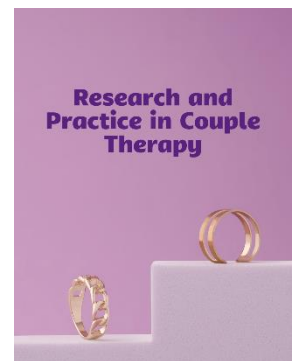




The Mediating Effects of Forgiveness and Trust in the Association between Infidelity Trauma and Marital Adjustment

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the mediating roles of forgiveness and trust in the relationship between infidelity trauma and marital adjustment among married adults in the United States. This cross-sectional correlational study was conducted among 624 married adults in the United States who had experienced emotional and/or sexual infidelity by their spouse within the previous five years. Participants were recruited through online relationship-support communities, social media platforms, and community organizations. Data were collected using the Infidelity Trauma Scale, the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM-18), the Dyadic Trust Scale, and the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to examine the direct and indirect relationships among study variables. Confirmatory factor analysis was performed to evaluate the measurement model, and model fit was assessed using χ^2/df , CFI, TLI, GFI, RMSEA, and SRMR indices. Indirect effects were tested using bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals. Structural equation modeling indicated that the proposed model demonstrated excellent fit to the data ($\chi^2/df = 2.34$, CFI = 0.951, TLI = 0.943, GFI = 0.924, RMSEA = 0.046, SRMR = 0.044). Infidelity trauma significantly predicted lower forgiveness ($\beta = -0.61$, $p < .001$), lower trust ($\beta = -0.49$, $p < .001$), and poorer marital adjustment ($\beta = -0.24$, $p < .001$). Forgiveness positively predicted trust ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < .001$) and marital adjustment ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < .001$), while trust emerged as the strongest predictor of marital adjustment ($\beta = 0.56$, $p < .001$). Bootstrap analyses revealed significant indirect effects through forgiveness ($\beta = -0.16$, 95% CI [-0.23, -0.10]), trust ($\beta = -0.27$, 95% CI [-0.36, -0.19]), and the sequential pathway of forgiveness and trust ($\beta = -0.13$, 95% CI [-0.18, -0.08]). The final model explained 68.4% of the variance in marital adjustment. The findings indicate that infidelity trauma undermines marital adjustment both directly and indirectly through diminished forgiveness and trust. Trust emerged as the most influential mechanism linking betrayal-related trauma to marital functioning, while forgiveness facilitated adjustment both independently and through its contribution to trust restoration. These results highlight the importance of targeting forgiveness and trust in therapeutic interventions designed to promote recovery and relationship resilience following marital infidelity.

Keywords: Infidelity trauma, marital adjustment, forgiveness, trust, structural equation modeling, marital relationships, betrayal.

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Introduction

The discovery of a partner's infidelity is widely recognized as one of the most distressing and disruptive events that can occur within a marital relationship. Infidelity represents a profound violation of relational expectations, emotional commitments, and interpersonal trust, often resulting in significant psychological, emotional, and relational consequences for both partners. Although marital relationships are built upon assumptions of loyalty, commitment, intimacy, and mutual trust,



extramarital involvement challenges these foundations and frequently triggers crises that threaten relationship stability and individual well-being (Dew et al., 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023). Across diverse cultural contexts, infidelity remains one of the most frequently reported causes of marital dissatisfaction, separation, and divorce, making it an important topic for contemporary relationship research and clinical intervention (Gacinya, 2024; Kartik & Malhotra, 2024). While some couples terminate their relationships following infidelity, others attempt to rebuild their marriages, highlighting the need to understand the psychological mechanisms that facilitate adaptation and recovery after relational betrayal.

The experience of infidelity is increasingly conceptualized as a traumatic interpersonal event rather than merely a relational conflict. Unlike ordinary marital disagreements, infidelity often involves deception, secrecy, betrayal, and the sudden disruption of deeply held assumptions regarding relational security. Individuals who discover a partner's extramarital involvement frequently report symptoms resembling post-traumatic stress, including intrusive thoughts, emotional dysregulation, hypervigilance, avoidance behaviors, sleep disturbances, and persistent rumination about the betrayal (Hoy & Oh, 2024; Jules et al., 2023). Research has demonstrated that the psychological impact of infidelity extends beyond immediate emotional distress and may influence long-term mental health, physical health, and relationship functioning (Hoy & Oh, 2024; Stavrova et al., 2022). Furthermore, the traumatic nature of infidelity is intensified when the betrayed partner perceives the event as central to their personal identity and life narrative, leading to prolonged difficulties in emotional adjustment and relationship recovery (Jules et al., 2023). In some cases, unresolved betrayal trauma may contribute to retaliatory behaviors, including reciprocal infidelity, which further complicates marital functioning and impedes healing processes (Hajihassani, 2026).

