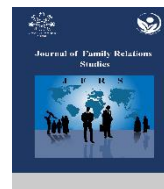




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## Research Paper

# Screen Time vs. Quality Time: Examining the Relationship between Multi-screen Addiction and Marital Relationship Quality through the Lens of maintenance-oriented relationship commitment



Crossmark

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Marital Relationship Quality, Multi-screen Addiction, Maintenance-Oriented Relationship Commitment, Screen Time

### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The present study aimed to investigate the predictive model of marital relationship quality based on multi-screen addiction with the mediating role of maintenance-oriented relationship commitment in married individuals.

**Methods:** The current research method was applied in terms of purpose, descriptive in data collection, and correlational based on the analysis process. The statistical population of the present study was the married teachers of Zanjan province in 2023, and 402 teachers participated in this research through convenience sampling. Data collection tools included the Relationship Quality Questionnaire (RQ) by Chonody et al. (2016), the maintenance-oriented relationship commitment Scale (MORC) by Schoebi et al. (2015), and the Multiple screen Addiction Scale (MSAS) by Saritepeci (2021). Data analysis was conducted using Pearson correlation tests, confirmatory and exploratory factor analyses, and structural equation modeling with SPSS 27 and AMOS 26 software.

**Results:** The results revealed that all scales had appropriate reliability. According to the Pearson correlation matrix, there was a significant positive relationship between MORC and RQ ( $r=0.593, P<0.01$ ), as well as between MSA and RQ ( $r=-0.237, P<0.01$ ). Structural equation modeling also indicated a good fit of the research conceptual model with the data (RMSEA=0.074).

**Conclusion:** It can be concluded that maintenance-oriented relationship commitment mediates the relationship between multi-screen addiction and marital relationship quality, suggesting that considering these factors in therapeutic interventions and marital enrichment programs can be beneficial.

## 1. Introduction

The quality of couples' relationships is a pivotal factor that influences the mental health of individuals and the stability of the family system (Grevenstein et al., 2023; Javdan et al., 2023). Furthermore, the family's health is essential to the overall emotional and mental well-being of a community (Khatamsaz et al., 2017).

However, the quality of marital relationships among Iranian couples is at risk, as divorce rates have risen in recent decades as an indicator of marital quality (Askari-Nodoushan, 2019). This issue may be due to rapid societal changes.

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Modernity does not stop at the gates of the family, and the quality of relationships and marital satisfaction of couples in a family is one of the essential factors affected by rapid social changes (Afra & Ebrahimi, 2021). Therefore, extensive efforts have been made to study variables related to marital relationship quality (Tavakol et al., 2017). However, due to the dynamic nature and variability of relationship quality in couples, identifying factors influencing it, especially variables influenced by modernity, is always necessary.

The dimensions of marital quality vary widely, leading to a range of definitions. Although considered inadequate, several comprehensive definitions have been referenced in various studies on marital quality (Nurhayati et al., 2019). These definitions attempt to encapsulate the complex nature of relationships within a marital context, reflecting the diverse aspects that contribute to the overall quality of a marriage. According to Custer (2009), marital relationship quality is the same feeling that spouses have about happiness and satisfaction and their perspective on their marital relationship (Mollazadeh Nooran et al., 2021). In intimate relationship literature, the subjective experience of marriage is usually referred to as "marital relationship quality" or "marital/relationship performance" (Snyder et al., 2005). Therefore, marital relationship quality is a comprehensive construct that encompasses variables such as happiness, compatibility, and marital satisfaction in a broader sense (Lavee & Katz, 2002). Beck-Gernsheim (2013) believes that family changes in today's world are so vast that many past theories can no longer explain them and have lost their impact. This may be because, over time, the quality of relationships changes, so identifying factors affecting relationship quality becomes possible and necessary despite the complexity and multiple interactions among various variables (Eslami, 2005). One of the influential variables is marital commitment.

