Comparison of Difficulty in Emotion Regulation, Emotional Literacy, and Sexual Knowledge and Attitudes in Married Female Students with Emotional Divorce Experience and Other Married Female Students

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A r t i c l e   I n f o

A B S T R A C T

Emotional divorce is a condition in which spouses, despite living together, experience no emotional exchange or feelings toward each other. This phenomenon is considered one of the fundamental causes of social and familial dysfunctions. The present study aimed to examine and compare difficulty in emotion regulation, emotional literacy, and sexual knowledge and attitudes among married female students who have experienced emotional divorce and other married female students. This research employed a causal–comparative design. The statistical population included all married students of Islamic Azad University, Lahijan Branch, during the 2024–2025 academic year. The population size was 8,543 individuals. The sample consisted of 90 students with emotional divorce experience and 90 students without such experience, selected through convenience sampling. The instruments used included the Gottman Emotional Divorce Questionnaire (2008), the Iranian Family Psychological Functioning Scale (2012), the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale by Gratz (2004), and the Sexual Knowledge and Attitudes Scale by Farjina et al. (2014). Data were analyzed at two levels: descriptive statistics (dispersion indices) and inferential statistics (univariate and multivariate analysis of variance) using SPSS version 26. The results indicated that students with emotional divorce experience had greater difficulty in emotion regulation and lower levels of emotional literacy as well as sexual knowledge and attitudes ($p < .05$). Difficulty in emotion regulation and deficiencies in emotional literacy and sexual knowledge are significant contributing factors to emotional divorce. Providing comprehensive educational and psychological interventions focused on emotion regulation, emotional literacy, and sexual education can improve marital relationship quality and reduce the consequences of emotional divorce.

Keywords: *emotional divorce, sexual knowledge and attitudes, difficulty in emotion regulation, emotional literacy.*

1.   Introduction

Emotional divorce has emerged as a subtle yet pervasive form of marital dissolution in which partners remain legally and physically together while their emotional bond is severely weakened or virtually absent (Amato, 2000; Sadeghzadeh et al., 2023). Rather than manifesting in explicit separation or legal proceedings, emotional divorce is characterized by chronic indifference, disengagement, and loss of intimacy, which can persist for years before any formal action is taken, if it occurs at all (Akbari et al., 2020; Jahanbakhshie et al., 2025). Research suggests that the psychosocial consequences of marital breakdown—whether legal or emotional—extend well beyond the couple, contributing to mental health problems, reduced well-being, impaired parenting, and intergenerational transmission of relationship difficulties (Amato, 2000; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Recent studies in Middle Eastern and Iranian contexts indicate that emotional divorce is increasingly reported among married women, and is associated with heightened psychological distress, diminished life satisfaction, and a sense of entrapment within unsatisfying relationships (Al-Shahrani & Hammad, 2023; Sadeghzadeh et al., 2023; Shahi & Eskandari, 2025). These findings underscore the need to examine the psychological mechanisms that differentiate couples who remain emotionally connected from those who slide into emotional disengagement, particularly among younger, educated populations such as married university students.

Theoretical frameworks of marital functioning emphasize that emotional climate, conflict patterns, and cognitive appraisals collectively shape how couples adapt to relational stress (Grych & Fincham, 1990). In the cognitive–contextual model, repeated exposure to unresolved conflict and negative emotional exchanges alters partners' interpretations of the relationship, gradually eroding trust, closeness, and perceived security (Grych & Fincham, 1990). In this perspective, emotional divorce can be understood as an advanced stage of marital degradation in which affection and positive engagement are replaced by avoidance, hostility, or emotional numbness (Akbari et al., 2020; Amato, 2000). Iranian research has shown that emotional divorce is closely related to maladaptive schemas, poor emotion regulation, and dysfunctional interaction patterns, suggesting that individual psychological vulnerabilities and interpersonal processes jointly contribute to this phenomenon (Akbari et al., 2020; Jahanbakhshie et al., 2025; Mousavi Khorrami et al., 2020). Conceptualizing emotional divorce as a dynamic

outcome of intra- and interpersonal factors provides a useful framework for investigating specific skills and capacities—such as emotion regulation, emotional literacy, and sexual knowledge and attitudes—that may distinguish women who experience emotional divorce from those who remain emotionally engaged in their marriages.