Infidelity trauma has substantial implications for marital adjustment, a multidimensional construct encompassing marital satisfaction, consensus, cohesion, emotional intimacy, and overall relationship quality. Marital adjustment reflects the degree to which partners successfully negotiate relational challenges while maintaining emotional connection and mutual support. Existing evidence indicates that individuals affected by infidelity often report significantly lower levels of marital adjustment due to diminished emotional security, communication difficulties, and persistent relational uncertainty (Tehrani et al., 2021; Wondimu & Andualem, 2024). Longitudinal investigations have further revealed that infidelity is associated with declines in both personal well-being and relationship satisfaction over time, even when couples remain together following disclosure (Stavrova et al., 2022). Qualitative studies similarly suggest that betrayed spouses frequently struggle with emotional ambivalence, fluctuating between desires to preserve the relationship and impulses to withdraw from the offending partner (Alfaruqy & Indrawati, 2023; Karadzhy, 2023). Consequently, understanding factors that mitigate the negative impact of infidelity trauma on marital adjustment represents a critical priority for researchers and clinicians.

One of the most extensively discussed mechanisms of relational recovery following betrayal is forgiveness. Forgiveness is generally defined as a process through which individuals reduce motivations for revenge and avoidance while fostering benevolent attitudes toward the offending person. Within marital relationships, forgiveness facilitates emotional healing, decreases resentment, and promotes constructive interactions between partners. Theoretical perspectives suggest that forgiveness is particularly important following severe relational offenses because it enables individuals to reinterpret the betrayal and move beyond persistent emotional suffering (Kasprzak, 2025; Záhorcová et al., 2023). Empirical research consistently demonstrates positive associations between forgiveness and various indicators of relationship functioning, including marital satisfaction, intimacy, commitment, and psychological well-being (Mohamad et al., 2022; Şahan, 2021). Couples who successfully engage in forgiveness processes often report greater emotional closeness and resilience when confronting relational adversity.

The relevance of forgiveness becomes especially apparent in the context of marital infidelity. Because infidelity directly violates expectations of loyalty and trustworthiness, forgiveness may serve as a critical mechanism through which betrayed

partners regulate emotional responses and facilitate relationship repair. Studies examining individuals affected by extramarital relationships have shown that forgiveness is associated with reduced marital burnout, increased intimacy, and improved relationship quality (Najibzadegan et al., 2024; Salehi et al., 2023). Furthermore, investigations of forgiveness following infidelity suggest that personal characteristics, offense severity, attachment patterns, and emotional distress significantly influence individuals' willingness to forgive (Beltrán-Morillas et al., 2023; Kasprzak, 2025). Research examining determinants of forgiveness after marital infidelity has identified empathy, emotional regulation, commitment, and relational investment as important contributors to forgiveness processes (Dacka et al., 2023; Záhorcová et al., 2023). Despite these advances, forgiveness remains a complex and multifaceted construct that may not independently account for successful relationship recovery following betrayal.

Another central construct in the aftermath of infidelity is trust. Trust constitutes a foundational element of intimate relationships because it enables partners to feel emotionally secure, vulnerable, and confident in one another's intentions. Infidelity often results in a severe disruption of trust, creating uncertainty regarding the offending partner's honesty, dependability, and commitment. Consequently, trust repair is frequently described as one of the most challenging aspects of post-infidelity recovery (Giacobbi & Lalot, 2025; Nnaji & Okoye, 2024). The loss of trust may persist long after disclosure, affecting communication patterns, emotional intimacy, and relational satisfaction. Even when couples remain committed to reconciliation, unresolved trust concerns often undermine efforts to rebuild relationship stability.

Recent scholarship emphasizes that trust repair involves a gradual and dynamic process rather than a single event. Systematic reviews have identified transparency, accountability, emotional responsiveness, and consistent trustworthy behaviors as essential components of rebuilding trust following betrayal (Giacobbi & Lalot, 2025). Similarly, qualitative investigations of couples recovering from infidelity reveal that trust restoration requires sustained efforts by both partners, including honest communication, acknowledgment of harm, and mutual commitment to relationship reconstruction (Fife et al., 2023; Pramudito & Minza, 2021). Research exploring women's experiences of betrayal further demonstrates that violations of trust frequently produce feelings of insecurity, humiliation, and relational instability, highlighting the central role of trust in marital functioning (Nnaji & Okoye, 2024). Because trust directly influences perceptions of safety and predictability within relationships, it may represent a crucial pathway linking infidelity trauma to marital adjustment.

The interplay between forgiveness and trust has attracted growing attention in relationship research. Although forgiveness and trust are conceptually distinct, they are closely interconnected within relational recovery processes. Forgiveness may reduce negative emotional reactions toward the offending partner, thereby creating conditions that facilitate trust rebuilding. Conversely, the restoration of trust may strengthen the sustainability of forgiveness by reinforcing perceptions of relational safety. Evidence suggests that forgiveness often precedes and supports trust reconstruction following significant relational transgressions (Giacobbi & Lalot, 2025; Pramudito & Minza, 2021). Studies involving couples experiencing various forms of relationship distress have reported that interventions promoting forgiveness frequently contribute to improvements in trust, intimacy, and overall relationship functioning (Côté et al., 2022; Sobhani et al., 2021). These findings indicate that forgiveness and trust may operate together as complementary mechanisms promoting marital recovery.