A successful marriage is based on commitment, attraction, and agreement, among which an important stable predictor for quality and continuity of marital relationships is commitment (John et al., 2017). Commitment has various dimensions, including personal reasons, ethical beliefs, and special convictions, that bind individuals to continue their marital relationship (Tang & Curran, 2013; Ehrenberg et al., 2012). However, how different levels of commitment justify why some relationships decline while others do not remains a question. Why do some couple relationships irreversibly deteriorate after a crisis while others neutralize the damage? The answer may lie in this hidden potential where commitment should evoke cognitions and behaviors that prevent relationship deterioration

(Menzies-Toman & Lydon, 2005). *Commitment* is a key force in promoting relationship maintenance. It is defined as "the sense of loyalty an individual feels towards a uniquely intimate relationship" (Rusbult et al., 2006), and it is assumed that commitment strengthens developments toward maintaining a relationship (Wieselquist et al., 1999), meaning an immediate motivational shift from personal benefit towards spouse's benefits and relationships. This motivation enhances relation-focused efforts to protect against undesirable threats (Lydon & Quinn, 2013). This motivation also manifests itself in cognitive and behavioral levels, such as an increased willingness to sacrifice personal interests for the sake of a spouse or relationship in more committed individuals (Van Lange et al., 1997). However, which aspect of commitment leads to relationship maintenance? The possibility is that commitment based on relationship maintenance can slow the decline in relationship quality and motivate behaviors that facilitate relationship repair beyond the effects of relationship satisfaction increases (Schoebi et al., 2015). Therefore, maintenance-oriented relationship commitment is individuals' willingness to engage in common thoughts and behaviors related to maintaining the relationship (Schoebi et al., 2012). Furthermore, several research studies suggest that marital commitment has a positive effect on enhancing satisfaction within marital partnerships (Lemieux & Hale, 2002; Fathi et al., 2012). Clements and Swensen (2018) also propose that marital commitment is linked to increased stability, decreased conflicts, and improved quality of marital relationships.

The structure of marital quality is a multidimensional and dynamic concept influenced by internal and external changes (Bradbury et al., 2000). Therefore, various factors and variables can affect the quality of relationships; one is the widespread use of cyberspace, which has brought significant changes to societies and families (Shojaei Jashooghani, 2018). Excessive use of online social networks and smartphones is one environmental factor that can influence interpersonal relationships (Dehghani Banadaki et al., 2022). Multi-screen addiction is considered a behavioral addiction (Saritepeci, 2021), such as addiction to smartphones or the internet. Therefore, multi-screen addiction can be described as excessive use and obsessive behavior toward several digital devices (Balhara et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2019; Bölükbaşı-Macit & Kavafoğlu, 2019). One important indicator of behavioral addiction is that lack or restriction of access to an object or situation causes distress. In multi-screen addiction, lack of access to just one device with a screen, such as a phone, tablet, computer, or television, is not an important indicator by itself; it indicates a situation where an

individual experiences distress and deprivation when losing access to all or several digital devices with screens simultaneously (Lin et al., 2019). When individuals spend more time in virtual spaces using digital screens, not only do they show signs like low self-control, anxiety, and neglecting their duties, but they also create conflicts and reduce marital commitments as the strongest predictor of marital quality (John et al., 2017) among married individuals (Houghton, 2018). However, there are few studies on multi-screen addiction or addiction to a single screen (Balhara et al., 2018; Din & Isam, 2019; Khalili-Mahani et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2019; Lucena et al., 2015).

Despite this, criticisms have been raised against numerous studies that have focused on examining bilateral relationships between these variables and factors involved in marital relationships. One criticism is that studies conducted on marital quality have examined these factors separately, and according to the researchers' review in this study, no model emphasizes individual and interpersonal factors regarding marital quality. Therefore, the present study holds significant importance as it delves into the unique exploration of marital commitment and digital addiction, specifically examining maintenance-oriented relationship commitment and multi-screen addiction as novel variables. This research stands out due to its focus on these emerging factors, which have not been previously studied in the cultural context of Iran, particularly in predicting the quality of relationships among married couples. The study's relevance is further underscored by the potential oversight in psychology and counseling, where the critical roles of these variables in marital relationship quality may be underappreciated. By investigating whether maintenance-oriented relationship commitment mediates the relationship between multi-screen addiction and marital relationship quality, this research aims to shed light on these fundamental functions, thereby addressing a critical gap in the understanding of contemporary marital dynamics.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This research is considered an applied study and falls under the category of quantitative research. The research design is descriptive-correlational based on structural equation modeling. The study population included all married teachers working in the education department of Zanjan province in the academic year 2022-2023. The sample size was estimated to be 375 using Morgan's table. However, to increase the research's external validity and enhance the statistical power of the tests, 402 male and female married teachers were selected through convenience sampling and participated in the study. In order to conduct the research, after obtaining approval