One of the central constructs in understanding marital functioning is emotional intelligence, broadly defined as the capacity to perceive, understand, use, and manage emotions in oneself and others (Goleman, 1995). Within this broader construct, emotional literacy refers more specifically to the ability to identify, label, interpret, and express emotions in socially and relationally appropriate ways (Goleman, 1995; Jardine et al., 2022). Meta-analytic evidence indicates that individuals with higher emotional intelligence tend to experience greater romantic relationship satisfaction, more constructive conflict resolution, and stronger attachment security (Jardine et al., 2022). In Iranian samples, emotional intelligence and communication skills have been shown to predict better marital functioning, including higher marital satisfaction and improved quality of life among women (Hadian & Amini, 2019; Shareh & Foshtanqi, 2019). Specifically, emotional literacy has been identified as a protective factor against emotional divorce, such that spouses who are better able to understand and articulate their feelings, respond empathically to their partner, and regulate emotional exchanges are less likely to withdraw or disengage (Alaghband et al., 2019). Models developed in Iran demonstrate that emotional literacy, along with coping styles and quality of life, can predict emotional divorce both directly and indirectly through emotion regulation processes (Akbari et al., 2020; Alaghband et al., 2019). These findings suggest that deficits in emotional literacy may play a significant role in the emergence and maintenance of emotional divorce, particularly in cultural contexts where open emotional expression within marriage may already be constrained by social norms.

Emotion regulation constitutes another key mechanism linking individual psychological functioning to relationship outcomes. Gratz and Roemer conceptualized emotion regulation as a multidimensional construct encompassing awareness, understanding, acceptance of emotions, the ability to engage in goal-directed behavior and control impulses when distressed, and access to effective regulation strategies (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Difficulties in emotion regulation have been consistently associated with a range of psychopathological symptoms, including depression, anxiety, and interpersonal problems (Gratz & Roemer,

2004). In the context of intimate relationships, recent evidence shows that emotion regulation difficulties mediate the association between relationship satisfaction and trajectories of depressive symptoms among couples receiving couple therapy, underscoring their role in both individual and relational adjustment (Morgan et al., 2024). Clinical and quasi-experimental studies further indicate that emotion-focused couple interventions and emotion regulation training can improve marital intimacy, reduce anger rumination, and enhance regulation capacities in women dealing with significant relational stressors such as spousal infidelity or impending divorce (Payamani et al., 2024; Teymouri et al., 2020). For example, emotion regulation training and Gottman-based couple therapy have both been shown to improve emotional regulation among women facing divorce-related challenges, suggesting that these skills are modifiable and clinically relevant (Payamani et al., 2024). In the domain of emotional divorce, studies in Iranian samples have found that difficulties in emotion regulation, especially in controlling impulsive reactions and employing adaptive strategies, significantly predict higher levels of emotional disengagement between spouses (Akbari et al., 2020; Mousavi Khorrami et al., 2020). It is therefore plausible that married women who experience emotional divorce exhibit more pronounced difficulties in emotion regulation compared with their counterparts in more emotionally intact marriages.

Sexual functioning, sexual knowledge, and sexual attitudes represent another crucial layer of marital dynamics. Classic work by Masters and Johnson showed that sexual response is shaped by an interplay of physiological processes, psychological factors, and relational context, highlighting the importance of communication, mutual responsiveness, and accurate knowledge in healthy sexual functioning (Masters & Johnson, 1966). Contemporary research in conservative cultural settings such as Saudi Arabia indicates that sexual desire, sexual satisfaction, and overall relationship satisfaction are tightly intertwined, and that deficits in any of these dimensions can undermine marital well-being (Attaky et al., 2021). In Iranian samples, higher sexual knowledge and more flexible, positive sexual attitudes have been associated with lower levels of emotional divorce, whereas ignorance, misconceptions, and restrictive beliefs about sexuality are linked to emotional distance and dissatisfaction (Momeni & Azadi-Fard, 2015). Emotional divorce appears to be closely related to breakdowns in sexual intimacy, often driven by unresolved emotional tensions, shame, inadequate knowledge, or rigid attitudes toward

sexual roles and behavior (Momeni & Azadi-Fard, 2015; Mousavi Khorrami et al., 2020). At the same time, interventions targeting emotional education and relational skills, such as the EMOVERE program for young couples, have demonstrated improvements in emotional understanding, communication, and relationship quality, which can indirectly support healthy sexual functioning (Mónaco et al., 2021). These findings collectively suggest that sexual knowledge and attitudes are integral to maintaining emotional connection in marriage, and that deficits in these domains may be particularly salient among women who report emotional divorce.

