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Mediating Role of Communication Patterns in Relationship Between Intolerance of Uncertainty and Sexual Variety Seeking Among Married Men

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Objective: This study aimed to investigate the mediating role of communication patterns in the relationship between intolerance of uncertainty and sexual variety seeking among married men.

Methods: This descriptive-correlational study employed structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population consisted of married men aged 25–45 years who attended cultural centers in Tehran, Iran, in 2025. A total of 250 participants were selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Sexual Variety Seeking Questionnaire (Aref-Nazari, 2011), the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale (Freeston et al., 1994), and the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (Christensen & Sullaway, 1990). Data were analyzed using SPSS-24 and AMOS software.

Results: The proposed model demonstrated a good fit to the data. Communication patterns significantly mediated the relationship between intolerance of uncertainty and sexual variety seeking ($\beta = 0.09$, $p < .05$).

Conclusions: Higher levels of intolerance of uncertainty, by weakening constructive communication patterns, appear to increase the tendency toward sexual variety seeking. These findings suggest that interventions aimed at enhancing communication skills and increasing tolerance of uncertainty may contribute to the prevention of marital problems and the improvement of couples' relationship quality.

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Introduction

Marriage is the most sacred relationship in society, and husband and wife constitute the inseparable pillars of family structure (Thomas & Mathew, 2026). Through marriage, two people commit to weathering life's ups and downs together and resolving the problems of shared life jointly (Jamali et al., 2025). In this way, a deep emotional connection forms between them, which leads to strong attachment (Sari & Kocher, 2021). Having an appropriate emotional relationship with one's spouse and perceiving support from them can foster a sense of self-control and self-care, social belonging, life satisfaction, and reduced psychological distress (Ben Omar & Grigorian, 2025; Tang et al., 2022). However, dissatisfaction with one's spouse and the problems arising from it can lead to numerous physical, psychological, familial, and social problems (Luscher et al., 2022). One problem that has particularly afflicted many families in the current era is "sexual variety seeking" (Hassan Tehrani et al., 2024).

Sexual variety seeking refers to an individual's desire to experience varied sexual relationships with different partners or through new behaviors and situations (Asefifar et al., 2023). This tendency can be understood as a combination of biological, cognitive, and personality factors, in which the need for emotional stimulation, curiosity, and pleasure-seeking leads the individual to avoid sexual repetition and monotony (Kaveh et al., 2024; Beka et al., 2026); it encompasses everything from emotional involvement without sexual relations, to sexual relations without emotional bonding, or a combination of both, and can inflict serious harm on a marriage (Mazloumi et al., 2024).

Given that sexual variety seeking is observed more frequently in men than in women (Asefifar et al., 2023), and considering the importance of preventing or treating sexual variety seeking for preserving the foundation of the family, gaining greater understanding of its contributing factors can be an effective step toward its management. According to Kaveh et al. (2024), the motives underlying sexual variety seeking include pleasure-seeking from varied sexual experiences, feeling valued by a new sexual partner, enjoyment of sexual relationships without restriction, and dissatisfaction with marital relationships. In addition, factors such as sexual functioning (Ka et al., 2019), sexual sensation seeking (Asefi et al., 2023), social media (Vidyanathan et al., 2018), impulsivity (Kowalowska et al., 2020), alexithymia (Hassan Tehrani et al., 2024), and sexual dissatisfaction (Brooks et al., 2025) have been emphasized as influencing sexual variety seeking

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among married men. However, given that sexual variety seeking is a highly complex and broad phenomenon, its examination must also take into account more multidimensional and extensive variables (Kaveh et al., 2024).

In this regard, intolerance of uncertainty plays a key role in many marital and family conflicts (Mehri Boroujeni et al., 2024) and likely also influences sexual variety seeking. Intolerance of uncertainty refers to individuals' stable tendency to experience ambiguous, unclear, or equivocal situations as threatening or as a source of anxiety (Hassani Jabdaraghi et al., 2024). An individual with a high level of intolerance of uncertainty typically experiences discomfort, restlessness, and anxiety in situations involving insufficient information, unknown consequences, or multiple possible interpretations (Yerlmaz et al., 2026), and tends to control or escape such situations through strategies such as avoidance, cognitive simplification, or hasty decision-making (Lopez et al., 2026). This trait can negatively affect various aspects of an individual's life, including occupational functioning, interpersonal relationships, and mental health (Elhadabi et al., 2023). In many studies, this trait has been associated with conservative personalities or a high need for cognitive structure, which can in turn influence communication styles (the formation of communication patterns) (Larochelle et al., 2025; Vahaland et al., 2020).

