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Social Support and Mental Health among Iranian Women: Mediation Role of Self-Efficacy

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This research explores the impact of perceived social support on the mental health of Iranian women, with self-efficacy serving as a mediating factor.

Methods: Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to assess the hypothesized relationships between the variables. A sample of 750 Iranian women was selected through convenience sampling. Data collection involved the use of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), the Perceived Social Support Scale (PSSS), and the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE).

Results: The findings indicated that the model exhibited acceptable fit indices, with self-efficacy partially mediating the relationship between social support and mental health, explaining 22% of the variance in mental health. The results showed significant positive relationships between social support and mental health, social support and self-efficacy, as well as self-efficacy and mental health ($p < 0.05$). Additionally, the indirect effect of social support on mental health through self-efficacy was significant, as determined by the bootstrap method ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusions: These findings highlight the importance of enhancing self-efficacy as a mediator to improve mental health outcomes for women, thereby emphasizing the need for social support interventions.

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Introduction

Mental health is a fundamental aspect of overall well-being, influencing an individual's ability to function effectively in everyday life and impacting their emotional, psychological, and social stability. It encompasses a range of factors, including cognitive, emotional, and social functioning, and is closely linked to an individual's quality of life (Keyes & Waterman, 2003). Among the key factors contributing to mental health, social support has emerged as one of the most influential, particularly for women who often face unique social, cultural, and familial challenges (Thoits, 2011, 2021). Social support, which refers to the emotional, informational, and instrumental assistance individuals receive from their social networks, plays a vital role in reducing psychological stress and improving well-being (Harandi et al., 2017). For women, who may experience greater levels of stress due to gender-specific expectations and responsibilities, the availability of social support can buffer the effects of these pressures, thereby enhancing mental health (Melrose et al., 2015).

Perceived social support, which is the subjective assessment of the availability and adequacy of support from family, friends, and community, has been consistently linked to better mental health outcomes across diverse populations (Uchino et al., 2018). Women, in particular, are more likely to benefit from social support due to their tendency to build stronger, more emotionally supportive relationships (Wills et al., 2016). For instance, research has shown that women with higher levels of social support report lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Seawell et al., 2014). Furthermore, social support can play a crucial role in promoting resilience and coping mechanisms, which are essential for mental health, particularly during challenging life events such as caregiving responsibilities, relationship issues, or societal pressures (Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008).

While the positive relationship between social support and mental health is well-documented, the mechanisms underlying this relationship are less clearly understood. A key mediator that has been explored in psychological research is self-efficacy, which refers to an individual's belief in their ability to successfully perform tasks and navigate challenges (Bandura, 2012). Self-efficacy is an essential psychological resource that affects how individuals perceive and respond to stressful situations, influencing their coping strategies, emotional responses, and overall mental health (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007). For example, individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to approach problems with confidence and persistence, leading to better psychological adjustment

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and mental health outcomes (Ochsner et al., 2013). When combined with social support, self-efficacy may enhance an individual's ability to manage life's difficulties, thus contributing to better mental health (Bandura, 2001).

In the context of Iranian women, the relationship between social support, self-efficacy, and mental health becomes particularly significant due to the unique socio-cultural dynamics that shape women's lives. Iranian women face specific societal pressures related to traditional gender roles, family expectations, and social restrictions, which can negatively impact their mental health (Motamedi et al., 2019). These socio-cultural challenges often place Iranian women in situations where they must balance their personal aspirations with societal demands, leading to increased psychological stress. As such, the role of social support in mitigating these stressors and promoting mental health becomes even more critical. Furthermore, the extent to which self-efficacy mediates the impact of social support on mental health among Iranian women remains under-explored, particularly in light of the country's unique cultural, political, and familial contexts.