Several recent studies underscore the multifaceted nature of emotional divorce, emphasizing the interplay between structural, emotional, and sexual dimensions of marital life. For instance, research on Iranian couples has shown that early maladaptive schemas, attachment styles, and sexual function components predict emotional divorce, with emotional intelligence acting as a significant mediator (Akbari et al., 2020; Mousavi Khorrami et al., 2020). Other work has highlighted the role of love styles, resilience, social support, and marital commitment, indicating that couples who maintain higher levels of commitment and intimacy despite structural or cultural stressors are less likely to experience emotional divorce (Jahanbakhshie et al., 2025; Shahi & Eskandari, 2025). During the COVID-19 pandemic, descriptive studies in Iran reported increased rates of emotional divorce, linked to heightened stress, economic pressures, and constrained coping resources, again pointing to the importance of adaptive emotional and relational capacities (Sadeghzadeh et al., 2023). In parallel, evidence from Saudi Arabia indicates that emotional divorce is associated with poorer mental health outcomes among married women, including elevated depression and anxiety symptoms (Al-Shahrani & Hammad, 2023). Taken together, these findings suggest that emotional divorce is not merely a private relational issue but a public mental health concern that may be especially pronounced for women in sociocultural contexts where divorce carries significant stigma and where access to relational education remains limited.

Despite growing interest in emotional divorce, important gaps remain in the literature. First, most studies have focused on general married populations or clinical samples, with relatively little attention to married university students—a group that occupies a unique developmental and social position, juggling academic demands, emerging adult identities, and marital responsibilities (Momeni & Azadi-

Fard, 2015; Shareh & Foshtanqi, 2019). Second, although several Iranian studies have examined predictors of emotional divorce using cross-sectional or structural models, few have directly compared psychological characteristics between women with and without emotional divorce within the same institutional and cultural context (Akbari et al., 2020; Alaghband et al., 2019; Mousavi Khorrami et al., 2020). Third, the combined role of difficulty in emotion regulation, emotional literacy, and sexual knowledge and attitudes has rarely been tested simultaneously, even though theoretical and empirical work strongly suggests that these domains are interrelated and jointly shape marital quality (Goleman, 1995; Gratz & Roemer, 2004; Jardine et al., 2022; Masters & Johnson, 1966). Furthermore, recent advances in couple-based interventions emphasize the importance of targeting emotion regulation skills, enhancing emotional literacy, and providing structured sexual education to improve relationship satisfaction and reduce psychological distress, yet empirical data linking these constructs to emotional divorce in young married women remain limited (Alvarez et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2024; Payamani et al., 2024; Teymouri et al., 2020).

Given the documented associations between emotional intelligence, emotion regulation, sexual functioning, and marital quality, and the emerging evidence that these factors may protect against emotional divorce or exacerbate its risk, there is a clear need for studies that concurrently examine these variables in vulnerable populations such as married female students (Attaky et al., 2021; Hadian & Amini, 2019; Mónaco et al., 2021; Shareh & Foshtanqi, 2019). Such research can provide a more nuanced understanding of how personal emotional competencies and sexual knowledge interact with broader relational and contextual factors to influence the likelihood of emotional divorce. It can also inform the design of preventive and therapeutic interventions tailored to the needs of young married women in university settings, where access to counseling and psychoeducational programs may be more feasible than in the general community (Jahanbakhshie et al., 2025; Payamani et al., 2024). Therefore, the aim of the present study was to compare difficulty in emotion regulation, emotional literacy, and sexual knowledge and attitudes between married female students with emotional divorce experience and other married female students.

2.   Methods and Materials

2.1.   Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a causal–comparative research design, and data collection was carried out in the field using questionnaires. The statistical population consisted of all married students of Islamic Azad University, Lahijan Branch, during the 2024–2025 academic year. To estimate the sample size, based on Delavar's recommendation that a minimum of 30 participants is required for causal–comparative studies, a sample size of 90 participants per group was determined. Sampling was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, 600 married students from Islamic Azad University, Lahijan Branch, were selected through convenience sampling, and the Gottman Emotional Divorce Questionnaire was administered to them. After collecting the questionnaires and examining the scores, 90 students who obtained high scores on the emotional divorce questionnaire were selected as the emotional-divorce group. Additionally, from among the students who obtained low scores on the questionnaire, 90 were selected as the group without emotional divorce experience.

