors contributing to marital stability (Bachand & Caron, 2001). However, the researcher found no studies that provided a grounded model addressing the affectional bond between couples, particularly within the Iranian cultural context. So, considering the crucial role of the couples' affectional bond and its influence on their lives and children, this qualitative study was undertaken to gain a deeper understanding of this concept and to develop a theoretical framework specifically for Iranian couples, which clarified conceptual ambiguity about the emotional aspects of marriage. The research aimed to develop a grounded theory about couples' affectional bonds.

2. Materials and Methods

This study utilized a grounded theory approach and involved 25 participants selected through purposive sampling with maximum variation. The participants shared the same background but differed in individual, socioeconomic, and marriage status: 15 female and 10 Male; 7 people aged 20-30, 9 in their 30-40 and 9 in their 40-50 years old; 5 people had a high school diploma, 10 had bachelor and 10 had above master; 6 people had good marital relationship quality, 10 moderate and 9 poor; 15 people were employed and 10 unemployed; 8 people had 3-5 years length of marriage, 9 had 5-15 and 8 had more than 15; 7 people had 1 child or non, 12 had 2 and 6 had 3 or more.

Data were collected between 2018 and 2023 through semi-structured interviews and field notes. Given the extended timeframe for data collection, consistency was maintained through the use of a fixed interview guide, a uniform approach to participant interactions, comprehensive recording of data, and continuous review of field notes. Efforts were also made to document the researcher's reflexivity over time to ensure that it did not influence the data analysis. The interviews lasted between 40-75 minutes, and the typed and edited transcripts were prepared for analysis. Analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted using the constant comparative analysis method (until theoretical saturation). Data analysis was conducted concurrently with the interviews, under the supervision and review of experts. As a result, a grounded theoretical model of the affectional bond among couples was developed. To enhance methodological rigor, the

study ensured credibility through prolonged engagement with the data, transferability via a multi-case approach, dependability by including diverse participants, and confirmability through peer review by eight experts in psychology and counseling- four women and four men, four holding master’s degrees and four PhDs.

3. Results

The analysis identified six main factors underlying couples’ affectional bonds: attractiveness, fondness,

responsiveness, intimacy, adjustment, and marital success.

Factor 1. Attractiveness -The Contextual Factor

Attractiveness is the foundation for developing affectional bonds and includes physical, emotional, behavioral, intellectual, and social attractiveness. Most participants highlighted the importance of attractiveness at the beginning and afterward. One participant noted, “Before someone can truly like another person, they must feel attracted to them, not repulsed” (Pa.8, P.29). Table 1 shows the attractiveness concepts.

Table 1. The concepts concerning Attractiveness- The Contextual Factor

Context	Components	Concepts	Indicators	
Attractiveness	Physical A.	Facial Features	Applying Makeup	
		Dressing Style	Enhancing one’s Appearance	
	Emotional A.	Kindness	Having Common Interests	Being Kind or Loving
			Being Calm or Gentle	Being Happy
		Emotional Stability	Not being Nervous or Aggressive	Not being Hostile
			Belief and Spiritual Proportion	Shared goals
	Intellectual A.	Shared Thought	Understanding of Life Issues	Being Optimistic
		Positive Thinking	Shared Value System	Creating Romantic Scenes
		Common Values	Pleasantness of Manners	A Soft and Pleasant Tone
	Behavioral A.	Communication Style	Being Open or Receptive	Attractive Sex
			Sexual Behaviors	Honesty
		Trustworthiness	Dependability	Humility
			Social Prominence	Pride of the Spouse
	Social A.	Social Compatibility	Cultural	

Physical Appearance: Physical appearance encompasses facial features (applying makeup for the spouse) and dressing style (enhancing one’s appearance). Many participants noted that some level of external attractiveness, stemming from facial features and attire, plays a role in fostering fondness for the spouse: “His face was nice” (Pa.13, P.31). “The way she dresses is what I appreciate” (Pa.6, P.25).

Emotional Attractiveness: Emotional attractiveness encompasses kindness (having common interests, being kind/loving, being calm/gentle, being happy) and emotional stability (not being nervous/aggressive, not being hostile). Some participants believed that their spouse’s emotional states play a big role in their ability to be loved: “He loves this talkative person (me) very much and that I am happy” (Pa.13, P.91). “My spouse was a little nervous and said whatever he wanted” (Pa.6, P.41).

Intellectual Attractiveness: Intellectual attractiveness

includes shared thoughts (beliefs and spiritual compatibility, common goals, and a shared understanding of life issues), positive thinking (being optimistic), and common values (shared value system). Many participants, especially from the middle and upper classes, stressed the importance of intellectual attractiveness through these aspects in strengthening their emotional connection with their spouse: “They agreed and aligned with each other” (Pa.8, P.37). “I am positive, and my wife is negative” (Pa.9, P.49). “He is very trustworthy” (Pa.23, P.12).