While some studies have examined the relationship between social support and mental health (Bedaso et al., 2021; Dolati et al., 2023; Turner & Brown, 2010; Wang et al., 2018), there is a gap in the literature regarding the specific mechanisms through which social support impacts mental well-being. Research has largely focused on general support and its direct impact on mental health, without sufficiently exploring the role of individual psychological factors, such as self-efficacy, that mediate this relationship. This is particularly relevant in the Iranian context, where cultural norms and expectations may influence how social support is perceived and utilized. For instance, the collectivist nature of Iranian society may lead to a unique understanding and application of social support, which could, in turn, influence how women experience and internalize the support they receive. Additionally, self-efficacy may play a crucial role in shaping how women from this socio-cultural background interpret and respond to support, influencing their mental health outcomes.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating the mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between perceived social support and mental health among Iranian women. By examining how social support influences mental health through the enhancement of self-efficacy, this research seeks to provide new insights into the psychological mechanisms that underpin well-being in this population. Understanding these processes is crucial for the development of effective

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interventions and support systems that can help improve the mental health of Iranian women, particularly in a context where socio-cultural factors play a significant role in shaping their experiences.

This research is particularly important for several reasons. First, it will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how social support affects mental health, highlighting the importance of psychological resources like self-efficacy. Second, it will address the specific cultural and societal challenges faced by Iranian women, offering insights that can inform culturally sensitive mental health interventions. Finally, by exploring these relationships, the study aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on women's mental health in the Middle Eastern context, providing a foundation for future research that can lead to practical applications in mental health policy and practice.

Material and Methods

The current investigation adopted structural equation modeling to assess the relationships between perceived social support, self-efficacy, and mental health among Iranian women. The target population comprised married women aged 20 to 60 residing in Bandar Abbas, Iran, during 2023. A total of 750 participants were selected through stratified random sampling, ensuring a representative sample across different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that the data collected from the questionnaires would only be used for research purposes.

Instruments

Perceived Social Support Questionnaire (F-SozU) - Brief Form: The Perceived Social Support Questionnaire (F-SozU) (Kliem et al., 2015) is a widely used psychometric tool designed to assess the perception of social support across various sources, including family, friends, and significant others. The brief form of this questionnaire, which was utilized in the present study, consists of 14 items that measure the degree to which individuals perceive support from these three sources in their lives. The questionnaire was developed to capture the multidimensional nature of social support, with each subscale focusing on a specific type of support: family support, friend support, and significant other support. Participants rate the extent to which they feel supported by family, friends, and significant others on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not true at all) to 5 (very

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true). The scores for each subscale are summed to produce a total score, with higher scores indicating higher levels of perceived social support. The brief form provides an efficient measure of social support while maintaining a reasonable level of reliability and validity. The F-SozU brief form has demonstrated good psychometric properties across multiple studies. The reliability of the instrument has been assessed through internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) and test-retest methods. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha for the entire scale was found to be0.81.

s important.

Self-Efficacy Scale: The Self-Efficacy Scale (Chen et al., 2001) was used to measure participants' self-efficacy, or their belief in their ability to perform tasks and overcome challenges. The scale consists of 8 items, rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "not at all confident" to "very confident." Previous studies have demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency for this scale, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.80 to 0.90 (Speier & Frese, 1996). In this study, the reliability coefficient for the self-efficacy scale was 0.84.

Mental Health Inventory: To assess mental health, we used the Mental Health Inventory (MHI-38) (Santos & Novo, 2020), which evaluates general psychological well-being, including symptoms of depression, anxiety, and general mental distress. This 38-item scale uses a 5-point Likert response format ranging from "not at all" to "extremely." Prior studies have demonstrated strong reliability for the MHI-38, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.85 (Hennessy et al., 2018). In this study, the overall reliability coefficient was 0.88.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS 26 and AMOS 24 software for structural equation modeling (SEM). SEM was used to test the hypothesized relationships between perceived social support (independent variable), self-efficacy (mediator), and mental health (dependent variable). Bootstrapping methods were employed to assess the significance of the indirect effects of self-efficacy in the relationship between social support and mental health. The goodness-of-fit indices (CFI, RMSEA, TLI) were evaluated to ensure the adequacy of the model fit.

