

## Predicting Marital Intimacy Based on Attachment Styles, Early Maladaptive Schemas, and Love Styles in Married Female Students

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### Article Info

#### Article type:

Original Research

#### How to cite this article:

Afshin, A., Pourmehdi Ganji, F., & Yaghobian, R. (2024). Predicting Marital Intimacy Based on Attachment Styles, Early Maladaptive Schemas, and Love Styles in Married Female Students. *Applied Family Therapy Journal*, 5(1), 108-114. <http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.ajtj.5.1.12>



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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to predict marital intimacy based on attachment styles, early maladaptive schemas, and love styles among married female students.

**Method:** The research employed a descriptive correlational design and included all married female students enrolled during the second semester of the academic year 2021. Out of these, 300 individuals were selected as the sample group and were studied. Research instruments included the Young Schema Questionnaire - Short Form (YSQ-SF), Hendrick's Love Styles Questionnaire, Collins and Read's Attachment Style Questionnaire (RAAS), and Thompson and Walker's (1983) Marital Intimacy Questionnaire. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data obtained from these instruments. Descriptive statistics included means and standard deviations, while multiple regression was used to examine the research hypotheses.

**Findings:** The regression results indicated that sacrificial love style ( $\beta = -0.14$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and the impaired limits schema ( $\beta = -0.16$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) negatively predict marital intimacy.

**Conclusions:** It can be concluded that the sacrificial love style and the impaired limits schema negatively explain marital intimacy.

**Keywords:** Marital intimacy, Attachment style, Early maladaptive schema, Love style.

### 1. Introduction

Marital intimacy is a highly important and complex aspect of a marital relationship. Marital intimacy is an emotional-cognitive and mental evaluation that an individual has of their marital relationship (Parsakia et al., 2023; Parsakia & Rostami, 2023). In other words, the term marital intimacy refers to a person's overall pleasure and

satisfaction with their close marital relationships (Kamali et al., 2020). When relationships between a wife and her family members are intimate, it creates a sense of peace in the family, which leads to a reduction in psychological issues and consequently a decrease in conflicts and disputes between the spouses, and improves performance in social life (Choi et al., 2020). However, divorce rates, the most reliable indicator of marital turmoil, suggest that marital

intimacy is not easily achievable (Tahir & Khan, 2021). Studies conducted in Iran have reported varying levels of marital intimacy among Iranian women, showing a spectrum from very high to low (Javadivala et al., 2019). Numerous efforts have been made to identify factors influencing marital satisfaction in long-term marriages (Teymouri et al., 2020).

One of the most important factors that has been focused on in recent years and affects marital intimacy is an individual's early experiences or the nature of their emotional relationship with their parents during childhood (Mardani et al., 2021). Khojasteh Mehr et al. (2014) stated that women with an ambivalent attachment style not only create grounds for conflict and dispute with their spouse but also lack problem-solving skills to resolve issues and prevent ongoing conflicts (Khojaste Mehr et al., 2015). On the other hand, it appears that the impact of attachment patterns on marital intimacy is based on the principle of the activity of the internal working model. Since these models have a cognitive-emotional concept, significant relationships can be expected between cognitive concepts such as early maladaptive schemas and adult attachment patterns (Wijaya & Widyaningsih, 2021).

On the other hand, schemas are the deepest cognitive structures (Pilkington et al., 2021). Schemas screen, encode, and evaluate incoming information based on their existing structure when faced with new stimuli, thus influencing individuals' attitudes toward themselves and the world around them. Young referred to those schemas that lead to the development and formation of psychological problems as early maladaptive schemas. Early maladaptive schemas (the deepest level of cognitive structures), consist of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral elements (Janovsky et al., 2020). Schemas related to marital relationships encompass fundamental beliefs about the nature of humans and how relationships function and are assumed to be relatively stable. Schemas guide spouses' behaviors within the framework of the marital relationship, influencing the interpretation of events through the activation of schemas, leading to damage in interpersonal relationships in the form of misunderstandings, distorted attitudes, incorrect assumptions, unrealistic goals, and expectations (Fernández-González et al., 2022). Schemas, due to their connection and impact on attachment styles, personality disorders, and mood disorders (Janovsky et al., 2020), can also have an indirect effect on marital relationships (Borges & Dell'Aglio, 2020). Research by Bakhtiari et al. (2019) showed that there is a mediating role of marital intimacy and

love styles in extramarital relationships based on attachment styles and early maladaptive schemas (Bakhtiari et al., 2019). Results from Seyfizadeh et al. (2019) also showed that early maladaptive schemas affect marital compatibility through fear of intimacy (Seyfizadeh et al., 2019).

