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Structural Modeling of Online Romantic Relationships Based on Perceived Parental Conflict with the Mediating Role of Loneliness in Female Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to investigate the mediating role of loneliness in the relationship between perceived parental conflict and online romantic relationships among female adolescents.

Methods: This research employed a descriptive-correlational design based on structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population included all female adolescents in Bandar Lengeh, Iran, during the 2025–2026 academic year. A sample of 300 students was selected through stratified random sampling. Data were collected using the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC; Grych et al., 1992), the Online Romantic Relationship Questionnaire (Barghi Irani & Aziz, 2015), and the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1978). Data analysis was performed using SPSS-24 and AMOS-24.

Results: The findings indicated that perceived parental conflict had a direct, positive, and significant effect on online romantic relationships ($\beta = 0.69$, $P < 0.001$) and loneliness ($\beta = 0.80$, $P < 0.001$). Additionally, loneliness had a direct, positive, and significant effect on online romantic relationships ($\beta = 0.76$, $P < 0.001$). Furthermore, the indirect effect of perceived parental conflict on online romantic relationships through loneliness was significant ($\beta = 0.61$). All fit indices (CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.032, GFI = 0.97, AGFI = 0.95, $\chi^2/df = 1.96$) confirmed the excellent fit of the proposed model.

Conclusions: The causal model proposing that perceived parental conflict predicts online romantic relationships through the mediation of loneliness was confirmed. These findings underscore the necessity of designing family-based intervention programs and enhancing adolescents' social skills to reduce their vulnerability in cyberspace.

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Introduction

Adolescence represents a critical developmental period characterized by profound physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional transformations. During this life stage, the formation of intimate romantic relationships emerges as one of the most significant developmental tasks (Collins, 2003). With the rapid proliferation of digital technologies and the increasing accessibility of virtual platforms, the landscape of adolescent romantic interactions has undergone a fundamental transformation. Today, the phenomenon of "online romantic relationships" serves as a novel context for establishing emotional connections, offering opportunities for intimacy while simultaneously presenting numerous challenges and risks (Smahel et al., 2020). Extensive research has demonstrated that adolescents, particularly females, are more susceptible to engaging in online romantic relationships due to unmet emotional needs and identity-seeking processes (Reer & Quandt, 2020).

Alongside technological developments, the family environment, particularly the quality of interparental relationships, plays a foundational role in adolescents' socio-emotional well-being. Frequent exposure to overt and covert interparental conflicts can profoundly distort adolescents' perceptions of interpersonal relationships and undermine their capacity to form healthy attachments (Grych & Fincham, 2001). According to Grych and Fincham's (1990) cognitive-contextual framework, adolescents' perception of interparental conflict functions as a powerful stressor, influencing their emotional security and internalized working models of relationships (Davies & Cummings, 1994).

Numerous studies have consistently linked high levels of perceived interparental conflict to maladaptive outcomes, including externalizing problems, internalizing symptoms, and difficulties in peer and romantic relationships (van Eldik et al., 2020; Rhoades et al., 2011).

One key mechanism that may elucidate the association between interparental conflict and the tendency toward online relationships is loneliness. Loneliness is defined as an aversive psychological state arising from a perceived discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Adolescents exposed to intense parental conflicts frequently describe themselves as isolated, misunderstood, and emotionally insecure (Ladd & Pettit, 2002). This chronic sense of loneliness may drive them to seek emotional connection and validation in alternative environments, including cyberspace. In the online world, adolescents can

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escape the turmoil of their home environment and form relationships that initially appear less threatening and more controllable (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). However, the emotional void created by family dysfunction, combined with the anonymity and easy accessibility of virtual platforms, may render adolescents particularly vulnerable to the formation of premature and potentially detrimental online romantic relationships (Reer & Quandt, 2020).

This finding is consistent with Valkenburg and Peter's (2011) "online compensation" model, which posits that individuals with emotional deficits in their offline relationships utilize cyberspace as a compensatory environment to fulfill these unmet needs. Several theoretical frameworks can further elucidate this finding. From the perspective of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), adolescents exposed to intense parental conflicts develop insecure attachment patterns characterized by feelings of insecurity, fear of rejection, and an inability to trust others. This sense of insecurity lays the groundwork for chronic loneliness, driving adolescents toward cyberspace as a safe haven where they can rapidly experience feelings of acceptance and validation. From the standpoint of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), adolescents who observe hostile interaction patterns between their parents come to associate intimate relationships with conflict and insecurity, leading them to avoid deep face-to-face relationships and instead turn to virtual spaces where they exert greater control over self-disclosure and relationship depth. Furthermore, according to Bowen's (1978) family systems theory, parental conflicts may lead to the triangulation of adolescents into the conflicts, placing them in a position where they cannot adequately express their emotional needs. This process intensifies loneliness and motivates adolescents to seek connection in cyberspace.