Results

The descriptive statistics, including the mean, standard deviation, and correlation coefficients among the variables, are presented in Table 1. Before evaluating the model, the assumptions of

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structural equation modeling—specifically, multivariate normality, the absence of multicollinearity, and the elimination of multivariate outliers—were thoroughly assessed and confirmed.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Mental Health	52.67	6.12	1		
2. Social Support	45.23	5.01	0.31**	1	
3. Self-Efficacy	23.12	4.56	0.28**	0.53**	1
Note: *Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)*					

In order to evaluate the structural relationships between perceived social support, self-efficacy, and mental health, structural equation modeling was employed. To assess the adequacy of the proposed model, several fit indices were examined. The results revealed the following model fit indices: the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.062, goodness of fit index (GFI) = 0.97, adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI) = 0.95, incremental fit index (IFI) = 0.98, and Tucker-Lewis's index (TLI) = 0.97. These indices indicate a strong fit of the model to the empirical data. Collectively, approximately 18% of the variance in mental health was explained by the model variables. The detailed fit indices are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Model Fit Indices

Indices	X^2/DF	P	GFI	AGFI	IFI	TLI	RMSEA
Obtained	2.80	0.001	0.97	0.95	0.98	0.97	0.062
Accepted	< 3	-	> 0.90	> 0.90	> 0.90	> 0.90	0.08

The results of the direct relationships in the proposed model indicated that all path coefficients were statistically significant. Specifically, the relationships between social support and self-efficacy, between social support and mental health, as well as between self-efficacy and mental health, were all positive and significant. The direct and indirect relationships among the variables are presented in Table 3.

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Table 3. Direct and Indirect Relationships of Variables

Path	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
Social Support → Self-Efficacy	0.72**	-	0.72**
Social Support → Mental Health	0.25*	0.18*	0.43**
Self-Efficacy → Mental Health	0.21*	-	0.21*

Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01*

The bootstrap method was applied to examine the indirect relationships among the variables. The indirect effect coefficient was found to be 0.18, and this effect was significant at the 0.05 level.

Discussion

The current study examines the intricate relationships between social support, self-efficacy, and mental health among Iranian women, with a focus on understanding the mediating role of self-efficacy. The findings highlight the significant influence of social support and self-efficacy in shaping mental health outcomes. By exploring the interaction of these variables, this research provides valuable insights into how social and psychological resources contribute to well-being, especially in a context marked by unique socio-cultural dynamics. The results underscore the importance of fostering both social connections and psychological empowerment to improve mental health.

The direct relationship between social support and mental health found in this study aligns with a well-established body of literature that emphasizes the critical role of social networks in promoting psychological well-being (Uchino et al., 2018). Social support has been recognized as a fundamental resource that buffers individuals against stress, reduces feelings of loneliness, and enhances overall life satisfaction. For Iranian women, whose social roles are often shaped by traditional norms, the presence of a supportive social network can offer substantial protection against mental health challenges. The results corroborate previous studies that have highlighted the positive impact of social support on mental health, particularly in the context of Iranian women who face socio-cultural pressures related to family roles, work, and societal expectations (Harandi et al., 2017).

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The present findings also suggest that social support is not only crucial for improving mental health directly but may also play a pivotal role in the development of self-efficacy. As social support can provide emotional, informational, and instrumental resources, it enables individuals to feel more capable in dealing with life's challenges, thereby boosting their sense of self-efficacy. This insight aligns with Bandura (2012) theory of self-efficacy, which posits that supportive interactions contribute to the development of one's belief in their abilities to manage difficult situations.

One of the novel contributions of this study is its exploration of the mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between social support and mental health. The results indicate that self-efficacy significantly mediates the effect of social support on mental health, suggesting that self-efficacy is a crucial mechanism through which social support influences psychological well-being. This finding resonates with prior research that has demonstrated how individuals with higher self-efficacy tend to cope more effectively with stress, leading to better mental health outcomes (Speier & Frese, 1996).