Communication patterns refer to the stable, recurring ways in which individuals exchange messages, resolve conflict, express emotion, and regulate their relationships during interaction with one another (Li et al., 2026). In addition to shaping the content of messages, these patterns also encompass the manner of delivery, style of expression, and degree of acceptance of or resistance to feedback (Li & Fang, 2022). If couples possess the ability to engage in open dialogue, empathy, expression of needs, and conflict resolution, the pressure arising from stressful circumstances across various dimensions may be reduced, and the negative effects of ambiguous life situations may be lessened (Kazemi et al., 2023; Rahbari et al., 2021). The importance of this is such that successful marriage has been considered contingent upon healthy and effective communication patterns between spouses (Altani et al., 2025). Correct and healthy communication patterns include behaviors that help sustain relationships in marital satisfaction (Negari et al., 2026). As noted above, marital dissatisfaction has a positive and significant relationship with extramarital relationships and, in a sense, with sexual variety seeking (Narimani et al., 2023). It

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can therefore be expected that maladaptive communication patterns constitute a fundamental element in sexual variety seeking.

Overall, despite the importance of intolerance of uncertainty and communication patterns, and their relationship with one another in predicting sexual variety seeking in men, no study to date has examined these elements within the framework of a comprehensive structural model. Accordingly, in light of this existing knowledge and research gap, the present study seeks to analyze the direct and indirect effects of intolerance of uncertainty and communication patterns on sexual variety seeking among married men. On this basis, the research question of the present study is: is there a significant relationship between intolerance of uncertainty and sexual variety seeking, considering the mediating role of communication patterns?

Material and Methods

The present study was fundamental in terms of purpose and descriptive-correlational, employing structural equation modeling (SEM), in terms of methodology. In this study, intolerance of uncertainty was considered the predictor variable, sexual variety seeking the criterion variable, and communication patterns the mediating variable. The statistical population consisted of married men aged 25 to 45 years who attended cultural centers in Tehran between November 2025 to February 2026. Sampling was conducted using a convenience sampling method at the Arasbaran (Seyed Khandan), Bahman (Nazi Abad), Shohada-ye Enghelab-e Eslami (Baharestan), Ibn Sina (Shahrak-e Gharb), and Shafagh (Yousef Abad) cultural centers. These centers were selected with the aim of achieving a sample with relative diversity in terms of cultural and economic characteristics. After explaining the objectives of the study, emphasizing the confidentiality of information, and obtaining informed consent, the questionnaires were administered to participants. Based on Hooman (2005), the minimum sample size in structural equation modeling was considered to be 15 participants per measured factor. Given that the research instruments comprised a total of 10 factors (Sexual Variety Seeking Questionnaire: 3 factors; Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale: 4 factors; and Communication Patterns Questionnaire: 3 factors), the minimum required sample size was estimated at 150 participants. However, to compensate for potential sample attrition and incomplete questionnaires, and to increase the precision of the estimates, 250 participants were included in the sample.

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Measures

The following instruments were used to collect data:

1. Sexual Variety Seeking Questionnaire (SVS): This questionnaire was designed by Aref-Nazari et al. (2011) to assess sexual variety seeking and consists of 46 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). This instrument measures three subscales: moral orientation, intimacy seeking, and variety in sexual behavior. Aref-Nazari et al. (2011) reported an overall reliability coefficient of 0.94 for the questionnaire, and Cronbach's alpha values of 0.90, 0.81, 0.70, and 0.80 for the subscales of desire for a sexual partner, moral orientation, intimacy, and varied sexual behaviors, respectively. Furthermore, factor analysis results confirmed the three-factor structure of this instrument.

2. Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale (IUS): This questionnaire was first designed by Freeston et al. (1994) to assess individuals' degree of intolerance when confronting uncertain situations. This instrument consists of 27 items rated on a five-point Likert scale from "never" (1) to "always" (5), with higher scores indicating greater intolerance of uncertainty (Freeston et al., 1994). This questionnaire comprises four subscales: inability to act in the face of uncertainty, uncertainty being perceived as stressful, uncertainty about the future, and perceiving and avoiding unexpected events as negative.