Contemporary couple therapy approaches increasingly target forgiveness and trust as primary therapeutic goals when addressing the consequences of infidelity. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Emotion-Focused approaches, Integrative Couple Therapy, and strength-based interventions have demonstrated effectiveness in improving forgiveness, intimacy, communication patterns, and attitudes toward infidelity among distressed couples (Ghadaki & Darbani, 2024; Keyhan et al., 2023; Khaneghahi et al., 2024; Mairal & Polanski, 2021). Research involving women affected by extramarital relationships has shown that therapeutic interventions designed to foster forgiveness can significantly enhance relational functioning and

reduce marital distress (Najibzadegan et al., 2024; Salehi et al., 2023). Similarly, interventions emphasizing emotional acceptance, commitment, and relational repair have demonstrated positive effects on communication and relationship satisfaction among couples confronting infidelity-related challenges (Keyhan et al., 2023; Khaneghahi et al., 2024). These findings underscore the practical significance of identifying mechanisms that facilitate recovery from betrayal trauma.

Beyond relational processes, broader individual and contextual factors also contribute to experiences of infidelity and subsequent adjustment. Research has linked marital infidelity to personality characteristics, attachment styles, sexual satisfaction, maladaptive schemas, and sensation-seeking tendencies (Karimi et al., 2023; Salehzadeh et al., 2024). Additionally, relationship outcomes following infidelity may be influenced by cognitive appraisals, emotional regulation strategies, and psychological resilience (Karadzhy, 2023; Tehrani et al., 2021). Spiritual and relational resources have also been identified as protective factors that support relationship health and emotional recovery following interpersonal challenges (Cornelius-White & Kanamori, 2025; Mohamad et al., 2022). While these variables contribute to understanding relationship dynamics, forgiveness and trust remain particularly relevant because they directly address the interpersonal consequences of betrayal.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to infidelity recovery, several gaps remain in the literature. Much of the existing research has examined forgiveness and trust independently, with limited attention to their simultaneous roles within a unified explanatory framework. Moreover, many studies have focused on therapeutic outcomes, qualitative experiences, or predictors of infidelity rather than investigating the mechanisms through which infidelity-related trauma influences marital adjustment. Although previous findings suggest that forgiveness and trust are associated with relationship recovery, the extent to which they mediate the association between betrayal trauma and marital adjustment remains insufficiently understood. Addressing this gap is particularly important because identifying mediating mechanisms can inform the development of targeted interventions that enhance relationship resilience and facilitate post-infidelity healing.

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to examine the mediating effects of forgiveness and trust in the relationship between infidelity trauma and marital adjustment among married adults in the United States.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a cross-sectional correlational design using structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the mediating roles of forgiveness and trust in the relationship between infidelity trauma and marital adjustment among married adults in the United States. The study was conducted between January and June 2026 and targeted individuals who had experienced emotional or sexual infidelity by their spouse or long-term marital partner within the previous five years. A total of 624 married individuals from different regions of the United States participated in the study. Participants were recruited through online survey platforms, social media advertisements, relationship support forums, and community organizations that provide services related to marital and family well-being.

Eligibility criteria included being at least 21 years of age, legally married for a minimum of one year, having experienced a confirmed episode of partner infidelity, and possessing sufficient English-language proficiency to complete the study questionnaires. Individuals currently involved in divorce proceedings or receiving inpatient psychiatric treatment were excluded to minimize potential confounding factors that might substantially influence marital adjustment outcomes. The final sample consisted of 624 participants, including 338 women and 286 men, with ages ranging from 22 to 68 years ($M = 41.37$, $SD = 10.84$). The average duration of marriage was 12.46 years ($SD = 8.27$).

Measures

Infidelity-related trauma was assessed using the Infidelity Trauma Scale (ITS), a standardized self-report instrument developed to measure the psychological and emotional consequences of discovering a partner's infidelity. The scale evaluates trauma-related symptoms such as intrusive thoughts, emotional distress, hypervigilance, avoidance behaviors, and disruptions in self-concept and relational functioning. The instrument consists of 28 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater levels of infidelity-related trauma. Previous studies have demonstrated satisfactory construct validity, convergent validity, and internal consistency reliability for the scale, with reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding .85. The instrument has been widely used in research examining relational betrayal and psychological adjustment following infidelity.