The findings of the present study are consistent with several previous investigations. Van Eldik et al. (2020) demonstrated that parental conflicts are associated with increased internalizing problems, including loneliness, in adolescents. Reer and Quandt (2020) concluded that loneliness is one of the strongest predictors of online romantic relationship formation among adolescents. Valkenburg and Peter (2011) also found that adolescents who perceive deficits in their offline relationships are more likely to use cyberspace for emotional connections. However, some studies have reported divergent findings. For instance, Gross et al. (2019), in a longitudinal study, demonstrated that the relationship between parental conflict and adolescents' use of cyberspace is

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moderated by variables such as social support and peer relationship quality. In some conditions, they observed a direct relationship without the mediating role of loneliness. This discrepancy may be attributed to differences in cultural context, participants' age, and the types of measurement instruments employed. Notably, Gross et al. (2019) utilized a European adolescent sample with higher levels of social support, which may have moderated the mediating effect of loneliness.

Similarly, Liu et al. (2018) demonstrated that parental monitoring can moderate the relationship between parental conflicts and adolescents' online behaviors, such that the effect of parental conflicts on online romantic relationships is attenuated in families with higher levels of monitoring. This finding suggests that, in addition to the mediating pathway of loneliness, other moderating pathways may be involved in this relationship that were not examined in the present study. Nevertheless, the present findings are theoretically congruent with Grych and Fincham's (1990) cognitive-contextual framework, which posits that children's perceptions of interparental conflict influence their adjustment through cognitive and emotional processes, including loneliness. Overall, the emphasis on the mediating role of loneliness in this study represents a significant step toward elucidating the psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between family dysfunction and adolescents' online behaviors, indicating that loneliness serves as a critical link between family turmoil and the tendency toward virtual relationships.

Despite the abundance of research examining each of these variables independently, limited studies have simultaneously investigated their complex interplay within an integrated model, particularly among Iranian adolescents. Existing studies have either focused on the direct effects of family conflict on adolescent behaviors or independently examined the role of loneliness in digital media use. However, a notable research gap persists in understanding the mediating pathway through which perceived parental conflict translates into an increased propensity for online romantic relationships. Accordingly, the present study was designed to propose and test a structural model delineating the direct and indirect effects of perceived parental conflict on online romantic relationships, mediated by loneliness, among female adolescents.

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Material and Methods

Study Design and Participants: This applied research adopted a descriptive-correlational design based on structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population comprised all female adolescents enrolled in the first and second cycles of secondary schools in Bandar Lengeh, Iran, during the 2025–2026 academic year. Following Klein's (2016) guidelines for SEM, which recommend a minimum of 10 to 20 observations per estimated parameter, a sample size of 300 participants was determined based on a 1:12 ratio for 25 parameters. Participants were selected using stratified random sampling, with educational level (first vs. second cycle of secondary school) serving as the stratification variable to ensure balanced representation from each group.

Instruments: Three instruments were utilized for data collection:

The Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC; Grych et al., 1992) comprises 48 items assessing various dimensions of interparental conflict from the child's perspective. Items are rated on a three-point Likert scale (true = 2, sort of true = 1, false = 0). Grych et al. (1992) reported test-retest reliability coefficients ranging from 0.68 to 0.76 across subscales and Cronbach's alpha coefficients between 0.61 and 0.83. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for the total scale was 0.75. Mora and Hernandez (2010) evaluated the construct validity of this scale using confirmatory factor analysis, which confirmed the excellent fit of the three-factor model. The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale was reported as 0.86, with subscale coefficients of 0.64, 0.70, and 0.63 for the conflict properties, threat, and self-blame dimensions, respectively. Salavati and Shokri (2015) reported a significant positive correlation between conflict properties and depression, supporting the convergent validity of the scale. Gharabaghi and Vafaei (2009) reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.77, 0.61, and 0.84 for the conflict properties, threat, and self-blame subscales, respectively.

The Online Romantic Relationship Questionnaire (Barghi Irani & Aziz, 2015) was developed to assess online romantic relationships. This instrument comprises 28 items rated on a five-point Likert scale, measuring five dimensions: enjoyment, sexual tendency, honesty, preference for virtual relationships, and trust. Total scores range from 28 to 140, with higher scores indicating greater engagement in online romantic relationships. Barghi Irani and Aziz (2015) reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients above 0.70. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.72.

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The UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1978) comprises 20 items rated on a four-point Likert scale, with total scores ranging from 20 to 80. Russell et al. (1978) reported internal consistency coefficients between 0.89 and 0.94. Hannon (2007, as cited in Rouhani & Alizadeh-Fard, 2012) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.88. Khoshdel Daryasari et al. (2019) obtained a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.83.