from the faculty council and department council, efforts were made to obtain necessary permits and introduction letters from Kharazmi University. After presenting the introduction letter to the education department of Zanjan province, permit letters for implementing the instruments were sent to 14 district offices. In the first step, translations of scales related to research variables were done using the back-translation method, and cultural adaptation of items and formal and content validity were reviewed and confirmed by faculty members from Kharazmi University counseling group and two linguistics experts. Subsequently, for preliminary study and calculating tool reliability, questionnaires were distributed among 55 teachers. Once it was determined that tool reliability was acceptable, questionnaires were distributed and completed at the level of all 14 districts. Finally, 402 questionnaires were completed and subjected to statistical analysis according to research hypotheses. The inclusion criteria for the study included being a teacher, being married, and providing informed consent to participate in the research. The exclusion criteria included not responding accurately to all questionnaire items or withdrawing from answering teachers. To ensure research ethics, participants were informed about the research objectives, and after ensuring confidentiality of information with researchers, they filled out an informed consent form voluntarily before participating. The research questionnaires were self-reported and anonymous without specifying personal identities and were made available to participants. It was also decided that if a participant wished to be informed about the research results, providing an email address voluntarily on the questionnaire was possible.

### Instruments

**Relationship Quality (RQ):** Chonody et al. (2016) designed, validated, and assessed the main tool's reliability. The scale consists of 9 items and 1 factor. The tool has good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.88. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Item 3 is reverse-scored in this tool. In Iran, for the first time, the psychometric properties of this questionnaire were studied by Taqizadeh Firouzjaei et al. (2017). After translation and cultural adaptation, internal consistency was calculated at an acceptable level (Cronbach's alpha = 0.90). In the present study, the internal consistency coefficient of the scale was 0.95.

**Maintenance-Oriented Relationship Commitment Scale (MORC):** The Maintenance-Oriented Commitment Scale focuses on commitment to behaviors and thoughts that strengthen relationship maintenance rather than assessing overall commitment (Schoebi et al., 2015).

The original study's exploratory factor analysis results supported a unidimensional structure for Italian and Swiss samples with good validity and a reported reliability of 0.71. This scale consists of 6 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7), indicating high levels of maintenance-oriented commitment in married individuals (Shabi et al., 2015). The reliability of the scale was calculated at 0.80 in the present study.

**Multiple screen Addiction Scale (MSAS):** The Multiple Screen Addiction Scale was designed by Saritepeci (2021) based on existing literature in this area and indicators of internet gaming disorder. EFA resulted in a structure with 15 items and 3 factors: compulsive behavior subscale with 8 items, loss-of-control subscale with 3 items, and excessive screen time with 4 items. Confirmatory factor analysis confirmed an appropriate factor structure with internal consistency coefficients reported as Cronbach's alpha = 0.92 for total scale reliability, Cronbach's alpha = 0.83 for excessive screen time subscale reliability, Cronbach's alpha = 0.90 for compulsive behavior subscale reliability, and Cronbach's alpha = 0.71 for loss-of-control subscale reliability indicating very good reliability. In this questionnaire, which consisted of 5 Likert scales, the cut-off point of 3 (sometimes) was determined to indicate addiction to digital screens in the multiple approaches, meaning that

if a score of 3 or higher is given to 8 out of 15 items, dependency is confirmed (Saritepeci, 2021). It should be noted that the multi-screen addiction scale has not been translated and standardized in Iran so far. The present study will be the first attempt to examine the psychometric properties of this scale. The present study revealed internal consistency coefficients as Cronbach's alpha = 0.92 for total scale reliability, alpha = 0.81 for excessive screen time subscale reliability, alpha = 0.89 for compulsive behavior subscale reliability, and alpha = 0.69 for loss-of-control.

Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical tests. The descriptive section calculated frequency, minimum and maximum scores, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. In the inferential section, exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, Pearson correlation matrix, and structural equation modeling were used with the help of SPSS 27 and AMOS 26 software.

### 3. Results

Data analysis showed that the participants in this study included 278 women (69.2%) and 124 men (30.8%), with a mean age of 40.08 and a standard deviation of 7.79. The average duration of marriage was also 14.67, with a standard deviation of 8.37. Table 1 shows descriptive measures such as the mean and standard deviation of research variables.