Forgiveness was measured using the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM-18), developed by McCullough and colleagues. The TRIM-18 assesses forgiveness following interpersonal offenses through three dimensions: avoidance motivation, revenge motivation, and benevolence motivation. The scale contains 18 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores on benevolence and lower scores on avoidance and revenge indicate greater levels of forgiveness toward the offending partner. The TRIM-18 has demonstrated strong psychometric properties across diverse populations, with substantial evidence supporting its factorial validity and reliability. Previous research has reported Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .80 to .94 for its subscales.

Marital trust was assessed using the Dyadic Trust Scale (DTS), developed by Larzelere and Huston. The DTS is an eight-item self-report measure designed to evaluate perceptions of honesty, dependability, faithfulness, and emotional security within intimate relationships. Participants respond using a seven-point Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting greater trust in one's spouse. The scale has consistently demonstrated strong internal consistency and construct validity in studies of romantic relationships and marital functioning. Previous investigations have reported reliability coefficients above .85, indicating satisfactory measurement precision.

Marital adjustment was measured using the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS), a widely used instrument developed to assess overall relationship quality and marital functioning. The RDAS consists of 14 items that evaluate consensus, satisfaction, and cohesion between partners. Responses are provided using varying Likert-type formats according to item content, and total scores are calculated by summing responses across all items. Higher scores indicate better marital adjustment and greater relationship stability. Extensive empirical evidence supports the reliability and validity of the RDAS, with reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients generally exceeding .80. The scale has been used extensively in marital and family research and is considered one of the most established measures of relationship adjustment.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29 and AMOS version 29. Initially, data were screened for missing values, outliers, and violations of statistical assumptions. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis values, were calculated for all study variables. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine the bivariate relationships among infidelity trauma, forgiveness, trust, and marital adjustment.

To evaluate the proposed theoretical model, structural equation modeling was employed. Confirmatory factor analysis was first performed to assess the adequacy of the measurement model and verify the latent structure of the study constructs. Subsequently, the structural model was tested to examine the direct effect of infidelity trauma on marital adjustment as well as the indirect effects through forgiveness and trust. Model fit was evaluated using multiple goodness-of-fit indices, including the

chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Conventional cutoff criteria were used to determine acceptable model fit.

The significance of indirect effects was assessed using a bias-corrected bootstrap procedure with 5,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals. Mediation was considered significant when the confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero. Additionally, standardized path coefficients were reported to facilitate interpretation of the magnitude and direction of relationships among variables. Statistical significance was established at $p < .05$ for all analyses. The analytical strategy allowed for a comprehensive examination of the mechanisms through which forgiveness and trust contribute to the association between infidelity trauma and marital adjustment among married adults in the United States.

Findings and Results

A total of 624 married individuals participated in the study. Of these, 338 participants (54.17%) were women and 286 (45.83%) were men. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 68 years, with a mean age of 41.37 years ($SD = 10.84$). Regarding educational attainment, 18.11% held a high school diploma or equivalent, 29.97% had completed some college or an associate degree, 35.58% possessed a bachelor's degree, and 16.34% held graduate or professional degrees. The mean duration of marriage was 12.46 years ($SD = 8.27$), ranging from 1 to 41 years. Emotional infidelity was reported by 41.67% of participants, sexual infidelity by 24.84%, and both emotional and sexual infidelity by 33.49%. The average time elapsed since the discovery of infidelity was 2.73 years ($SD = 1.46$). Most participants (71.31%) remained married to the offending spouse at the time of the study, whereas 28.69% reported a temporary separation followed by reconciliation. Preliminary screening indicated no substantial missing data. Values of skewness and kurtosis for all study variables were within acceptable limits, supporting the assumption of multivariate normality.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Study Variables