Another important factor affecting marital intimacy, which interacts with attachment styles, is love styles. Love styles refer to how individuals define or express love (Morovati, 2021; Rafiezadeh & Zarehneyestanak, 2021). Individuals use a specific style and method to express love toward their spouse, influenced by their continuous mutual relationship with their spouse and their interpretation of their living environment. One of the most important theories that explain types of love is Lee's six-dimensional theory. Based on findings from the United States, Canada, and Britain, Lee describes six types of love (Ghaebi Panah & Keshavarzi Arshadi, 2020; Rafiezadeh & Zarehneyestanak, 2021): 1- Romantic love, 2- Companionate love, 3- Playful love, 4- Lustful love, 5- Pragmatic love, 6- Altruistic love (Amanelahi et al., 2012). Furthermore, attachment theory can be used as a structural basis for understanding adult love. Romantic love can be defined as an attachment process that follows the evolutionary process and similar outcomes of individual differences in infant-parent attachment (Parsakia et al., 2023; Shadanloo et al., 2023). According to attachment theory, cognitive systems known as active models have a profound impact on individuals' approaches to love. Active models can include positive or negative views of oneself and others. People with secure attachments have active models that increase their chances of experiencing mature love and maintaining happiness and health (Parsakia et al., 2023; Shadanloo et al., 2023). The research by Amanelahi et al. (2012) also showed that romantic attachment styles are related to marital satisfaction (Amanelahi et al., 2012).

Based on what has been discussed, previous research has shown the role of attachment styles, early maladaptive schemas, and love styles on marital intimacy separately, but there is a need for a more comprehensive study that examines the combined role of all these factors on marital intimacy. Therefore, the present research aims to provide a causal model to examine the relationship between attachment styles, early maladaptive schemas, and love styles on the level of marital intimacy.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study design and Participant

This study is fundamental in terms of its objectives and correlational in terms of methodology. The population of this research consisted of all married female students at the Islamic Azad University, North Tehran Branch, during the second semester of the academic year 2021. According to university records, the total population was about 1000 individuals. Based on the sample size determination table by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a sample of 278 was deemed appropriate, but considering the need for a minimum of 300 questionnaires for model execution, the researcher decided on a sample size of 300. Therefore, the current study sample includes 300 individuals. The sampling method used was convenience sampling.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Early Maladaptive Schemas

This questionnaire consists of 75 questions and is designed to assess 15 cognitive early maladaptive schemas including emotional deprivation, abandonment / instability, mistrust/abuse, social isolation / alienation, defectiveness / shame, failure, dependence / incompetence, vulnerability to harm or illness, enmeshment/undeveloped self, subjugation, self-sacrifice, emotional inhibition, unrelenting standards / hypercriticalness, entitlement / grandiosity, and insufficient self-control/self-discipline. Each of the 75 statements is scored on a 6-point Likert scale. A person's score for each schema is obtained by summing the scores of the questions pertaining to that schema. A higher score indicates a more prominent presence of a maladaptive schema. This questionnaire was designed by Young and Brown, and the long form initially contained 205 questions. In 1998, a short form was created to facilitate research use. In the study by Wilburn et al., all fifteen subscales of the short form questionnaire showed good to excellent internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha for all schemas was calculated (0.76 to 0.93). In study by Yousefi et al. (2015) on a non-clinical sample, the internal reliability of this questionnaire was calculated using Cronbach's alpha at 0.88, with schema domain coefficients ranging from 0.55 to 0.89 (Heydari & Saedi, 2020). In the current research, the reliability of the questionnaire was determined using Cronbach's alpha method. Alpha coefficients for the various subscales ranged

from 0.74 to 0.89, and the total questionnaire score reliability was 0.81.

#### 2.2.2. Love Styles

The original form of this questionnaire was developed by Hendrick and Hendrick (1986) based on Lee's model of love and consists of 42 items. It is scored on a 4-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) and measures attitudes towards love across six dimensions: altruistic love (questions 1-7), playful love (questions 8-14), lustful love (questions 15-21), pragmatic love (questions 22-28), companionate love (questions 29-35), and romantic love (questions 36-42) (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986). The factor structure of this questionnaire in the Iranian population was examined and confirmed by Bayat (2008). Cronbach's alpha values for the love factors altruistic, playful, lustful, pragmatic, companionate, and romantic were respectively found to be 0.69, 0.77, 0.70, 0.67, 0.66, and 0.77 (Heydari & Saedi, 2020). In the current study, reliability was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, resulting in coefficients for altruistic, playful, lustful, pragmatic, companionate, and romantic love of 0.736, 0.720, 0.714, 0.805, 0.744, and 0.624, respectively.