**Table 1. Descriptive indices of mean and standard deviation of research variables**

Variables	Subscales	Mean	Standard deviation
Maintenance-Oriented Relationship Commitment	-	36.1244	5.01066
Multi-screen Addiction	Excessive screen time	9.5100	3.47720
	Compulsive behavior	19.8159	7.09015
	Loss-of-control	5.4129	2.32596
	Total	34.7388	11.67297
Relationship Quality	-	34.2044	8.78948

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the study variables. The Maintenance-Oriented Relationship Commitment variable has a mean of 36.12 and a standard deviation of 5.01. For Multi-screen Addiction, the mean is 34.73, and the standard deviation is 11.67. Lastly, the Relationship Quality variable shows a mean of 34.20 and a standard deviation of 8.78.

The study confirmed univariate normality by assessing skewness and kurtosis for each variable, finding values

within  $\pm 1$  and error values not exceeding twice the statistics. Linearity was tested using scatter plots, showing linear relationships between variables and models. Multiple regression analysis, including tolerance and variance inflation factors, tested for nonlinearity. Outliers were checked with box plots, and no participants were excluded. Missing data were handled using the maximum likelihood estimation method.

**Table 2. Correlation matrix between research variables**

Variables matrix	1	2	3	4	5	6
Excessive screen time	1					
Compulsive behavior	0.743**	1				
Loss-of-control	0.633**	0.655**	1			
Multi-screen Addiction	0.876**	0.959**	0.786**	1		
Maintenance-Oriented Relationship Commitment	-0.106*	-0.099*	-0.087*	-0.109*	1	
Relationship Quality	-0.182**	-0.229**	-0.220**	-0.237**	0.593**	1

\*P<0.05 \*\*P<0.01

Based on the results obtained (Table 2), there is a significant negative relationship between the total score of MSA and its components (*Excessive screen*

*time, compulsive behavior, loss of control*) with RQ with r values ranging from -0.237 to -0.220, which are significant at  $p \leq .001$  level. Therefore, it

can be stated that there is a relationship between *MSA* and *RQ*. Moreover, there is a significant negative relationship between the total score of *MSA* and its components with *MORC* with *r* values ranging from -0.109 to -0.087, which are significant at  $p \leq .001$  level.

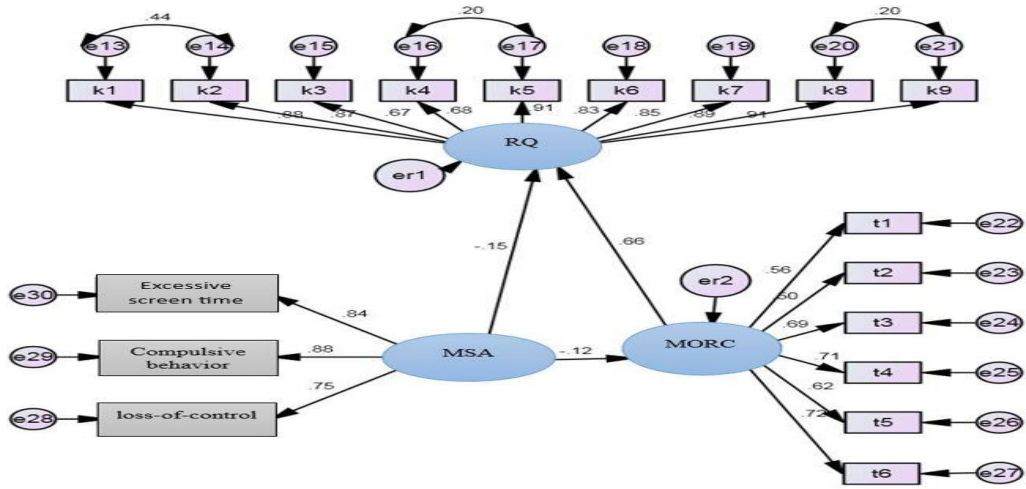
In order to clarify the mediating role of *MORC* in predicting *RQ* based on *MSA*, the structural equation modeling method was used. The fit indices obtained are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Model fit indices**

Indices	df	df/χ <sup>2</sup>	GFI	CFI	RMSEA
Revised	315	2.262	0.911	0.902	0.074

Table 3 provides the fit indices for the model, with the following values:  $\chi^2 = 744.712$ ;  $\chi^2/pdf = 2.262$ ; CFI = 0.902; GFI = 0.911; RMSEA = 0.074. According to Hu

and Bentler's (1999) criteria, CFI and GFI values greater than 0.90 and an RMSEA value less than 0.08 indicate a good relative fit of the proposed model to the data.