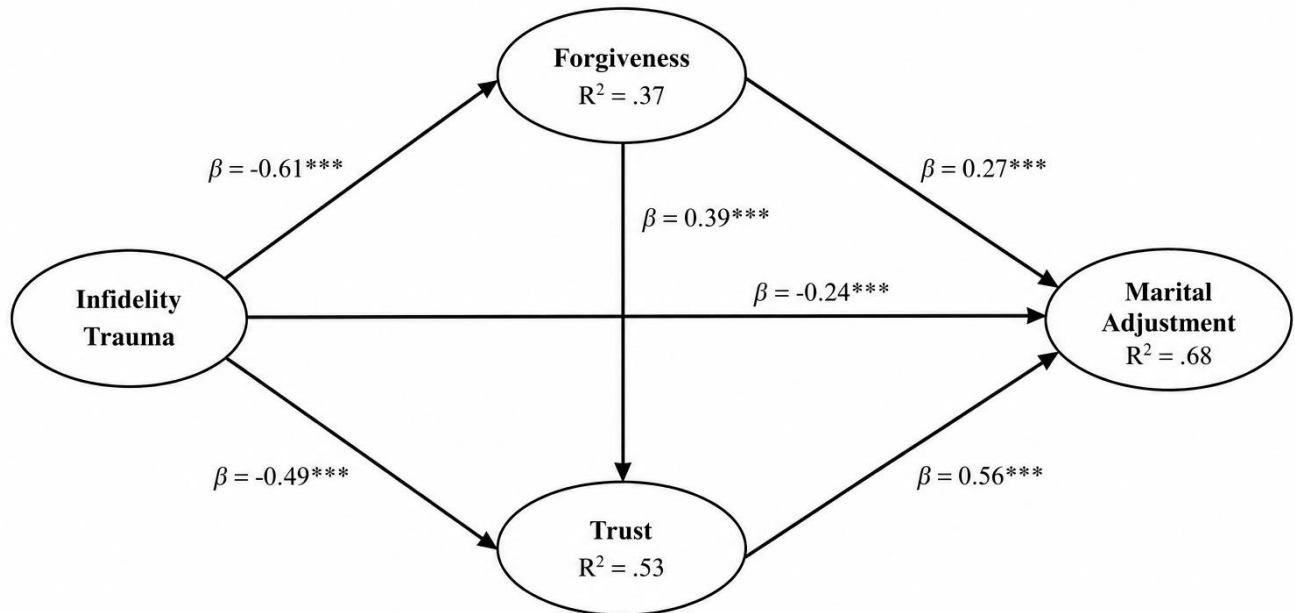
Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Infidelity Trauma	89.64	16.28	1			
2. Forgiveness	52.81	11.74	-0.61**	1		
3. Trust	34.27	8.63	-0.67**	0.58**	1	
4. Marital Adjustment	42.53	9.51	-0.72**	0.65**	0.74**	1

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients among the study variables. The results demonstrated that infidelity trauma was negatively and significantly associated with forgiveness ($r = -0.61$, $p < .001$), trust ($r = -0.67$, $p < .001$), and marital adjustment ($r = -0.72$, $p < .001$). In contrast, forgiveness was positively correlated with trust ($r = 0.58$, $p < .001$) and marital adjustment ($r = 0.65$, $p < .001$). Trust also exhibited a strong positive association with marital adjustment ($r = 0.74$, $p < .001$). These findings provide preliminary support for the proposed mediation model, suggesting that greater trauma resulting from infidelity is associated with lower levels of forgiveness and trust, which in turn are linked to poorer marital adjustment.

Table 2. Goodness-of-Fit Indices for the Measurement and Structural Models

Fit Index	Recommended Value	Measurement Model	Structural Model
χ^2/df	< 3.00	2.11	2.34
CFI	≥ 0.90	0.958	0.951
TLI	≥ 0.90	0.949	0.943
GFI	≥ 0.90	0.931	0.924
AGFI	≥ 0.90	0.911	0.905
RMSEA	≤ 0.08	0.042	0.046
SRMR	≤ 0.08	0.039	0.044

The adequacy of the proposed model was evaluated using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling. As shown in Table 2, all fit indices exceeded recommended thresholds. The measurement model demonstrated satisfactory fit to the observed data, indicating that the latent constructs were adequately represented by their respective indicators. Similarly, the structural model exhibited excellent fit, with $\chi^2/df = 2.34$, CFI = 0.951, TLI = 0.943, GFI = 0.924, RMSEA = 0.046, and SRMR = 0.044. Collectively, these results suggest that the hypothesized model provides an appropriate representation of the relationships among infidelity trauma, forgiveness, trust, and marital adjustment.



Note. Standardized path coefficients (β) are reported. R^2 indicates the proportion of variance explained in each endogenous variable. *** $p < .001$.

Model Fit Indices	
$\chi^2/df = 2.34$, CFI = .951, TLI = .943, GFI = .924, RMSEA = .046, SRMR = .044	
N = 624	

Figure 1. Structural Model of the Mediating Effects of Forgiveness and Trust in the Relationship between Infidelity Trauma and Marital Adjustment

The structural model illustrated the direct and indirect pathways linking infidelity trauma to marital adjustment through forgiveness and trust. Standardized path coefficients indicated that infidelity trauma exerted substantial negative effects on both forgiveness and trust, while forgiveness positively influenced trust and marital adjustment. Trust emerged as the strongest direct predictor of marital adjustment. The model accounted for a considerable proportion of variance in marital adjustment, demonstrating the central role of interpersonal healing processes following experiences of infidelity.

Table 3. Standardized Direct Effects among Study Variables

Path	β	SE	CR	p
Infidelity Trauma → Forgiveness	-0.61	0.04	-15.92	<0.001
Infidelity Trauma → Trust	-0.49	0.05	-11.37	<0.001
Forgiveness → Trust	0.39	0.04	9.84	<0.001
Forgiveness → Marital Adjustment	0.27	0.05	5.94	<0.001
Trust → Marital Adjustment	0.56	0.04	12.76	<0.001
Infidelity Trauma → Marital Adjustment	-0.24	0.05	-4.98	<0.001

The direct effects presented in Table 3 revealed that infidelity trauma significantly predicted lower levels of forgiveness ($\beta = -0.61, p < .001$) and trust ($\beta = -0.49, p < .001$). Forgiveness demonstrated a significant positive effect on trust ($\beta = 0.39, p < .001$), indicating that individuals who were more forgiving toward their partners reported higher levels of relational trust. Furthermore, both forgiveness ($\beta = 0.27, p < .001$) and trust ($\beta = 0.56, p < .001$) positively predicted marital adjustment. Although infidelity trauma maintained a significant direct effect on marital adjustment ($\beta = -0.24, p < .001$), the magnitude of this relationship was substantially reduced after the inclusion of the mediating variables, suggesting the presence of partial mediation.