Dugas et al. (2004) reported an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.94 for the questionnaire and a five-week test-retest reliability of 0.72. Additionally, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales ranged from 0.90 to 0.94, and the instrument's correlations with the Worry Questionnaire (0.93), the Beck Depression Inventory (0.59), and the Beck Anxiety Inventory (0.55) were significant. In Iran, Hamidpour et al. (2011) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82 and a test-retest reliability of 0.79, indicating satisfactory reliability for this instrument.

3. Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ): The Communication Patterns Questionnaire was designed by Christensen and Sullaway (1990) to assess couples' communication patterns. This self-report instrument consists of 35 items and evaluates couples' communication patterns across three situations: when conflict arises, during discussion of the conflict, and after the discussion has ended. Responses are rated on a nine-point Likert scale from "very unlikely" (1) to "very likely" (9), and assess behaviors such as mutual avoidance, mutual discussion, the demand/withdrawal pattern, mutual negotiation, verbal aggression, physical aggression, and mutual withdrawal. This

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questionnaire comprises three subscales: demand/withdrawal communication, mutual constructive communication, and mutual avoidance communication. The demand/withdrawal communication subscale further includes two patterns: "male demand/female withdrawal" and "female demand/male withdrawal."

Christensen and Shenk (1991) examined the validity of the three subscales of this questionnaire by comparing non-distressed, distressed, and divorcing/separating couples. The results showed that the mutual constructive communication subscale was able to distinguish among all three groups, whereas the mutual avoidance communication and demand/withdrawal communication subscales distinguished only distressed couples from non-distressed couples. Additionally, Noller and White (1990), comparing couples with differing levels of marital satisfaction, reported that 27 of the 35 items on this questionnaire were able to significantly differentiate couples with high versus low marital satisfaction. In Iran, Ebadatpour (2000), examining the correlation of this instrument with the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire, reported correlation coefficients of 0.58, -0.58, and 0.35 for the mutual constructive communication, mutual avoidance communication, and demand/withdrawal communication subscales, respectively, all of which were significant at $p < 0.01$.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 24 and AMOS software. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage frequency, mean, standard deviation, and range, were used. For inferential statistics, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the research model. Prior to conducting the analyses, the assumption of data normality was examined and confirmed.

Results

According to the descriptive findings, 33.6% of participants were in the 41–45-year age group and 32.4% were in the 36–40-year age group. In addition, 61.6% were self-employed and 38.4% were salaried employees. In terms of educational level, the highest frequency corresponded to a high school diploma (54%), followed by an associate degree (31.6%). Regarding duration of marriage, the highest frequency corresponded to the 5–10-year range (31.6%). Descriptive statistics for the study variables are presented in Table 1.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the research variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Skewness	Kurtosis
Moral orientation	16.88	4.38	7	36	0.874	0.307
Intimacy seeking	15.42	4.12	9	35	1.188	1.297
Variety in sexual behavior	18.88	5.01	10	36	0.599	0.404
Sexual variety seeking (total)	51.16	10.77	32	107	1.668	1.697
Inability to act	24.74	7.38	9	42	-0.176	-0.545
Uncertainty as stressful	24.79	6.60	10	41	-0.076	-0.271
Uncertainty about the future	25.69	6.51	10	40	-0.374	-0.194
Negative appraisal and avoidance of unexpected events	22.84	6.37	9	38	-0.015	-0.409
Intolerance of uncertainty (total)	92.73	20.79	42	137	-0.557	-0.325
Demand/withdrawal	28.78	13.05	8	60	0.224	-1.131
Mutual constructive communication	28.10	11.33	6	56	0.229	-0.855
Mutual avoidance communication	23.53	8.80	8	52	0.365	-0.510
Communication patterns (total)	78.88	28.24	31	163	0.371	-0.861

Based on the information in Table 1, the mean and standard deviation of sexual variety seeking were 51.16 and 10.77, respectively; the mean and standard deviation of intolerance of uncertainty were 92.73 and 20.79, respectively; and the mean and standard deviation of communication patterns were 78.88 and 28.24, respectively. Table 2 presents the correlation matrix for the research variables.