Behavioral Attractiveness: Behavioral attractiveness encompasses an attractive communication style (creating romantic scenes, pleasantness of manners, a soft and pleasant tone), sexual behaviors (attractive sex), and trustworthiness (honesty, dependability, humility). Many participants emphasized the role of the spouse’s behaviors in their attractiveness: “I create romantic scenes” (Pa.5, P.15). “He spoke very nicely” (Pa.13,

P.31). "His tone is very sharp. He gets sulky immediately" (Pa.8, P.25). "I don't miss anything in sex. I do everything that makes him satisfied" (Pa.13, P.91). "She is honest" (Pa.23, P.12).

Social Attractiveness: Social attractiveness encompasses social prominence (pride of the spouse), social compatibility (familial, cultural). Some participants considered the importance of social prominence and cultural and family compatibility with their spouse as a factor for starting an affectional bond: He says, "I am proud of you" (Pa.10, P.55). "Our families are completely compatible" (Pa.2, P.47). "We

are very different from each other culturally and traditionally" (Pa.13, P.57).

Factor 2. Fondness -The Core Factor

Fondness is the emotional nucleus of the affectional bond, encompassing liking, impatience, and compassion. All participants believed that the foundation of couples' affectional bonds lies in having positive affection and fondness for one another, which, in terms of emphasis, was regarded as the core category for describing these bonds. "After one year, this relationship led to an intense love" (Pa.7, P.3). Table 2 shows the fondness concepts.

Table 2. The concepts concerning Fondness- The Core Factor

Core Category	Components	Concepts	Indicators
Fondness	Liking	Attachment	Belonging
		Love	-
	Desire	Longing	Not Enjoying Oneself without the Spouse
		Eagerness	Intolerance of the Spouse's Absence
		Benevolence	Looking forward to Meeting
	Compassion	Benevolence	Interest in the Spouse's Progress
		Sympathy	Being Unwilling to the Spouse's Misfortune
		Feeling Upset about the Spouse's Distress	
		Being Worried about the Spouse	

Liking: Liking encompasses attachment (belonging) and love. According to most participants, this component was one of the most essential components extracted from the data. All participants emphasized the concept of liking in the successful affectional bond of couples, and this concept was a strong component: "It means that one is attached" (Pa.6, P.7). "We would become one soul in two bodies" (Pa.9, P.61). "It means to have affection and love" (Pa.3, P.11).

Desire: Desire encompasses longing (not enjoying oneself without the spouse, intolerance of the spouse's absence) and eagerness (looking forward to meeting). Most of the participants believed that the couple's fondness for each other causes them to have desire, while they are away from each other: "I used to look through the window and wait for him to come, and I was restless and counting the moments" (Pa.8, P.17). "He said there was no pleasure because you were not there" (Pa.11, P.13). "I can't live without him" (Pa.5, P.51).

Compassion: Compassion encompasses benevolence (interest in the spouse's progress, being unwilling to the spouse's misfortune) and sympathy (feeling upset about the spouse's distress, being worried about the spouse). The participants with strong affectional bonds commented on many signs of benevolence and

sympathy: "We help each other progress" (Pa.7, P.25). "He doesn't want me to be upset. I don't want him too" (Pa.1, P.17). "He felt sad about my illness" (Pa.14, P.41). "We worry about each other" (Pa.12, P.5).

Factors 3-5. Responsiveness, Intimacy, and Adjustment (The Process Factors)

Processes include interactions and reactions that take place in response to conditions. A deep exploration of the data yielded the main categories of couples' affectional responsiveness to each other, intimacy, and adjustment as processes. It means that the communicational factor of the couple's affectional bond encompasses these three categories, which are explained below.

Factor 3. Positive Responsiveness -First Process Factor

Positive responsiveness strengthens affectional bonds by expressing fondness, valuing one's partner, and offering care and support. Couples often exhibit attentive behavior toward each other in a strong affectional bond. All participants emphasized the necessity of positive responsiveness to one another as a key aspect of their affectional bond: "My wife feels that I do not pay much attention to her" (Pa.2, P.19). Table 3 presents the various concepts of responsiveness.

Table 3. The concepts concerning positive Responsiveness- First Process Factor

Process	Components	Concepts	Indicators
Positive Responsiveness	Expressing Fondness	Affectional Gestures	Greeting
			Bidding Farewell
			Focusing on Listening
			Caring Gestures at the Dining
			Gift Giving

Process	Components	Concepts	Indicators
Positive Responsiveness	Valuing	Verbal Expression	Loving Address
			Love Expression
			Sending Loving Messages
		Respect	In Private
			In Public
			The Spouse's Family
		Prioritization	than own
			than others
			than Financial Issues
		Admiration	Meeting the Spouse's Needs
			Emotions over Sexual Issues
			Gratitude
	Supporting	Assistance	Praise
			Encouragement
			Congratulations
		Companionship	Supporting the Spouse versus others
			Forereaching with Tasks
			Providing New Ideas
			Helping with the Spouse's Progress
			Consolation
			Taking Care of the Spouse's Health
			Solving the Spouse's and Family's Problems
			Supporting during the Illness
			Financial Support