Table 4. Bootstrap Analysis of Indirect Effects

Indirect Path	Indirect Effect (β)	Boot SE	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	Result
Infidelity Trauma → Forgiveness → Marital Adjustment	-0.16	0.03	-0.23	-0.10	Significant
Infidelity Trauma → Trust → Marital Adjustment	-0.27	0.04	-0.36	-0.19	Significant
Infidelity Trauma → Forgiveness → Trust → Marital Adjustment	-0.13	0.02	-0.18	-0.08	Significant
Total Indirect Effect	-0.56	0.05	-0.66	-0.46	Significant

The significance of the mediating pathways was evaluated using bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. As shown in Table 4, all indirect effects were statistically significant because their confidence intervals did not include zero. The indirect effect through forgiveness alone was significant ($\beta = -0.16, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.23, -0.10]$), indicating that infidelity trauma diminished marital adjustment partly through reductions in forgiveness. The mediation pathway through trust was even stronger ($\beta = -0.27, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.36, -0.19]$), highlighting the critical role of trust restoration in post-infidelity marital functioning. In addition, a significant sequential mediation pathway was identified whereby infidelity trauma reduced forgiveness, which subsequently decreased trust and ultimately impaired marital adjustment ($\beta = -0.13, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.18, -0.08]$). The total indirect effect was substantial ($\beta = -0.56, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.66, -0.46]$), confirming that forgiveness and trust jointly represent important psychological mechanisms linking infidelity-related trauma to marital adjustment outcomes.

Overall, the findings supported the hypothesized model. Infidelity trauma was associated with poorer marital adjustment both directly and indirectly through reduced forgiveness and diminished trust. Trust emerged as the most influential proximal predictor of marital adjustment, whereas forgiveness functioned as both an independent mediator and a precursor to trust restoration. The final structural model explained 68.4% of the variance in marital adjustment, indicating substantial explanatory power and highlighting the importance of forgiveness and trust as central recovery processes following experiences of marital infidelity.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study investigated the mediating effects of forgiveness and trust in the relationship between infidelity trauma and marital adjustment among married adults in the United States. The findings provided strong support for the proposed conceptual model, demonstrating that infidelity trauma was negatively associated with marital adjustment both directly and indirectly through forgiveness and trust. Specifically, higher levels of infidelity-related trauma were associated with lower levels of forgiveness and trust, while greater forgiveness and trust predicted better marital adjustment. Furthermore, the results revealed that trust served as the strongest predictor of marital adjustment and that forgiveness influenced marital adjustment both directly and indirectly through trust. These findings suggest that the relational damage caused by infidelity extends beyond the initial betrayal and operates through psychological and interpersonal processes that shape long-term relationship functioning.

The first major finding of the study was the significant negative relationship between infidelity trauma and marital adjustment. Participants who reported greater psychological distress following the discovery of a partner's infidelity also reported poorer levels of marital satisfaction, emotional cohesion, and overall relationship functioning. This finding is consistent with the conceptualization of infidelity as a traumatic interpersonal event that disrupts emotional security and relational stability. The discovery of infidelity often challenges fundamental assumptions regarding trust, commitment, exclusivity, and emotional safety, leading individuals to experience intense emotional reactions that interfere with healthy marital functioning. The present findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that infidelity is associated with declines in relationship satisfaction, emotional well-being, and relationship quality (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Stavrova et al., 2022). Similarly, studies examining emotional and cognitive consequences of infidelity have shown that individuals affected by betrayal frequently experience heightened emotional dysregulation, insecurity, and relational distress, all of which contribute to poorer marital adjustment (Jules et al., 2023; Tehrani et al., 2021). The findings also align with longitudinal evidence indicating that the consequences of infidelity may persist long after disclosure and continue to affect both psychological health and relationship functioning (Hoy & Oh, 2024). Qualitative investigations have likewise documented profound emotional suffering, confusion, and uncertainty among betrayed spouses, reinforcing the notion that infidelity trauma represents a significant threat to marital stability (Alfaruqy & Indrawati, 2023; Karadzhy, 2023).