2.2.   Measures

Gottman Emotional Divorce Questionnaire (2008; EDQ): The Gottman Emotional Divorce Questionnaire was developed in 2008 by John Gottman and colleagues. This questionnaire typically contains 24 items, and respondents indicate their agreement or disagreement on a 5-point Likert scale (from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). The main dimensions include reduced emotional intimacy (feeling coldness or disinterest toward the spouse), avoidance of positive interactions (reduced conversation, humor, and companionship), increased unresolved conflicts (issues remaining without resolution), emotional indifference (feelings of meaninglessness or emptiness in the relationship), and psychological withdrawal (reduced mutual support, avoidance of affection). The item scores are summed to yield a total score ranging from a minimum of 24 to a maximum of 120 (for the 24-item version). Higher scores indicate higher levels of emotional divorce. In some versions, based on cutoff scores, couples are classified into three levels: low (0–40): relatively stable relationship without serious signs of emotional alienation; moderate (41–80): clear signs of emotional distancing requiring counseling intervention; and high (81–120): severe emotional divorce

with a high likelihood of legal or psychological separation. In the original version, Cronbach's alpha ranged from .87 to .91, indicating very good internal consistency. In retest studies, reliability coefficients ranged from .79 to .84 over intervals of 2–4 weeks. In the study by Mami and Asgari, Cronbach's alpha was reported as 83%. Content validity has also been reported as satisfactory by experts. In the present study, the overall alpha coefficient was .70.

Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (Gratz & Roemer, 2004; DERS): The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale was developed in 2004 by Gratz and Roemer and is one of the most widely used self-report instruments for assessing emotional regulation difficulties in both clinical and non-clinical settings. This scale is based on multidimensional theoretical models of emotion regulation and measures not only a person's ability to control and manage emotions but also various dimensions of difficulty in emotional regulation. The questionnaire includes 36 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = almost never to 5 = almost always). The scale contains six subscales: nonacceptance of emotional responses, difficulty engaging in goal-directed behavior when experiencing strong emotions, impulse control difficulties, lack of emotional awareness, limited access to effective emotion regulation strategies, and difficulty in understanding and identifying emotions. The total score is obtained by summing all items, with a range of 36 to 180. Higher scores indicate greater difficulty in emotion regulation. Scores below 80 typically indicate adequate emotion regulation, scores between 81 and 130 indicate moderate difficulties, and scores above 131 indicate severe difficulties. The validity of this instrument has been examined in numerous studies. In the original study by Gratz and Roemer, construct validity was confirmed through confirmatory factor analysis, supporting the six-factor structure of the scale. Convergent validity was demonstrated through positive and significant correlations with similar instruments, such as the Garnefski Emotion Regulation Questionnaire. Criterion validity has also been supported by associations between higher scores and anxiety disorders, depression, borderline personality disorder, and impulsivity-related problems. In Iran, Aminian translated and standardized the Persian version of the questionnaire. To assess criterion validity, the correlation between the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale and Zuckerman's Sensation Seeking Scale was calculated, resulting in a correlation coefficient of .26 (p = .043), indicating acceptable validity. Reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) reported in international and Iranian studies have been

high. In Gratz and Roemer's study, the total alpha coefficient was .93, with subscale alphas ranging from .80 to .89. Test–retest reliability over a 4–8-week interval was reported as .88. In Aminian's study, the reliability of the Persian version using Cronbach's alpha and split-half methods was reported as .86 and .80, respectively. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was .85.

Iranian Family Psychological Functioning Scale (2012; IFPFS): The Iranian Family Psychological Functioning Scale is an indigenous instrument designed to assess various dimensions of family functioning in psychological and social domains. Developed and standardized by Iranian researchers using theoretical foundations and field studies, the scale evaluates dimensions such as intimacy, cohesion, conflict resolution, emotional support, behavioral control, responsibility, and emotional literacy. The scale typically contains approximately 90 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"), with higher scores indicating more desirable family functioning. In the present study, only the emotional literacy component of this scale was used. This component refers to the ability of family members to recognize, express, understand, and manage their own emotions and those of other members, reflecting the emotional health and awareness of family interactions. Content and construct validity of the scale have been confirmed through expert evaluations and factor analysis. The multidimensional structure and appropriate factor loadings support the scale's construct validity. Convergent validity has also been reported through significant correlations with similar instruments. Reliability has been established through Cronbach's alpha and test–retest methods, with coefficients ranging from .85 to .92 for the total scale and above .80 for the emotional literacy component, indicating good internal consistency and stability. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for the emotional literacy component was .74.