Expressing Fondness: Expressing fondness encompasses affectional gestures (greeting, bidding farewell, focusing on listening, caring gestures at the dining, and gift giving) and verbal expression (loving address, love expression, and sending loving messages). Most participants highlighted the importance of couples expressing their love for one another and identified practical, attentive behaviors in daily interactions as effective methods of conveying love: “I was going to welcome him” (Pa.3, P.25). “I offer to carry his bag and to get his coat” (Pa.14, P.61). “They pay close attention to one another during conversations and through their body language” (Pa.13, P.29). “At the dinner table, they engage with each other (Pa.1, P.49). “They frequently use affectionate terms when addressing each other. For example, My goal, my dear” (Pa.1, P.47). I send him messages when he’s not around” (Pa.8, P.17). “Sometimes, he surprises me” (Pa.12, P.9).

Valuing: Valuing encompasses respect (in private, in public, and with the spouse’s family), prioritizing (own, others, financial issues, meeting the spouse’s needs, and prioritizing emotions over sexual matters), and Admiration (gratitude, praise, encouragement, congratulations, and supporting the spouse over others). According to the majority of the participants, to strengthen their affectional bond with their spouses, it is better to give importance to them, respect them and their families in mutual and collective relationships, and prioritize their spouses in different situations in their lives: “He always calls my name with the word Lady” (Pa.11, P.33). “He has never said anything about me to anyone” (Pa.5, P.39). “We respect each other’s families

under any circumstances” (Pa.7, P.25). “I don’t prefer what I like: (Pa.6, P.17). “Their priority is their spouse, and the others are secondary. They are significant to each other” (Pa.1, P.49). “I expected him to satisfy my material and spiritual needs” (Pa.12, P.25). “I read his mind and fulfilled his wish” (Pa.9, P.39).

Supporting: Supporting includes assisting (such as helping with tasks, offering new ideas, and aiding the spouse’s progress) and companionship (which involves offering comfort, caring for the spouse’s health, solving problems, supporting during illness, and providing financial help. Many participants believed that care and support are the best ways to foster emotional responsiveness in a spouse. Participants with strong emotional bonds described various caring and supportive behaviors their spouses displayed. Others expected similar behaviors from their spouses: “He stood up in front of his family, who were bothering me” (Pa.8, P.17). “Well, I would also like him to help me with this challenging task of looking after the baby” (Pa.10, P.45). “Take the lead in everything” (Pa.13, P.25). “When I got sick, he didn’t stand by me” (Pa.8, P.55). “She looks after her spouse’s health” (Pa.20, P.5). “They support each other financially, emotionally, and academically” (Pa.10, P.63).

Factor 4. Intimacy -Second Process Factor

Intimacy encompasses physical, communication, sexual, and financial intimacy. Most of the participants with a favorable emotional relationship with their spouses reported rich experiences of close and comfortable relationships, and the participants with unfavorable relationships stated that they experienced

less of this characteristic in their relationships with their spouses and wanted to have more intimacy with them. “They are so close that they talk to each other like two

friends” (Pa.1, P.51). “Shared feelings, emotions, and experiences are formed” (Pa.20, P.1). Table 4 shows the intimacy concepts.

Table 4. The concepts concerning Intimacy- Second process Factor

Process	Components	Concepts	Indicators
Intimacy	Physical	Physical Closeness	Sitting together
			Physical Contact
			Sleeping together
		Non-sexual Touch	Handshaking
			Kissing
			Hugging and Pushing
	Communicational	Conversation-Contact	Caressing
			Transparency
			Exchange of Information
			Comfortable Conversation
			Shared Decision-Making
			Consulting
			Regular Contact
			Sharing Time
	Sexual	Shared Activities	Working together
			Joint Leisure
Celebrating Occasions			
Sexual	Comfortable Sex	Talking about Sex	
	Sex with Love	Post-Sex Affection	
Financial	Considering Diversities	Coercion-Free Sex	
	Financial Sharing	Joint Account	
	Joint Management	Shared Financial Planning	

Physical Intimacy: Physical intimacy includes physical closeness (sitting together, physical contact, sleeping together) and nonsexual contact (handshaking, kissing, hugging, caressing). Participants who had a favorable emotional relationship with their spouse reported more physical intimacy, whereas those with an unfavorable relationship reported fewer such experiences. But they believed these behaviors could indicate intimacy and a desirable affectional bond: “We sit together” (Pa.12, P.35). “I put my head on his shoulder” (Pa.8, P.29). “We lie down together” (Pa.3, P.39). “He shakes hands with me first” (Pa.6, P.63). “They walk hand in hand” (Pa.12, P.13). “When we meet, we kiss each other” (Pa.14, P.61). “I put my hand around my husband’s neck” (Pa.8, P.29). “They sit next to each other” (Pa.4, P.43). “I should embrace and press him” (Pa.11, P.61). “He wakes me up very caressingly” (Pa.5, P.53).