Another important finding was the strong negative association between infidelity trauma and forgiveness. Participants who reported higher levels of trauma demonstrated significantly lower levels of forgiveness toward their partners. This finding is theoretically meaningful because forgiveness requires the reduction of resentment, revenge motivations, and avoidance tendencies, processes that become considerably more difficult when individuals experience intense betrayal-related distress. Infidelity often generates feelings of humiliation, anger, grief, and emotional pain that may interfere with the development of compassionate or benevolent attitudes toward the offending partner. The present result is consistent with studies demonstrating that greater offense severity and post-offense distress are associated with lower levels of forgiveness in romantic relationships (Kasprzak, 2025). It is also supported by research showing that experiences of sexual infidelity frequently lead to unforgiveness and persistent emotional distress, particularly among individuals with insecure attachment tendencies (Beltrán-Morillas et al., 2023). Furthermore, investigations specifically examining forgiveness after marital infidelity have identified emotional pain, betrayal severity, and unresolved anger as significant barriers to forgiveness (Dacka et al., 2023; Záhorcová et al., 2023). Taken together, these findings suggest that the traumatic nature of infidelity creates emotional obstacles that hinder forgiveness and complicate relational recovery.

The results further demonstrated that infidelity trauma was negatively associated with trust. Participants who experienced more severe betrayal-related trauma reported significantly lower trust in their spouses. This finding is unsurprising given that trust is one of the primary relational components damaged by infidelity. Trust enables partners to feel secure, vulnerable, and confident in the reliability of one another's behavior. When infidelity occurs, assumptions about honesty, loyalty, and commitment are disrupted, often leading to chronic suspicion and uncertainty. The current finding supports previous theoretical and empirical work emphasizing the central role of trust disruption in the aftermath of infidelity (Giacobbi & Lalot, 2025; Pramudito & Minza, 2021). Qualitative studies have repeatedly shown that betrayed spouses often struggle with fears of repeated betrayal, emotional insecurity, and doubts regarding their partner's trustworthiness long after the affair has ended (Fife et al., 2023; Nnaji & Okoye, 2024). The findings also align with broader evidence indicating that violations of relational trust are among the most psychologically damaging aspects of infidelity and frequently predict long-term relationship difficulties (Giacobbi & Lalot, 2025; Pramudito & Minza, 2021). Consequently, trust appears to represent a critical mechanism through which betrayal trauma affects marital functioning.

The positive relationship between forgiveness and marital adjustment constituted another significant finding. Participants who reported greater forgiveness also demonstrated higher levels of marital adjustment. This result supports theoretical perspectives suggesting that forgiveness facilitates emotional healing and enables couples to move beyond destructive cycles of blame, resentment, and avoidance. Through forgiveness, individuals may reduce emotional burdens associated with betrayal and become more capable of engaging in constructive relational behaviors. The finding is consistent with prior studies demonstrating positive associations between forgiveness and marital satisfaction, intimacy, and relationship quality (Mohamad et al., 2022; Şahan, 2021). It also corroborates evidence from intervention studies showing that therapeutic approaches designed to increase forgiveness contribute to improvements in intimacy, marital functioning, and psychological well-being among individuals affected by extramarital relationships (Najibzadegan et al., 2024; Salehi et al., 2023). Furthermore, previous research involving conflicting couples has shown that forgiveness-oriented interventions reduce fear of intimacy and promote healthier relational interactions (Sobhani et al., 2021). These findings collectively suggest that forgiveness serves as an adaptive coping mechanism that supports relational recovery following significant interpersonal injuries.

The study additionally found that forgiveness positively predicted trust. Individuals who were more forgiving toward their partners reported higher levels of trust within the relationship. This finding provides important insight into the recovery process following infidelity because it suggests that forgiveness may create psychological conditions that facilitate trust rebuilding. When betrayed partners begin to release resentment and reduce avoidance motivations, they may become more open to recognizing trustworthy behaviors and re-establishing emotional vulnerability. The finding is consistent with theoretical frameworks proposing that forgiveness often precedes trust restoration in the aftermath of interpersonal transgressions (Pramudito & Minza, 2021). It also aligns with systematic reviews indicating that trust repair depends partly on the injured partner's willingness to engage in emotional reconciliation processes (Giacobbi & Lalot, 2025). Evidence from couple therapy research further suggests that interventions promoting forgiveness frequently lead to improvements in trust, emotional closeness, and relational commitment (Côté et al., 2022; Sobhani et al., 2021). Therefore, forgiveness may function not only as an independent predictor of relationship recovery but also as a catalyst for rebuilding trust.

Perhaps the most notable finding was that trust emerged as the strongest predictor of marital adjustment within the structural model. Although forgiveness exerted a significant influence on marital adjustment, trust demonstrated a substantially larger effect. This result highlights the central importance of trust in sustaining relationship quality after infidelity. While forgiveness may alleviate emotional distress and reduce negative feelings toward the offending partner, successful marital adjustment ultimately depends on whether partners are able to restore confidence in the relationship's future. Trust influences communication, emotional intimacy, commitment, and perceptions of relational security, all of which are essential components of marital adjustment. The present finding is consistent with qualitative studies showing that couples who successfully recover from infidelity often describe trust reconstruction as the defining element of their healing journey (Fife et al., 2023). It also corresponds with research emphasizing transparency, accountability, and consistent trustworthy behavior as key factors in post-infidelity relationship repair (Giacobbi & Lalot, 2025). Consequently, interventions that prioritize trust rebuilding may have particularly strong effects on marital outcomes.