Sexual Knowledge and Attitudes Scale (Farjina et al., 2014; SKAS): The Sexual Knowledge and Attitudes Scale was developed by Farjina and colleagues and is a validated instrument for assessing both sexual knowledge and attitudes. Based on theories from health psychology and sexual education, the scale aims to evaluate individuals' knowledge regarding sexual functioning, physiology, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, and attitudes reflecting values, beliefs, and sexual norms. The scale typically includes two separate sections: a sexual knowledge section, usually consisting of multiple-choice or true/false items, and a sexual attitudes section, consisting of items

rated on a Likert scale (from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). Higher scores in the knowledge section indicate greater sexual awareness, whereas higher scores in the attitude section indicate more open and positive attitudes toward sexual issues; lower scores reflect more traditional or restrictive attitudes. Content validity has been confirmed by experts in sexual education, psychology, and health, demonstrating that the items adequately cover different aspects of sexual knowledge and attitudes. Construct validity has been assessed using confirmatory factor analysis, supporting the two-factor structure (knowledge and attitudes). Reliability has been established through Cronbach's alpha and test–retest methods, with coefficients above .80 for both sections, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. In Iran, the translated and localized version has been used in several studies, with face and content validity confirmed by specialists and reliability coefficients ranging from .78 to .85. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was .74.

2.3. Data analysis

Data were analyzed at two levels: descriptive statistics (dispersion indices) and inferential statistics (univariate and multivariate analysis of variance) using SPSS version 26.

3. Findings and Results

Table 1 presents the results of the descriptive indices examining the dispersion indices (mean and standard deviation) of the variables difficulty in emotion regulation, emotional literacy, and sexual knowledge and attitudes in the two groups of married female students with emotional divorce experience and other married female students. According to the information in the table, the mean and standard deviation of difficulty in emotion regulation in married female students with emotional divorce experience were 118.50 ± 11.056, respectively. The mean and standard deviation of difficulty in emotion regulation in the other married female students were 80.02 ± 10.645, respectively. According to the information in the table, the mean and standard deviation of emotional literacy in married female students with emotional divorce experience were 18.33 ± 2.976, respectively. The mean and standard deviation of emotional literacy in the other married female students were 30.12 ± 3.246, respectively.

According to the information in the table, the mean and standard deviation of sexual knowledge and attitudes in married female students with emotional divorce experience were 40.54 ± 5.929, respectively. The mean and standard deviation of sexual knowledge and attitudes in the other married female students were 61.70 ± 6.432, respectively. In addition, the mean and standard deviation of the components of knowledge and attitudes in the group of married female students with emotional divorce experience were 20.40 ± 2.276 and 20.24 ± 3.952, respectively. The mean and standard deviation of the components of knowledge and attitudes in the group of other married female students were 30.64 ± 4.628 and 21.07 ± 4.158, respectively.

Table 1

Descriptive Indices Related to Difficulty in Emotion Regulation, Emotional Literacy, and Sexual Knowledge and Attitudes

Variable	Group	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Difficulty in emotion regulation	With emotional divorce experience	90	86	141	118.50	11.056
Difficulty in emotion regulation	Other students	90	54	100	80.02	10.645
Emotional literacy	With emotional divorce experience	90	11	25	18.33	2.976
Emotional literacy	Other students	90	22	39	30.12	3.346
Sexual knowledge and attitudes	With emotional divorce experience	90	27	55	40.54	5.929
Knowledge	With emotional divorce experience	90	10	31	20.40	4.276
Attitudes	With emotional divorce experience	90	11	32	20.24	3.952
Sexual knowledge and attitudes	Other students	90	46	75	61.70	6.432
Knowledge	Other students	90	21	41	30.64	4.628
Attitudes	Other students	90	20	40	21.07	4.158

To test the research hypotheses, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used, and its assumptions were first examined. To assess the normality of the data distribution, skewness and kurtosis were used.