Communication Intimacy: Communication intimacy includes conversation-contact (transparency, information exchange, comfortable conversation, shared decision-making, consulting, regular contact) and shared activities (sharing time, working together, joint leisure, celebrating occasions). Most participants believed that closeness and comfort in communicating with the spouse can be a sign of a suitable affectional bond. Some of them reported the frequent occurrence of such cases in their relationship with their spouses, and others have report them in the favorable affectional bonds: “We used

to talk to each other” (Pa.1, P.11). “We spend time together; we have a relationship with each other” (Pa.13, P.7). “I need to know about my spouse routinely” (Pa.11, P.31). “Let’s watch TV together” (Pa.3, P.33). “We go out together, take a walk, or go shopping” (Pa.2, P.37).

Sexual Intimacy: Sexual intimacy includes comfortable sex (talking about sex), sex with love (post-sex affection), and considering diversity (coercion-free sex). Some participants who had positive relationships with their spouses shared feelings of closeness and comfort in their sexual connections. However, due to cultural factors, many participants did not show much interest in discussing this topic openly, which may explain the perceived lack of emphasis on these concepts. As a result, individuals from middle and higher socioeconomic classes felt more at ease talking about it. Nevertheless, one participant highlighted that sex itself did not contribute to their affectional bond. Another participant expressed that when he experiences emotional pleasure with his spouse, he wishes to consummate that connection through sex: “They could easily talk about their sexual desire” (Pa.20, P.9). “They enter into sex with love” (Pa.12, P.55).

Financial Intimacy: Financial intimacy includes financial sharing (joint account) and joint management (shared financial planning). Several participants discussed financial intimacy and shared their feelings of

comfort and involvement with their spouse regarding financial matters: *“Opening an account with each other” (Pa.13, P.19). “Planning together for their financial goals” (Pa.20, P.9).*

Factor 5. Adjustment -Third Process Factor

Adjustment enhances affectional bonds through commitment, healthy structure, coping, and conflict resolution. The participants with favorable marital relationships indicated a set of adjustment behaviors

between themselves and their spouses, which prevented conflicts. They have considered these behaviors as signs and factors of the strength of their affectionate bond with their spouses. On the other hand, the participants who have an unfavorable relationship with their spouses pointed out many maladjustments and problematic behaviors between themselves and their spouses, which harm their affectional bond. *“We try to adapt ourselves” (Pa.7, P.25).* Table 5 shows the adjustment concepts.

Table 5. The concepts concerning Adjustment- Third Process Factor

Process	Components	Concepts	Indicators
Adjustment	Commitment	Loyalty	Exclusivity
			Protection from Threats
			Adherence to Contracts
		Responsibility	Fulfilling Duties
			Striving for a Good Life
			Toughness in Problems
	Healthy Structure	Balanced Hierarchy	Seeking to Improve
			Not Dominance or Dictatorship
			Playing Gender Roles
		Maintaining Boundaries	Maintaining the Statuses
			Coordination
			Personal Boundaries
	Coping	Positive Perspective	Marital Boundaries
			Avoiding a Coalition with others
			Avoiding Triangulating in Conflicts
			Spouse Evaluation
			Not Focusing on Negative Traits
		Acceptance	Forgetting Problems & Mistakes
			Having Realistic Expectations
			Understanding the Spouse
Fairness and Justice			
Trust in the Spouse			
Conflict Resolution	Forbearance	The Spouse	
		The Spouse’s Family	
		Patience	
	Assertiveness	Releasing Grudges	
		Not Prolonging Conflicts	
		Considering Spouse’s Sensitivities	
Non-Aggression	Forgiveness		
	Temporary Withdrawal		
	Impactful Criticism and Protest		
	Expressing Annoyance		

Commitment: Commitment includes loyalty (exclusivity, protection from threats, adherence to contracts) and responsibility (fulfilling duties, striving for a good life, toughness in problems, seeking to improve). Some participants believed that their loyalty and responsibility significantly prevented conflict and helped their marital adjustment. Some others who had experienced a failed relationship with their spouses reported a lack of loyalty and responsibility: *“The spouses should not think of the other as a spouse” (Pa.23,*

P.10). “I do not betray” (Pa.10, P.25). “I must correct myself first” (Pa.1, P.21). “I constantly looked for a solution, and every time, I tried to manage myself quickly and return to normal life” (Pa.8, P.23).