Table 2. Correlation matrix of the research variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Communication patterns	1												
2. Demand/withdrawal	.86**	1											
3. Mutual constructive	.87**	.68**	1										
4. Mutual avoidance	.72**	.52**	.65**	1									
5. Sexual variety seeking	.29**	.32**	.27**	.34**	1								
6. Moral orientation	.21**	.25**	.19**	.25**	.81**	1							
7. Intimacy seeking	.093	.080	.083	.14*	.71**	.41**	1						
8. Variety in sexual behavior	.37**	.41**	.37**	.41**	.81**	.51**	.24**	1					
9. Intolerance of uncertainty	.21*	.31**	.12*	.13*	.12	.091	.026	.15*	1				
10. Inability to act	.35**	.43**	.49**	.34**	.54**	.26**	.25**	.63**	.57**	1			
11. Uncertainty as stressful	.31**	.40**	.30**	.32**	.46**	.28**	.26**	.54**	.63**	.75**	1		
12. Uncertainty about the future	.36**	.45**	.31**	.31**	.41**	.22**	.20**	.52**	.66**	.75**	.83**	1	
13. Negative appraisal of unexpected events	.27**	.34**	.24**	.30**	.32**	.22**	.18**	.36**	.75**	.67**	.70**	.71**	1

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01

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As shown in Table 2, there was a significant positive relationship between communication patterns and intolerance of uncertainty ($r = .213$, $p < .05$), and between communication patterns and sexual variety seeking ($r = .294$, $p < .05$). In order to apply structural equation modeling, it was necessary to verify a number of underlying assumptions.

Assumption 1 — Sample size: Taking into account the recommended upper-bound ratio of sample size to observed variables and free parameters (15:1), model complexity, the maximum likelihood estimation method (which requires a large sample size), the amount of missing data (less than 5%), and the relationship between multivariate normality and sample size (as deviation from multivariate normality increases, the ratio of respondents required per estimated parameter also increases; 15 cases per parameter), it was established that a sample size of 150 would be sufficient to conduct the path analysis. In this study, 250 participants were included in the sample.

Assumption 2 — Outliers: Prior to estimating the free parameters in the structural equation model, multivariate outliers were examined using the Mahalanobis distance index. No outlying data points were identified; therefore, no cases needed to be removed.

Assumption 3 — Multivariate normality: In this study, Mardia's coefficient and its associated critical ratio were used to examine whether multivariate normality was met. The critical ratio for this coefficient, obtained by dividing the multivariate kurtosis value by its standard error, is compared against a value of 2.58. Absolute values exceeding this threshold for the kurtosis critical ratio can be interpreted as indicating a significant departure of the multivariate distribution from normality. Based on the value of Mardia's coefficient obtained in the present study, the assumption of multivariate normality was met for the model under examination.

Given that these assumptions were satisfied, covariance-based structural equation modeling was used to examine the conceptual model of the relationship between intolerance of uncertainty and sexual variety seeking, mediated by communication patterns, among married men. Estimates for the overall model fit indices and the main parameters (direct, indirect, and mediating effects of intolerance of uncertainty, communication patterns, and sexual variety seeking) are reported in the figure and tables below.