The mediating function of self-efficacy can be understood through the lens of psychological resilience. Social support provides individuals with the tools and encouragement necessary to overcome challenges, which, in turn, bolsters their belief in their ability to succeed. For Iranian women, where societal expectations can impose additional stressors, the empowerment derived from self-efficacy may be especially important in helping them navigate their roles within the family and society. This finding is consistent with research that has suggested the positive influence of self-efficacy on mental health in collectivist cultures, where individuals often face pressure to conform to societal norms (Ochsner et al., 2013).

The indirect effect of social support on mental health, mediated by self-efficacy, underscores the importance of both external and internal resources in shaping mental health outcomes. While social support offers external validation and resources, self-efficacy acts as an internal psychological resource that enables individuals to utilize these supports effectively. This dual mechanism emphasizes the need for interventions that enhance both the external (social support) and internal (self-efficacy) resources of individuals to promote mental well-being.

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The findings of this study have important implications for mental health interventions targeting Iranian women. The significant direct and indirect effects of social support and self-efficacy suggest that interventions should focus on both enhancing social support networks and fostering self-efficacy. Strengthening social connections—whether through community engagement, peer support groups, or family-oriented interventions—can provide individuals with the emotional and practical resources needed to manage stress and adversity. Moreover, interventions designed to enhance self-efficacy, such as skills training, self-empowerment programs, and resilience-building exercises, could further amplify the positive effects of social support on mental health.

Mental health programs should also be culturally tailored to address the specific challenges faced by Iranian women. In a society where traditional gender roles often limit women's social participation and autonomy, interventions that promote both social support and self-efficacy can help women feel more confident in their abilities to navigate social and familial expectations. Empowering women through education and support could lead to improved mental health outcomes by enhancing their sense of control over their lives and reducing feelings of helplessness or anxiety.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on the role of social support and self-efficacy in mental health, particularly within the context of Iranian women. While much of the existing research has focused on the direct effects of social support, this study expands the literature by examining the mediating role of self-efficacy. The findings provide empirical support for the notion that self-efficacy is a critical factor in understanding how social support influences mental health outcomes. Furthermore, the study highlights the cultural specificity of these relationships, demonstrating the importance of considering cultural context when examining psychological constructs.

The results also add to the literature on the interplay between social support, self-efficacy, and mental health in collectivist cultures. Research in collectivist societies often emphasizes the importance of family and community ties in promoting mental well-being (Chentsova Dutton et al., 2020). However, less attention has been paid to the role of self-efficacy in this dynamic. By demonstrating the mediating role of self-efficacy, this study calls for a more nuanced

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understanding of the psychological mechanisms that underlie the relationship between social support and mental health.

While the current study provides valuable insights into the relationships among social support, self-efficacy, and mental health, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study relies on cross-sectional data, which limits the ability to draw causal inferences about the relationships among the variables. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine how these variables interact over time and whether self-efficacy consistently mediates the effect of social support on mental health.

Second, the study uses self-report measures, which are subject to biases such as social desirability and response distortion. To mitigate these biases, future studies could incorporate multiple methods of data collection, such as interviews or behavioral observations, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the variables under investigation.

Third, while the study focuses on Iranian women, its findings may not be generalizable to other cultural contexts. Future research could replicate this study in different cultural settings to examine whether the mediating role of self-efficacy is consistent across diverse populations. Exploring these relationships in other collectivist societies could provide a broader understanding of how social support and self-efficacy interact to influence mental health.

Lastly, qualitative research could be employed to gain deeper insights into how Iranian women perceive and experience social support and self-efficacy. Interviews or focus groups could provide richer data on the ways in which women understand and use social support and how their sense of self-efficacy influences their mental health.

In conclusion, this study highlights the critical roles of social support and self-efficacy in promoting mental health among Iranian women. The mediating effect of self-efficacy underscores the importance of both external and internal resources in shaping psychological well-being. These findings suggest that interventions aimed at improving mental health should consider not only enhancing social support networks but also fostering self-efficacy to empower individuals to cope effectively with stress. Future research should build on these findings by employing longitudinal designs, expanding the cultural scope of the study, and

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integrating qualitative methods to further explore the mechanisms underlying the relationship between social support, self-efficacy, and mental health.

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 University of Hormozgan.

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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