Healthy structure: Healthy structure includes balanced hierarchy (not dominance or dictatorship, playing gender roles, maintaining the statuses, coordination) and maintaining boundaries (personal boundaries, marital boundaries, avoiding coalition with others, avoiding triangulation in conflicts). Most participants believed that

a suitable emotional relationship with their spouse and effective adjustments can be achieved by fostering healthy structural patterns that establish a balanced human relationship by avoiding dominance over their spouses and participating in decision-making together. Some male and female participants also emphasized maintaining balanced hierarchies based on culture, which includes upholding male and female gender characteristics and roles within the home. Simultaneously, several participants noted the importance of respecting the independence and personal boundaries of the couple, along with the privacy of the marriage and its autonomy from the surrounding environment as indicators of a healthy communication pattern: *“He always looks down on me, I feel evaluated, monitored, and controlled, and there is no need to focus on gender or superiority in a relationship”* (Pa.8, P.13). *He maintains his masculine side”* (Pa.11, P.57). *“He wanted me, as a woman, to embrace my role effectively”* (Pa.12, P.23). *“The independence of both parties is crucial, too”* (Pa.11, P.13). *“He allies with my mother-in-law against me; he frequently calls my mom, too”* (Pa.23, P.18).

Coping: Coping includes a positive perspective (spouse evaluation, not focusing on negative traits, forgetting problems & mistakes, having realistic expectations, understanding the spouse, fairness & justice, trust in the spouse), acceptance (the spouse, the spouse’s family), and forbearance (patience, releasing grudges, not prolonged conflicts, considering spouse’s sensitivities, forgiveness). Many participants considered it essential to cope with each other, and some others complained about their spouse being strict and not coping in their life, which

leads to maladjustment: *“I see his positive points and tell myself the positive points”* (Pa.1, P.35). *“The parties must trust each other”* (Pa.20, P.6). *“But in general, I felt he accepted me”* (Pa.8, P.13). *“What makes the husband accept the woman’s family is that the wife accepts his family”* (Pa.3, P.43). *“They understand each other”* (Pa.11, P.27). *“My wife is an employee. I don’t expect her to be like a housewife”* (Pa.2, P.57). *“I try to learn good behavior from my spouse”* (Pa.24, P.19)

Conflict Resolution: Conflict resolution included assertiveness (temporary withdrawal, impactful criticism & protest, expressing annoyance, negotiation, apologizing) and non-aggression (verbal, physical, and sexual). Participants with favorable spousal relationships reported many experiences of bold tactics to resolve conflicts that arose. Other participants, referring to their own or their spouses’ degree of aggression, believed that verbal, physical, and sexual aggression had damaged their emotional relationship: *“They have to deal with problems”* (Pa.14, P.7). *“He comes and talks to me; he says let us solve the problem”* (Pa.10, P.41). *“He apologize many times”* (Pa.7, P.23). *“If he bites a person with his tongue, the person will hate him”* (Pa.14, P.53). *“He hits me”* (Pa.13, P.35).

Factor 6. Marital Success-The Outcome Factor

A strong affectional bond contributes to marital success, demonstrating stability and evoking positive emotional consequences. Many participants in the study highlighted the consequences of couples’ affectional bonds and stressed their essential elements. Marital success refers to attaining the goals and benefits of marriage: *“What does one get married for? To calm down”* (Pa.8, P.28). Table 6 shows the concepts related to marital success.

Table 6. The concepts concerning Marital Success- The Outcome Factor

Consequence	Components	Concepts	Indicators
Marital success	Longevity	Relationship L.	Not breaking up
		Attachment L.	Refraining from divorce
	Emotional Consequences	Pleasure	Not regretting
		Happiness	Not being bored
			Mental P.
		Satisfaction	Physical P.
			Prosperity
		Tranquility	Hope
			Mental S.
		Assurance	
		Security	

Longevity: Longevity includes relationship longevity (avoiding breakups and divorces) and attachment longevity (not feeling regret or boredom). Many participants identified one indicator of a strong affectional bond as the relationship longevity paired with the ongoing love between couples over time: *“Love makes one move forward in life”* (Pa.7, P.11). *“He says*

I regret” (Pa.19, P.8). *“They share a strong affectional bond, but over time, it gradually weakens”* (Pa.3, P.49).

Emotional Consequences: Emotional consequences encompass pleasure (both mental and physical), happiness (including prosperity and hope), satisfaction (both mental and physical), and tranquility (which encompasses assurance and security). Some participants

emphasized the outcomes of a strong affectional bond between couples: *“Their intimacy is also fulfilling for both of them”* (Pa.13, P.41). *“He shows happiness in having me”* (Pa.8, P.27). *“We find spiritual satisfaction”* (Pa.3, P.55). *“They should also feel sexually satisfied”* (Pa.12, P.21). *“How much I long to feel safe with him”* (Pa.8, P.29).