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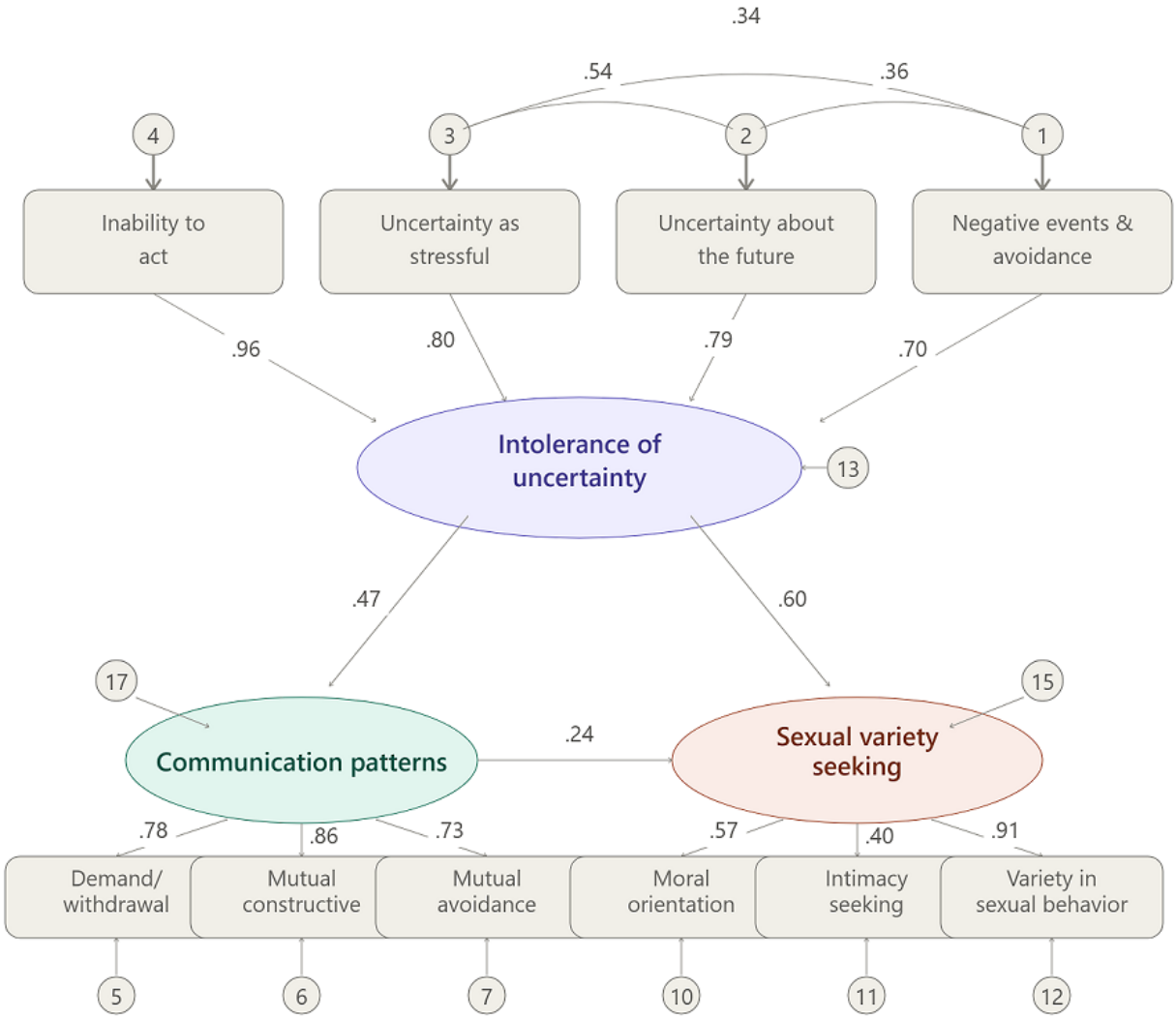


Figure 1. Model of the relationship between intolerance of uncertainty and sexual variety seeking, mediated by communication patterns

The fit indices were calculated using AMOS software, and the results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Estimates of the overall fit indices for the structural equation model

Index	CMIN	DF	CMIN/DF	GFI	AGFI	IFI	CFI	RFI	NFI	RMSEA
Value	81.96	29	2.826	0.94	0.90	0.96	0.96	0.91	0.94	0.07
Acceptable range	–	–	< 5	> 0.9	> 0.9	> 0.9	> 0.9	> 0.9	> 0.9	< 0.08

The model fit indices, evaluated against their recommended acceptable ranges, collectively indicate that the hypothesized model is supported by the research data. In other words, the model demonstrates good fit to the data.

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To calculate the direct and indirect effects of intolerance of uncertainty on sexual variety seeking, mediated by communication patterns, the bootstrap method was used in AMOS software; the output is reported in Table 5.

Table 5. Estimates of direct and indirect effects of intolerance of uncertainty on sexual variety seeking, mediated by communication patterns

Independent variable	Mediating variable	Dependent variable	Direct effect		Indirect effect		Total effect	
			Estimate	Sig.	Estimate	Sig.	Estimate	Sig.
Intolerance of uncertainty	—	Sexual variety seeking	0.597	.001	—	—	0.711	.001
Intolerance of uncertainty	—	Communication patterns	0.467	.001	—	—	0.467	.001
Intolerance of uncertainty	Communication patterns	Sexual variety seeking	—	—	0.114	.001	—	—
Communication patterns	—	Sexual variety seeking	0.244	.001	—	—	0.244	.001

Based on the results of the model evaluation examining the relationship between intolerance of uncertainty and sexual variety seeking, mediated by communication patterns, it can be concluded that the hypothesized model demonstrates good and acceptable fit. These findings indicate that the relationship between intolerance of uncertainty and sexual variety seeking can be well explained through communication patterns among married men, and that communication patterns can mediate the relationship between intolerance of uncertainty and sexual variety seeking.