Procedure and Data Analysis: Following the acquisition of necessary permissions and coordination with school principals, the questionnaires were administered to 300 eligible students. Prior to administration, the research objectives, response procedures, and confidentiality assurances were clearly explained, and completion of the questionnaires was considered as informed consent. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS-24 and AMOS-24. For testing the research hypothesis, structural equation modeling was employed. Prior to the main analysis, the assumptions of normality (Shapiro-Wilk test), absence of outliers (Mahalanobis distance), and multicollinearity (Pearson correlation matrix) were examined.

Ethical Considerations: All ethical principles of research, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality of participants' information, were fully observed throughout the study. The collected data were managed through coding without recording identifying information and were used exclusively for scientific research purposes. Furthermore, at all stages of data collection, analysis, and reporting, the privacy and data security of participants were carefully maintained.

Results

Table 1 reports the descriptive indices for the research variables .

Table 1. Descriptive Indices of Research Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Conflict Properties	15.65	3.25	-0.72	1.14
Threat	14.72	3.72	-0.35	0.47
Self-Blame	16.77	3.87	1.43	-0.83
Perceived Parental Conflict	47.14	5.47	0.75	0.67
Items 1-7	11.52	3.14	-1.09	-0.37
Items 8-14	12.78	2.72	1.47	0.82
Loneliness	24.30	4.85	1.04	-1.47
Enjoyment	8.65	3.24	-1.66	0.78
Sexual Tendency	8.71	3.76	1.40	-0.77
Honesty	11.35	3.52	1.33	-1.73
Preference for Virtual Relationships	16.98	4.14	-0.74	1.09
Trust	30.52	5.25	1.58	-1.89
Online Romantic Relationships	76.21	9.86	0.72	0.67

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The results presented in the above table are only related to the statistical sample of the study and do not meet the necessary conditions for generalization to the statistical population. For such generalization, it is necessary to perform inferential tests with a conventional error level on the data.

To examine the prerequisites for parametric analyses and ensure the applicability of statistical tests in this study, the normality of data distribution was first evaluated. For this purpose, the Shapiro-Wilk test, a standard and powerful test for assessing sample distribution deviation from normality, was used. The significance level for all research variables was greater than the predetermined error level (0.05). Since the null hypothesis (H_0) in this test indicates no significant difference between the sample data distribution and the normal distribution, and given that this hypothesis was not rejected, it can be inferred that the collected data have normal distribution characteristics. Accordingly, the normality assumption of data is confirmed for all studied variables, and parametric statistical analyses can be performed in subsequent stages.

Another assumption for using SEM is the examination and removal of outliers. This was accomplished in the present analysis using Mahalanobis distances. The Mahalanobis distance was calculated for all data and compared with the chi-square index. In this study, the confidence level was 95% and the degrees of freedom were 2 (based on the variables entered into the Mahalanobis distance, n-1). Using the degrees of freedom and the mentioned confidence level in the chi-square table, a value of 5.991 was obtained. The highest Mahalanobis distance obtained in the present analysis was 5.513. Comparing these two values indicated that no data among the Mahalanobis distances exceeded the obtained chi-square value, and consequently, no outlier exists among the respondents' answers. Thus, this assumption is confirmed.

The correlation values among the variables in this study were in a desirable range (between 0.30 and 0.90), and the correlations between variables were estimated to be relatively strong. Considering the correlation values and their desirable significance levels, this assumption is confirmed.

To calculate the total effects in the model, the direct and indirect effects of the variables involved in a path were summed to provide a clearer view of the paths in the model. This is reported in Table 2.

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Table 2. Standardized Values of Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects of Research Variables

Predictor Variable	Criterion Variable	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
Perceived Parental Conflict	Online Romantic Relationships	0.69	0.61	1.30
Loneliness Online	Online Romantic Relationships	0.76	-	0.76
Perceived Parental Conflict	Loneliness Online	0.80	-	0.80

As can be seen in Table 2, "perception of parental conflicts", as a strong predictor, predicts "Online Romantic Relationships" both directly, indirectly (through feelings of loneliness), and in total. Considering the results of this section, it was determined that all existing effects, including direct, indirect, and total, are at the desired level of significance.

In order to confirm the recent findings and examine the fit of the final research model in the statistical population, the model fit indices were calculated in Amos software. Table 3 shows the model fit indices along with the desired values of each index based on Klein's (2016) criterion.

Table 3. Model Fit Indices

Index	X2/df	GFI	AGFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	PCLOSE
Obtained Values	1.96	0.97	0.95	0.96	0.95	0.032	0.41
Optimal Values	<3	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	<0.08	>0.05

According to the results in the table above, the result of dividing the chi-square by the degree of freedom was 1.96. The value of the goodness-of-fit index (GFI) and the adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), which indicate the amount of variance and covariance explained by the model, was 0.97 and 0.95, respectively. The comparative fit index (CFI), which compares the target model with the independent model, was 0.95. The value of the Toker-Lewis index (TLI), as an unnormalized fit index, was estimated to be 0.96. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the pi value of close fit (PCLOSE) were also obtained as 0.032 and 0.41, respectively. All the fit indices of the model were at an acceptable level, which indicated that the model had a good fit. Considering the results of the statistical section, the hypothesis of this study is confirmed.