Integration of the theory and the theoretical model of couples’ affectional bond

Six factors of couples’ affectional bonds are structured in a four-dimensional theoretical model, the AFRIAS Model (Figure 1). In this model, the couple’s

attractiveness to each other is considered the essential context for an affectional bond. Couples’ fondness for each other is the core category because, from the participants’ perspective, the main concern and focus of the couples’ affectional bond is the issue of liking and loving each other. Responsiveness, intimacy, and adjustment factors are the processes and interactions within couples’ affectional bonds. Finally, marital success is positioned at the end of the model as the result of a healthy couple’s affectional bond. Additionally, according to this model and based on the participants’ statements, all factors are interrelated.

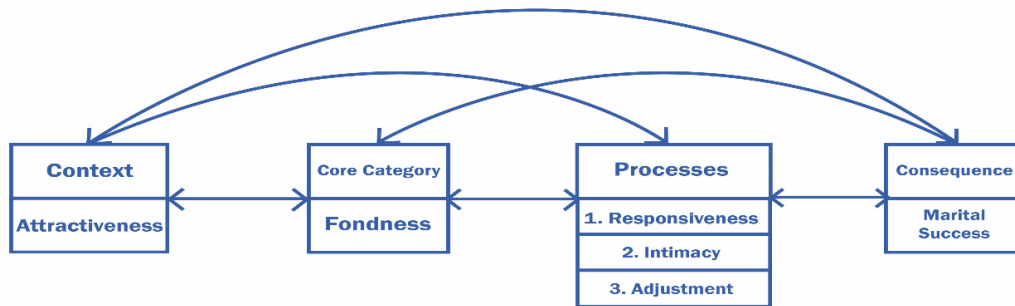


Figure 1. A theoretical model of couples’ affectional bond- The AFRIAS Model

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Attractiveness serves as the context of an affectional bond between couples. Bowlby (2005) considers attractiveness central to creating this bond. Humans are drawn to others based on their bonding schemas, viewing them as essential figures. Attractiveness differs from mere gravity; it is unique to marital relationships and encompasses both physical and sexual dimensions, aspects that gravity does not include (Safarinia & Hassanzadeh, 2012). Couples evaluate their partners and marital relationships using a cognitive framework emphasizing various dimensions, particularly physical appearance and sexual appeal. This evaluation process incorporates assessing the likability and pleasantness of the spouse. The outcome of this evaluation, combined with the level of attractiveness, plays a crucial role in fostering fondness and affection between partners. Attractiveness includes physical appearance, emotional, intellectual, behavioral, and social appeal. Estrada (2009) emphasized the importance of these factors. When evaluating others, people often consider multiple aspects, many of which are context-dependent, especially in the search for a spouse. Participants in studies have indicated that emotional and behavioral attractiveness are particularly significant. Given the uniqueness of spousal relationships, it is essential to assess these dimensions relatively. Specific long-term psychological factors may influence the qualities that make a spouse attractive. We suggest implementing further specialized research in this area.

Fondness is the core category of couples’ affectional bonds. This means that a strong affectional bond is related to mutual fondness between partners. A lack of fondness for one another is a significant factor contributing to divorce (Habibpour & Nazoktabar, 2011). Similarly, Estrada (2009) discovered that love is a crucial element of long-term, satisfying marriages. When considering the emotional aspects of couples’ relationships, fondness is viewed as a positive emotion directed toward others, particularly one’s spouse. Fondness encompasses liking, desire, and compassion. Liking includes attachment and love. Similar results were obtained in the studies (Bachand & Caron, 2001; Bowlby, 2005). If we consider liking as a spectrum, it ranges from the most intense feeling -love, to the most negative feeling -hate. However, this study focuses on defining affectional bonds, so the emphasis is on the positive side of this spectrum, precisely the positive emotions, liking, which range from attachment to love. Participants reported that a certain degree of affection is essential for couples’ affectional bond, and this affection can vary in intensity, peaking in expression as love. Desire encompasses longing and eagerness. When couples have feelings for each other and are apart, they often miss one another and look forward to reuniting, sometimes counting down the moments until they can see each other again. On the other hand, if their fondness starts to fade, couples may become indifferent and less motivated to reconnect during times of separation.

Ainsworth (1989) identified fondness and separation distress as key characteristics of affectional bonds in close relationships. Therefore, it's reasonable to conclude that when someone is attached to and cares about another person, they may feel homesick and excited to reunite when they are apart. Compassion involves elements of benevolence and sympathy. It is obvious that when a person has a fondness for someone, they are likely to exhibit these traits towards them.