#### 2.2.3. Attachment Styles

Collins and Read developed the RAAS in 1990. Initially, the questionnaire had 21 items, later reduced to 18. This scale involves self-assessment of relationship-building skills and self-descriptive ways of forming attachment bonds and is measured using a 5-point Likert scale (Collins & Read, 1990). Collins and Read (1990) demonstrated that the subscales of closeness, dependency, and anxiety remained stable over a period of 2 months and even up to 8 months, and reported Cronbach's alpha for each subscale across three student samples (Collins & Read, 1990).

#### 2.2.4. Marital Intimacy

This is a 17-item tool designed to measure affection and intimacy. It was evaluated by Etemadi for its validity. The scale was translated by Sanaei (2000). To determine content and face validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by 15 counseling professors and 15 couples, and its validity was confirmed (Etemadi, 2005). Also, Khazaei (2007) in their master's thesis calculated a correlation coefficient of 82% between this questionnaire and the Bagarozzi questionnaire, which was significant at the 0.01 level, indicating criterion

validity for this scale. Etemadi in a doctoral thesis administered it to 100 randomly selected couples in Isfahan, achieving a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.96 for the entire scale, indicating acceptable reliability. Etemadi and colleagues (2006) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.96 for the scale. Additionally, convergent validity of the test was obtained by administering it concurrently with the Bagarozzi intimacy questionnaire, resulting in a coefficient of 0.82 (Javadivala et al., 2019; Kamali et al., 2020). Reliability of this questionnaire was also determined by the researcher using Cronbach's alpha, achieving a value of 0.89.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

For data analysis, descriptive and inferential statistics were used appropriately to present the results. Descriptive statistical indices included means and standard deviations.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics for the Study Variables*

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum Score	Maximum Score
Marital Intimacy	60.79	14.60	31	124
Secure Attachment Style	13.59	2.39	6	20
Avoidant Attachment Style	14.08	2.58	8	22
Ambivalent Attachment Style	12.61	3.26	6	24
Altruistic Love Style	25.44	4.43	12	35
Playful Love Style	19.54	3.01	12	29
Lustful Love Style	26.27	4.49	11	35
Pragmatic Love Style	26.54	4.42	12	35
Companionate Love Style	26.82	4.99	13	35
Romantic Love Style	20.05	4.25	7	33
Rejection and Abandonment	62.30	14.47	25	95
Impaired Autonomy and Performance	45.08	10.01	20	76
Impaired Limits	30.71	7.09	11	51
Directedness	30.38	8.77	10	55
Hyper-vigilance	29.76	10.80	13	58

As indicated in Table 1, the mean for marital intimacy was 60.79 with a standard deviation of 14.60. Among the attachment styles, the avoidant attachment style showed the highest mean of 14.08 with a standard deviation of 2.58. Among the love styles, the companionate love style had the highest mean (26.82) and standard deviation (4.99). In early

maladaptive schemas, the mean and standard deviation for the rejection and abandonment domain were 62.3 and 14.47, respectively; impaired autonomy and performance were 45.08 and 10.01; impaired limits were 30.71 and 7.09; directedness was 30.38 and 8.77; and hyper-vigilance was 29.76 and 10.80.

### 3. Findings and Results

Out of the 300 research sample participants, 137 individuals (46%) were in the age group up to 25 years, 96 individuals (32%) were in the age group 26 to 30 years, 38 individuals (12%) were in the age group 31 to 35 years, 15 individuals (5%) were in the age group 36 to 40 years, and 6 individuals (2%) were aged 41 years and older. Among the 300 research participants, 6 individuals (2%) held a diploma, 208 individuals (69.3%) had a bachelor's degree, and 80 individuals (26.7%) had a master's degree or higher.

maladaptive schemas, the mean and standard deviation for the rejection and abandonment domain were 62.3 and 14.47, respectively; impaired autonomy and performance were 45.08 and 10.01; impaired limits were 30.71 and 7.09; directedness was 30.38 and 8.77; and hyper-vigilance was 29.76 and 10.80.