Discussion

The present study was conducted with the aim of examining the mediating role of communication patterns in the relationship between intolerance of uncertainty and sexual variety seeking among married men. The findings showed that intolerance of uncertainty had a significant positive relationship with sexual variety seeking through communication patterns. This finding indicates that part of the effect of intolerance of uncertainty on the tendency toward sexual variety seeking is transmitted through the quality of couples' interactions and communication patterns; that is, individuals with low tolerance for ambiguous situations are more likely to engage in dysfunctional communication patterns, and this in turn increases the likelihood of a tendency toward sexual variety seeking.

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This finding is consistent with the results of studies by Narimani et al. (2023), Jamali et al. (2025), Kaveh et al. (2024), and Li and Fang (2022). Narimani et al., in their study, showed that communication patterns have a significant relationship with marital quality, mediated by perceived spousal responsiveness; Jamali et al. (2025), in their study, found that marital quality has a significant relationship with resilience through sexual satisfaction; Kaveh et al. (2024), in their study, concluded that extramarital relationships can be predicted through sexual schema and personality dimensions; Li and Fang (2022), in their study, stated that communication patterns have a significant relationship with marital satisfaction through emotion regulation.

In explaining the findings of the present study, it can be said that intolerance of uncertainty refers to individuals' tendency to perceive uncertain situations as threatening, and is typically accompanied by anxiety, difficulty in emotion regulation, and reduced cognitive flexibility (Mehri Boroujeni et al., 2024; Yerlmaz et al., 2026). Such individuals also show greater vulnerability when facing ambiguity, conflict, and disagreement within marital relationships, and are more likely to rely on dysfunctional communication strategies (Larochelle et al., 2025; Vahaland et al., 2020).

According to communication perspectives, dysfunctional patterns such as demand/withdrawal and mutual avoidance are associated with reduced intimacy, increased misunderstandings, and weakened psychological security within the relationship (Kazemi et al., 2023; Mehri et al., 2024). Under such conditions, some individuals may turn to alternative sources of gratification in order to compensate for unmet emotional needs or reduce psychological tension, one manifestation of which can be a tendency toward sexual variety seeking (Brooks et al., 2025). However, constructive communication patterns — by strengthening dialogue, problem-solving, emotional expression, and increased mutual trust and sense of security — can reduce the negative effects of intolerance of uncertainty and help prevent the emergence of maladaptive behaviors (Li & Fang, 2022).

On this basis, the findings of this study indicate that the relationship between intolerance of uncertainty and sexual variety seeking is not solely attributable to individual characteristics, but that the quality of marital interactions also plays a determining role in this process. Therefore, preventive and therapeutic programs should focus not only on strengthening tolerance of

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uncertainty, but also on correcting communication patterns, enhancing conflict-resolution skills, improving emotion regulation, and improving the quality of couples' relationships.

Limitations

It should be noted that the findings of this study must be interpreted in light of certain limitations. First, the use of a correlational design limits the ability to draw causal inferences among the variables. Second, data were collected using self-report instruments, which, given the sensitive nature of the topic of sexual variety seeking, increases the likelihood of bias arising from social desirability or self-report inaccuracy. Third, the study population was limited to married men attending cultural centers in Tehran; therefore, generalizing the results to other demographic groups, women, or individuals residing in other regions should be done with caution.

Accordingly, it is suggested that future research examine this model among women, couples with varying levels of marital satisfaction, and other demographic groups, and evaluate the causal relationships among the variables using longitudinal or intervention-based designs. Furthermore, the design and implementation of educational and therapeutic interventions centered on increasing tolerance of uncertainty, correcting communication patterns, and enhancing conflict-resolution and emotion-regulation skills could be effective in reducing the tendency toward sexual variety seeking and improving the quality of marital relationships.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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