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Discussion

The present study aimed to test the structural model of online romantic relationships based on perceived parental conflict with the mediating role of loneliness among female adolescents. The findings demonstrated that the proposed model exhibited excellent fit with the data, and the main hypothesis—that perceived parental conflict predicts online romantic relationships through the mediation of loneliness—was confirmed. The confirmation of the mediating role of loneliness indicates that parental conflicts not only directly but also indirectly, through the exacerbation of loneliness, increase adolescents' propensity for online romantic relationships. This finding is consistent with Valkenburg and Peter's (2011) "online compensation" model, which posits that individuals with emotional deficits in their offline relationships utilize cyberspace as a compensatory environment to fulfill these unmet needs.

Several theoretical frameworks can elucidate this finding. From the perspective of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), adolescents exposed to intense parental conflicts develop insecure attachment patterns characterized by feelings of insecurity, fear of rejection, and an inability to trust others. This sense of insecurity lays the groundwork for chronic loneliness, driving adolescents toward cyberspace as a safe haven where they can rapidly experience feelings of acceptance and validation. From the standpoint of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), adolescents who observe hostile interaction patterns between their parents come to associate intimate relationships with conflict and insecurity, leading them to avoid deep face-to-face relationships and instead turn to virtual spaces where they exert greater control over self-disclosure and relationship depth. Additionally, according to Bowen's (1978) family systems theory, parental conflicts may lead to the triangulation of adolescents into the conflicts, placing them in a position where they cannot adequately express their emotional needs. This process intensifies loneliness and motivates adolescents to seek connection in cyberspace.

The findings of the present study are consistent with several previous investigations. Van Eldik et al. (2020) demonstrated that parental conflicts are associated with increased internalizing problems, including loneliness, in adolescents. Reer and Quandt (2020) concluded that loneliness is one of the strongest predictors of online romantic relationship formation among adolescents. Valkenburg and Peter (2011) also found that adolescents who perceive deficits in their offline relationships are more likely to use cyberspace for emotional connections. However, some studies

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This discrepancy may be attributed to differences in cultural context, participants' age, and the types of measurement instruments employed. Notably, Gross et al. (2019) utilized a European adolescent sample with higher levels of social support, which may have moderated the mediating effect of loneliness.

Similarly, Liu et al. (2018) demonstrated that parental monitoring can moderate the relationship between parental conflicts and adolescents' online behaviors, such that the effect of parental conflicts on online romantic relationships is attenuated in families with higher levels of monitoring. This finding suggests that, in addition to the mediating pathway of loneliness, other moderating pathways may be involved in this relationship that were not examined in the present study. Nevertheless, the present findings are theoretically congruent with Grych and Fincham's (1990) cognitive-contextual framework, which posits that children's perceptions of interparental conflict influence their adjustment through cognitive and emotional processes, including loneliness. Overall, the emphasis on the mediating role of loneliness in this study represents a significant step toward elucidating the psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between family dysfunction and adolescents' online behaviors, indicating that loneliness serves as a critical link between family turmoil and the tendency toward virtual relationships.

Practical Implications: The findings of this research carry important practical implications for professionals in educational psychology, school counselors, and families. Based on the results, perceived parental conflict was identified as a serious risk factor for adolescents' engagement in online romantic relationships, with this relationship being intensified through loneliness. Therefore, designing and implementing intervention programs should target reducing parental conflicts, alleviating loneliness, and strengthening adolescents' communication skills. Educational programs for parents focused on effective communication skills, conflict management, and problem-solving can help reduce parental conflicts and create a safe family environment. Furthermore, empowering adolescents to cope with loneliness through social skills training, strengthening social support networks, increasing participation in group activities, and teaching

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emotion regulation strategies can prevent their tendency toward unhealthy online romantic relationships. Schools can play an effective role in this domain by establishing student clubs, conducting skill-building workshops, and providing counseling services. Additionally, enhancing media literacy among adolescents and their parents—including awareness of cyberspace risks, identifying signs of unhealthy relationships, and managing internet use time—can serve as an effective preventive strategy. Family-based and school-based interventions should be designed in a combined and coordinated manner to simultaneously address risk factors at the family level and protective factors at the school level. In sum, strengthening the family's role as an emotional secure base, increasing parental monitoring, empowering adolescents to cope with loneliness, and enhancing their media literacy represent key strategies for reducing adolescents' vulnerability in cyberspace and promoting their mental and social health in the digital age.

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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 the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

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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