**Table 2**

*Regression Analysis of Marital Intimacy on Attachment Styles, Cognitive Schemas, and Love Styles*

Variable	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F	Beta	t	p	Tolerance	VIF (Variance Inflation Factor)	Durbin Watson
Constant	0.30	0.09	0.05	2.12	-	6.23	0.0001	-	-	2.05
Secure Attachment	-	-	-	-	0.06	1.11	0.26	0.89	1.12	-
Avoidant Attachment	-	-	-	-	0.07	1.27	0.20	0.91	1.09	-
Ambivalent/Anxious Attachment	-	-	-	-	0.04	0.78	0.43	0.89	1.11	-
Altruistic Love Style	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.01	0.97	1.03	-
					0.14	2.56				
Playful Love Style	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.31	0.94	1.05	-
					0.05	1.00				
Lustful Love Style	-	-	-	-	0.03	0.59	0.55	0.94	1.06	-
Pragmatic Love Style	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.61	0.93	1.07	-
					0.03	0.50				
Companionate Love Style	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.30	0.83	1.19	-
					0.06	1.03				
Romantic Love Style	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.11	0.81	1.22	-
					0.09	1.56				
Rejection and Abandonment	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.23	0.91	1.08	-
					0.07	1.18				
Impaired Autonomy	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.94	0.88	1.12	-
					0.01	0.06				
Impaired Limits	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.01	0.82	1.20	-
					0.16	2.38				
Directedness	-	-	-	-	0.01	0.08	0.93	0.88	1.12	-
Hyper-vigilance	-	-	-	-	0.03	0.49	0.61	0.80	1.23	-

Using the Enter method, a significant model emerged ( $R^2 = 0.09$ ,  $F = 2.12$ ), explaining 9% of the variance. Only the altruistic love style and impaired limits schema were significant predictors of marital intimacy, negatively predicting marital intimacy. Tolerance values were less than 0.1, and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for each of the predictor variables were not greater than 10. Tolerance values less than 0.1 and VIF values greater than 10 indicate multicollinearity. Another assumption checked in regression is the independence of residuals (the difference between actual values and values predicted by the regression equation). If the assumption of independence of residuals is violated and residuals are correlated, regression may not be used. The Durbin-Watson test was used to check for independence of residuals, which ranged from 1.5 to 2.5, suggesting that residuals are independent.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study indicated that the altruistic love style and the impaired limits schema negatively predict marital intimacy. These findings are consistent with prior studies (Amanelahi et al., 2012; Bakhtiari et al., 2019; Khojaste Mehr et al., 2015; Seyfizadeh et al., 2019).

In explaining the obtained results, it should be noted that individuals with a secure attachment style are trustworthy, stable, and use more logical methods in dealing with life's issues. These individuals are less likely to act emotionally in matters of love as they have received adequate love and affection in a logical and correct manner from their parents during childhood. Consequently, the lustful love style, characterized by intense emotions, is less developed in these individuals, and they tend to use more rational love styles such as the pragmatic style (Armstrong & Mellor, 2016). Being securely attached, which involves traits like having trust in interpersonal relationships, personality stability, logical interpersonal behavior, and a rational love style, also encompasses a rich source of tools necessary for achieving marital intimacy. On the other hand, securely attached individuals have grown up in families where emotional needs were sufficiently met with clear discipline, preventing the formation of maladaptive schemas. In contrast, ambivalently attached individuals, characterized by anxiety about rejection, fear in interpersonal relationships, and distrust, may negatively impact marital intimacy through the lustful love style, which is associated with intense emotional states, suspicion, jealousy, and rumination, and a strong fear of rejection (Pilkington et al., 2021). Alongside the lustful love style, schemas in the domain of rejection, typical of cold

and rejecting families (indeed, those that develop an ambivalent attachment style), can also negatively affect marital intimacy and significantly reduce it.

## 5. Suggestions and Limitations

This study was conducted on married female students; therefore, caution should be exercised in generalizing the results to other populations (men or non-student women). Since the sampling method in this research was convenience sampling, generalizations should be made cautiously. The data collection tool in this study was a self-report questionnaire. Like similar studies, this research includes limitations associated with self-report questionnaires. This research was conducted on students in Tehran; therefore, caution should be exercised in generalizing the results to communities and cities with different cultures. Given the research findings regarding the relationship between love styles and marital intimacy, it is recommended to prepare brochures and catalogs for families and make them available in premarital counseling sessions to improve and enhance desirable love styles. In light of the research findings on the relationship between love styles and marital intimacy, it is suggested that educational workshops be designed and conducted for families dealing with marital issues. Future researchers are advised to consider the potential impact of cultural factors on the outcomes obtained and to conduct this research in other cities with similar and dissimilar cultures to more accurately verify the validity of the results.

## Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

## Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

## Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

## Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

## Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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