**Figure 1. The structural equation modeling of the relationship between MSA, MORC, and RQ**

Based on the results obtained (Figure 1 & Table 4), the direct effect of multi-screen addiction on maintenance-oriented relationship commitment (-0.12) is statistically significant. Also, the direct effect of multi-screen addiction on marital relationship quality (-0.15) is significant. Furthermore, the direct effect of

maintenance-oriented relationship commitment on marital relationship quality (0.66) has been evaluated as significant. As can be seen, the t-value in all significant paths is greater than  $1.96 \pm$ , indicating the significance of these paths.

**Table 4. Direct effects of research variables**

predictor variable	criterion variables	Effect Size	T
MSA	MORC	-0.12	-2.077
MSA	RQ	-0.15	-3.327
MORC	RQ	0.66	9.23

Finally, the Sobel test was used to determine the model's significance. This method analyzes the mediating variable using the following formula.

$$z\text{-value} = a*b/SQRT(b^2*sa^2 + a^2*sb^2 + sa^2*sb^2)$$

**Table 5. Sobel test results for mediating and indirect effects**

Predictor	Mediator	Criterion	Indirect coefficient (bootstrap)	Z-value	sig
MSA	MORC	RQ	0.079	4.24	$P \leq 0.05$

Based on Table 5, predicting marital relationship quality based on multi-screen addiction with maintenance-oriented commitment as a mediator shows a z-value greater than  $1.96 \pm$  and ( $P < 0.01$ ), indicating the significance of this path and suggesting that "multi-screen addiction with maintenance-

(MacKinnon et al., 1995)

The results of the Sobel test for the mediating path can be seen in the table below.

oriented commitment as a mediator predicts marital relationship quality in married individuals." In other words, maintenance-oriented commitment in couples plays a mediating role in the relationship between multi-screen addiction and marital relationship quality.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The family is recognized as the fundamental structure that significantly influences its members' mental and physical well-being (D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019). Within the family system, the quality of the relationship between couples is of paramount importance, as it has profound positive effects on health (Fatemi Aghda et al., 2022; Azarnik & Aghaei, 2015; Robles et al., 2014). Stable and satisfying marriages are often associated with better health outcomes for spouses (Robles et al., 2014) and increased happiness (Be et al., 2013). Conversely, a decline in the quality of the marital relationship can result in reduced peace and mental health for both partners, potentially leading to various issues and even psychological disorders, which may culminate in separation (Pourezia, 2011; Zare Bidaki, 2018). Motivated by these considerations, this study was designed to explore a structural equation modeling approach to predict marital relationship quality, with a focus on the mediating role of maintenance-oriented relationship commitment in the context of multi-screen addiction among married individuals.

In data analysis using the structural equation modeling method, it was found that goodness-of-fit indices indicate relative fit between the assumed pattern and data. Also, results obtained from path coefficients show significant direct effects of MSA on MORC (-0.12), MSA on RQ (-0.15), and MORC on RQ (0.66). The results of the Sobel test used for determining model significance showed that multi-screen addiction predicts marital relationship quality in married individuals with maintenance-oriented relationship commitment as a mediator. In other words, MORC mediates the relationship between MSA and RQ. These findings are in line with studies by Sharifinia et al. (2019), Fariborz et al. (2020), Farshadfar et al. (2017), Mirshakari et al. (2021), Baboo & Mohammadi (2021), Dehghani Banadaki et al. (2023), Fotouhi et al. (2023), Elphinston et al. (2011), Lapierre & Louis (2018), Saritepeci et al. (2021). It is evident that a set of factors or variables always influences the quality of a marital relationship due to its multidimensional, dynamic, and change-dependent nature (Bradbury et al., 2000), one of which is an addiction to multiple digital screens, that is, excessive and compulsive use of any device with a digital display which is considered a behavioral addiction (Balhara et al., 2018; Saritepeci et al., 2021). Too much attention and excessive use of digital screens force people to spend less time together and fulfill each other's needs, reducing the quality of the relationship. On the other hand, when couples excessively engage in digital screens, they engage in fewer behaviors that preserve the marital relationship. Therefore, the quality of their relationship decreases.