The mediation analyses provided additional support for the proposed theoretical model. Forgiveness significantly mediated the relationship between infidelity trauma and marital adjustment, indicating that part of the detrimental effect of betrayal trauma operates through reductions in forgiveness. This finding suggests that individuals experiencing severe trauma may struggle to forgive, which subsequently contributes to poorer relationship functioning. Trust also emerged as a significant mediator, and its indirect effect was stronger than that of forgiveness. This result indicates that the erosion of trust constitutes one of the most important pathways through which infidelity trauma undermines marital adjustment. Moreover, the sequential

mediation analysis demonstrated that infidelity trauma reduced forgiveness, which in turn diminished trust and ultimately lowered marital adjustment. This pattern highlights the interconnected nature of forgiveness and trust within the recovery process. The findings align with conceptual models suggesting that relational healing occurs through multiple interconnected mechanisms rather than isolated psychological processes (Fife et al., 2023; Mairal & Polanski, 2021). They further support therapeutic perspectives emphasizing the simultaneous cultivation of forgiveness and trust during post-infidelity intervention efforts (Keyhan et al., 2023; Khaneghahi et al., 2024).

The findings may also be interpreted within broader theoretical frameworks concerning relationship resilience and recovery. Previous studies have identified numerous factors associated with infidelity, including maladaptive schemas, attachment patterns, personality traits, sensation seeking, and sexual dissatisfaction (Karimi et al., 2023; Salehzadeh et al., 2024). Although these factors may contribute to the occurrence of infidelity, the present findings suggest that post-infidelity adjustment depends largely on how couples navigate the emotional consequences of betrayal. Couples who are able to foster forgiveness and rebuild trust appear more capable of maintaining relationship stability despite the significant challenges created by infidelity. This interpretation is consistent with research demonstrating that positive relational processes, emotional responsiveness, and constructive coping strategies contribute to healthier relationship outcomes following major interpersonal crises (Cornelius-White & Kanamori, 2025; Mohamad et al., 2022). The results therefore reinforce the view that recovery from infidelity is not determined solely by the betrayal itself but also by the relational mechanisms activated during the healing process.

One particularly important implication of the present study concerns the prevention of escalating relational dysfunction following betrayal. Previous research has shown that unresolved infidelity-related distress can contribute to retaliatory behaviors, recurring conflict, emotional withdrawal, and even reciprocal infidelity (Hajihassani, 2026). By identifying forgiveness and trust as significant mediators, the current study provides empirical support for intervention strategies that target these processes before maladaptive relational patterns become entrenched. Such interventions may be especially valuable given evidence linking infidelity not only to marital dissatisfaction but also to broader social, legal, and family consequences, including separation and divorce (Gacinya, 2024; Kartik & Malhotra, 2024). Therefore, strengthening forgiveness and trust may contribute not only to individual relationship recovery but also to broader family stability.

A limitation of the present study is its cross-sectional design, which restricts causal interpretations of the observed relationships. Although the proposed model was theoretically grounded and supported by statistical analyses, longitudinal studies are needed to establish temporal relationships among infidelity trauma, forgiveness, trust, and marital adjustment. Additionally, the study relied exclusively on self-report measures, which may be influenced by social desirability, recall bias, and subjective perceptions. The sample consisted of married adults who voluntarily participated in the study, potentially limiting generalizability to more diverse populations and relationship structures. Finally, the study focused on individual perceptions rather than collecting dyadic data from both spouses.

Future research should employ longitudinal and prospective designs to examine how forgiveness and trust evolve over time following infidelity disclosure. Researchers may also investigate additional mediating and moderating variables such as attachment security, emotional regulation, empathy, commitment, resilience, and communication quality. Future studies should include more culturally diverse samples and explore whether the observed relationships differ across cultural contexts, relationship durations, and types of infidelity. Dyadic research involving both partners would further enhance understanding of reciprocal influences within the recovery process.

From a practical perspective, clinicians working with couples affected by infidelity should prioritize interventions that facilitate forgiveness and trust rebuilding. Therapeutic approaches may focus on emotional processing of betrayal, development of empathic understanding, transparent communication, accountability, and the gradual restoration of relational safety.

Psychoeducational programs may also help couples understand the psychological impact of infidelity and develop adaptive coping strategies during recovery. Marriage counselors, family therapists, and relationship educators can utilize the findings of this study to design targeted interventions that strengthen relational resilience and improve long-term marital adjustment following experiences of betrayal.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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