Positive responsiveness is one of the essential processes and interactions among couples within their affectional bond. In positive responsiveness, the spouses pay attention to each other. It is a cognitive process that enables individuals to focus on specific aspects of their environment while disregarding others. As a result, people become more prepared to respond to significant stimuli (Safarinia & Hassanzadeh, 2012). A spouse, as a significant person in one's life, deserves both responsiveness and thoughtful behavior. Therefore, in this study, responsiveness is regarded as critical for couples' affectional bonds. Positive responsiveness includes expressing fondness, valuing, and supporting the spouse. The expression of fondness includes affectionate gestures and verbal expressions of fondness. Similar findings related to responsiveness between the spouses have been obtained (Karimi, 2016; Estrada, 2009). Emotional responsiveness is fundamental to attachment patterns and is key to maintaining affectional bonds (Johnson & Whiffen, 2005). Therefore, expressing positive affection towards one's spouse is essential for strengthening the connection between couples. Such expressions enhance mutual feelings and fondness for one another. Valuing encompasses respect, prioritization, and admiration. Previous studies have highlighted the significance of valuing and respecting one another (Madaniyan et al., 2012; Estrada, 2009). Bowlby (2005) argues that significant individuals become targets for affectional bonds. Responsiveness is defined as being directed towards important stimuli, making it essential to prioritize one's spouse. Participants have indicated that they expect to be significant to their spouses and anticipate that their spouses will demonstrate this importance through their behaviors at various stages of life. Supporting involves assistance and companionship. Researchers have also noted similar findings regarding these concepts (Alderman et al., 2025). If one person is significant to another, they will demonstrate care and support by meeting needs while supporting them during their challenges. Neglecting the person's problems and leaving him/her to face difficulties alone, without providing support, indicates a lack of care and focus on that person. Intimacy is a significant process within the affectionate bond of couples. Scholars have identified intimacy as a

key factor in communication dynamics (Conroy et al., 2016). In this study, intimacy was understood to encompass physical, communicative, sexual, and financial dimensions. Bagarozzi (2013) identified additional dimensions, namely, emotional and psychological intimacy. However, these do not align with the findings of this study, which considers emotional and psychological aspects inherent in all dimensions of intimacy. Therefore, categorizing them as separate components seems redundant. Furthermore, while Bagarozzi (2013) introduced intellectual, spiritual, aesthetic, and temporal forms of intimacy, these were not found in this research. Based on the definition of intimacy a warm, close, and comfortable relationship, these additional forms may be better understood as contributing factors to intimacy rather than direct manifestations. Physical intimacy includes both physical closeness and non-sexual touch. This finding aligns with Coffey et al. (2024) and Bagarozzi's (2013) findings (Mikaeili and Salmani, 2021). The findings indicate that intimacy is associated with comfort and closeness, while physical contact is a crucial indicator of this bond. In addition to physical contact, such actions can be viewed as expressions of comfort and connection. Communicational intimacy comprises intimate conversations & contact, and shared activities. These behaviors reflect emotional warmth and closeness. Bagarozzi (2013) determined social-recreational intimacy as a fundamental necessity of intimate relationships. Engaging in intimate conversations, contact, and spending time together fosters a comfortable, warm, and close relationship. Sexual intimacy encompasses comfortable sex, love-infused interactions, and consideration of diverse experiences. These elements align with earlier research (Tashkeh et al., 2024; Van Epp, 2013). While sex can occur without intimacy, intimacy cannot develop without an affectional bond (Patrick and Beckenbach, 2009). Thus, sexual intimacy is a significant, though not the sole, indicator of a healthy marital relationship. Financial intimacy is characterized by financial sharing and joint management. The couples often share financial decision-making (Wood et al., 2012). So, cooperative financial behavior enhances the sense of security and partnership.

Adjustment is another essential process in the affectionate bond between couples. It refers to constructive responses to marital situations that help strengthen emotional ties. In contrast, destructive behaviors erode a sense of security and foster emotional distance. Adjustment encompasses commitment, healthy structure, coping, and conflict resolution. Commitment is expressed through loyalty and responsibility. These findings are supported by prior research (Chabkinejad et al., 2016; Karimi, 2016; Van Epp, 2013). Sternberg (1986) also regarded

commitment as a fundamental component of love. It seems that commitment and responsibility lead to more appropriate responses to the demands of the marital relationship while reducing the likelihood of conflict. A healthy structure incorporates a balanced hierarchy and the maintenance of boundaries. This finding aligns with those of [Conroy et al. \(2016\)](#). While feminist theory emphasizes the risk of patriarchal abuse within hierarchical structures, systems theory underscores the necessity for a flexible yet stable framework. Thus, a balanced, justice-oriented relationship structure is essential for harmony and mutual adjustment. Such structures significantly reduce the conditions for conflict and lay the foundation for strengthening fondness and love between couples. Coping involves a positive perspective, acceptance, and forbearance. These concepts are supported by [Gaur & Bhardwaj \(2015\)](#). Couples may experience distorted thinking when evaluating each other, influenced by emotional salience, whether positive or negative. According to [Gottman & Silver \(1999\)](#), positive emotional salience fosters constructive behavior, while negative salience often leads to misjudgment. A realistic evaluation can promote acceptance, forbearance, and fewer conflicts. Conflict resolution entails assertiveness and non-aggression. These results align with previous studies related to conflict resolution ([Conroy et al., 2016](#); [Karimi, 2016](#); [Estrada, 2009](#)) and non-aggression ([Karimi, 2016](#)). Given the inevitability of conflict in marital relationships, conflict resolution strategies can either contribute to effective management and control of conflict or, conversely, intensify tension and discord. Assertive resolution strategies tend to support conflict management and adjustment. In contrast, various forms of aggression can exacerbate conflict. Aggression, as an outward expression of negative emotions, often triggers similar emotional responses in the partner, leading to negative emotional experiences and unfavorable evaluations within the relationship ([Azerbaijani et al., 2012](#)). Supporting this, [Latifian et al. \(2016\)](#) also found that domestic violence and aggression correlate with emotional divorce, and today, authority is more effective than dominance in maintaining the family structure ([Rajabdoust et al., 2025](#)).