When the main activity that an individual engages in during the day is looking at or checking digital screens such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, or televisions, it distances them from the desired marital relationship, which can disrupt family order and balance and consequently lead to emotional detachment in the relationship (Sharifinia et al., 2020). For example, when an individual spends more time in virtual space and uses digital screens excessively, conflicts arise, and marital commitments between couples decrease (Houghton, 2018). Excessive use of virtual space reduces the time spent expressing love and affection between partners, which can create a gap in their emotional connection and harm the level of commitment and quality of marital relationships. Excessive use of digital screens can make the partner feel that their spouse does not prioritize the marital relationship and does not value their emotions and needs, leading to lower marital satisfaction. According to Wang et al. (2017), *partner phubbing* has negative effects on the romantic relationships of married individuals. When individuals are phubbed by their romantic partners, the quality and satisfaction of the relationship will be lower, as feeling abandonment damages responsiveness and intimacy experienced in their relationship (Rezaei et al., 2023). Therefore, the negative effects of phubbing affect related constructs in couples' relationships, such as reduced relationship quality and accessibility to a spouse, decreased trust and intimacy, and increased negative emotions and jealousy (Frackowiak et al., 2022); cited in (Rezaei et al., 2023). However, these conditions can also occur with excessive use of other digital screens. For example, when an individual spends much time watching TV shows or checking other digital screens, they may have insomnia or miss out on educational or job opportunities, leading to conflicts in marriage due to this negligence and unresponsiveness by their spouse, which ultimately results in decreased marital satisfaction and commitment leading to reduced quality of their marital relationship. According to Ramirez's study (2008), life satisfaction, love, and commitment result from relationship maintenance behaviors. These factors will continue to promote the use of relationship maintenance behaviors. These findings align with Rusbult's Investment Model (1980), which focuses on the process of marital commitment as much as the conditions for relationship deterioration. According to this theory, commitment provides resources to enable individuals to shift their focus from short-term pleasure-seeking outcomes to long-term ones and reduces the temptation for infidelity. This model explains the increase in satisfaction and commitment in romantic relationships and behaviors of staying or leaving spouses.

Furthermore, potential benefits and rewards are compared with individual expectations regarding relationships. Individual satisfaction is achieved when results exceed standard levels, but dissatisfaction will follow when results fall below internal standards. Furthermore, in explaining these findings with *equity theory* based on reinforcement principles and economics, a general model for understanding interpersonal relationships based on fair or unfair distribution of resources is provided (Sprecher, 1986). It should be noted that the inputs (e.g., care and attention) that an individual invests in a relationship should be equal to the outputs they receive from interacting with their spouse; otherwise, they will perceive less satisfaction from the relationship, which can negatively impact their commitment to maintaining it thus affecting the quality of their marital relationship.

Lydon & Gagné (2014) argue that individuals committed to maintaining a relationship have such a level of self-identity with the relationship that they blur the lines between themselves, their spouse, and the relationship itself. Therefore, their internal motivation is so strong that they favor their partner and relationship by making sacrifices. According to Schoebi et al. (2015), the effects of these future-oriented behaviors go beyond just satisfaction with the relationship. This means that commitment based on maintaining relationships can slow the decline in relationship quality and encourage behaviors that repair relationships. In other words, when a person continuously considers the consequences for his wife and relationship when making important decisions and believes that investing in the relationship will pay off in the long run, He makes sacrifices in his relationship. He considers the act for the benefit of his wife as his benefit. Moreover, considering these actions create a positive emotional cycle between the couple, he will experience a high-quality relationship.

In general, multi-screen addiction due to maintenance-oriented relationship commitment in couples can predict marital relationship quality. Therefore, including assessments of maintenance-oriented relationship commitment and multi-screen addiction in pre-marital counseling programs for enhancing the future quality of couples' relationships is recommended. Additionally, conducting communication skills workshops focusing on teaching strategies for maintaining relationships and controlling dependency on screens is suggested for improving marital relationship quality. One limitation of this study is that the study population consisted of married teachers in Zanjan province. Therefore, Care should be taken when generalizing the results to other communities. Due to the use of self-report-based tools in this research, there may be ambiguity in interpreting

some statements and potential biases from participants. Therefore, future studies should aim to replicate this research among different demographics, including newlyweds or couples with and without children. It is recommended that gender-related differences and participant personality traits be explored with a larger sample size and that the research variables be studied through structured interviews and clinical observations.

## 5. Ethical Considerations

### Compliance with ethical guidelines

This article considered all ethical principles. The participants were informed about the research objective and its implementation phases. They were also assured about the confidentiality of their information and allowed to leave the study whenever they wished. Moreover, the research results would be available if they desired.

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### Authors' contributions

This article was an adaptation of Naser Abbasi's master's thesis in family counseling at the University of Kharazmi, supervised by Dr. Sedigheh Ahmadi and consulted by Dr. Kianoush Zaharakar.

### Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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