Marital success is the outcome of contextual factors, core categories, and interactive processes. It includes longevity and emotional consequences. These outcomes have been identified in past research ([Willoughby et al., 2015](#)). [Ainsworth \(1989\)](#) highlighted longevity as a hallmark of a strong affectional bond. Marital success, therefore, is characterized by a long-lasting connection, enjoyment, emotional satisfaction, and peace with one's partner. Couples who achieve these qualities are more likely to sustain their relationships. A well-established

affectional bond realizes these goals and fosters a fulfilling married life.

A theoretical model for couples' affectional bonds, known as the AFRIAS model, has been introduced. This model provides a comprehensive framework that includes several key components: attractiveness (the background), fondness (the core factor), and the processes of responsiveness, intimacy, and adjustment, all of which contribute to marital success (the outcomes). It aligns with existing theories of fondness and intimacy proposed by researchers such as [Stamp \(2004\)](#), [Gottman & Silver \(1999\)](#), and [Sternberg \(1986\)](#). While the AFRIAS model shares similarities with earlier frameworks, it stands out due to its data-driven approach, clear categorization of concepts for differentiation, and the identification of additional dimensions such as attractiveness, responsiveness, adjustment, and marital success concerning couples' affectional bonds. The model also illustrates how all factors and dimensions are interconnected, as revealed through participant narratives. Research findings emphasize the importance of showing responsiveness to one's spouse as a means of fostering attachment and fondness. This finding supports the work of [Kumar \(2024\)](#) on the relationship between marital adjustment and satisfaction, as well as [Habibpour and Nazoktabar \(2013\)](#) regarding the influence of patriarchal communication on intimacy and adjustment. Additionally, it draws on insights from [Patrick and Beckenbach \(2009\)](#) regarding the role of adjustment in the reversibility of intimate relationships. [Latifian et al. \(2016\)](#) analyze the relationship between domestic violence and emotional divorce, too. Other studies have examined the effects of fondness on marital satisfaction, the role of commitment in marital stability ([Freer & Surana, 2025](#)), communication patterns among couples concerning marital satisfaction ([Sanagoy et al., 2024](#)), and the connection between responsiveness and marital satisfaction ([Lu et al., 2024](#)). Many studies have explored concepts beyond the affectional bonds of couples, often focusing on narrow variables primarily through quantitative methods. In contrast, this research adopts a qualitative and exploratory approach, drawing insights from participant narratives, which can also be evaluated quantitatively. [Sternberg \(1986\)](#) argues that attachment, intimacy, and sexual relationships are mutually influential. [Johnson \(2020\)](#) also highlights the significance of managing difficult moments and challenging conversations to maintain love in relationships. From a systemic perspective, all family members are interconnected; each person affects the family unit and creates a chain of reactions. Understanding how compatible, responsive, and intimate behaviors influence couples' attractiveness and fondness

in marital relationships can be analyzed through a systemic lens and the principle of circular causality. The research comprehensively added attractiveness and effective emotional communication (responsiveness, intimacy, and adjustment) as the essential factors for a strong affectional bond between couples. Simply having a fondness and a willingness to maintain the couple relationship is insufficient to create and maintain this connection. These factors play a significant role in achieving marital goals.

The study faced some limitations, including participants' reluctance to discuss confidential aspects of their marital relationships, influenced by Iranian culture, and the inability of some spouses to participate. Despite these challenges, the results suggest that counselors and therapists working with marital issues should use the developed theoretical model and its framework when assessing and intervening in Iranian couples' emotional bonds. This model may also help describe, explain, and predict behavior in this context. The researcher is advised to adopt a qualitative approach to explore the dimensions, concepts, and theoretical model of emotional bonds in close bilateral relationships. Based on the dimensions and concepts found in this study, researchers can develop measurement tools for different aspects of couples' affectional bonds, test the model's fit, and validate its theoretical propositions using a quantitative approach. Furthermore, this research can be replicated in other countries, ethnicities, and nationalities, considering potential contextual differences in how couples perceive affectional bonds.

5. Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

Ethical considerations in research include obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, the right to withdraw from the study, and preventing plagiarism.

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Authors' contributions

The author was responsible for designing, implementing, and drafting the manuscript.

Conflicts of interest

The author stated she has no conflict of interest with any person or organization.

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