Table 2

Results of the Kolmogorov–Smirnov Test to Examine the Normality of the Data

Group	Variable	N	Statistic	Sig.	Status
With emotional divorce experience	Difficulty in emotion regulation	90	0.043	0.200	Normal
With emotional divorce experience	Emotional literacy	90	0.066	0.200	Normal
With emotional divorce experience	Sexual knowledge and attitudes	90	0.059	0.200	Normal
Other students	Difficulty in emotion regulation	90	0.053	0.200	Normal
Other students	Emotional literacy	90	0.054	0.200	Normal
Other students	Sexual knowledge and attitudes	90	0.076	0.200	Normal

The results of this examination showed that all data followed a normal distribution (between +2 and −2). In addition, to examine the normality of the dependent variables (emotional literacy, sexual knowledge and attitudes, and difficulty in emotion regulation) in the groups of married female students with emotional divorce experience and other married female students, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was used to ensure the normality of the data. When examining normality, the null hypothesis was that the distribution of the data is normal at the 5% error level. Therefore, if the test statistic yielded a significance level greater than or equal to .05, there would be no reason to reject the null hypothesis of normality, and the distribution of the data would be considered normal.

Table 3

Correlation Coefficients Between the Dependent Variables (Sexual Knowledge and Attitudes, Difficulty in Emotion Regulation, Emotional Literacy) in Married Female Students With Emotional Divorce Experience and Other Married Female Students (n = 180)

Variables	Difficulty in emotion regulation	Emotional literacy	Sexual knowledge and attitudes
Difficulty in emotion regulation	1		
Emotional literacy	−0.764**	1	
Sexual knowledge and attitudes	−0.759**	0.791**	1

**p < .01.

Table 3 examines the correlations between the dependent variables (sexual knowledge and attitudes, difficulty in emotion regulation, and emotional literacy) in married female students with emotional divorce experience and other married female students at the significance level of $p < .01$. The Pearson correlation coefficients used to examine the relationships between the dependent variables showed that there was a strong negative relationship between difficulty in emotion regulation and emotional literacy ($r = −0.764$). Sexual knowledge and attitudes also showed a strong positive relationship with emotional literacy ($r = 0.791$). Finally, sexual knowledge and attitudes had a strong negative relationship with difficulty in emotion regulation ($r = −0.759$). These results indicate that the dependent variables in the present study have moderate to high correlations, and thus the necessary condition for conducting multivariate analysis of variance is satisfied.

Box's test of the variance–covariance matrix for equality of the variances of the dependent variables (difficulty in emotion regulation, emotional literacy, and sexual knowledge and attitudes) across the groups of married female students with emotional divorce experience and other married female students showed that the assumption of homogeneity of the covariance matrices was not rejected. Therefore, the equality of the variances of the dependent variables (difficulty in emotion regulation, emotional literacy, and sexual knowledge and attitudes) in the groups of married female students with emotional divorce experience and other married female students was established, and as a result the execution of MANOVA was permissible. The results of Levene's test are presented in Table (4-11). The results of Levene's test to examine the assumption of equality of variances showed that the variables "difficulty in emotion regulation" (F = 0.030, sig = 0.862), "emotional literacy" (F = 1.854, sig = 0.175), and "sexual knowledge and attitudes" (F = 0.774, sig = 0.380) had homogeneous variances ($p > .05$), and thus the assumption of analysis of variance for these variables was met.

Table 4

Between-Group Results From Multivariate Analysis of Variance for Difficulty in Emotion Regulation, Emotional Literacy, and Sexual Knowledge and Attitudes in Married Female Students With Emotional Divorce Experience and Other Married Female Students

Source	Variable	SS	df	MS	F	p	Partial η²
Between groups	Difficulty in emotion regulation	66614.635	1	66614.635	565.574	0.000	0.761
Error	Difficulty in emotion regulation	20965.268	178	117.782			
Between groups	Emotional literacy	6252.896	1	6252.896	623.783	0.000	0.778
Error	Emotional literacy	1784.299	178	10.024			
Between groups	Sexual knowledge and attitudes	20157.856	1	20157.856	526.850	0.000	0.747
Error	Sexual knowledge and attitudes	6810.470	178	38.261			

The results in Table 4 indicate that there is a significant difference between married female students with emotional divorce experience and other married female students in the variable difficulty in emotion regulation. Therefore, the main hypothesis of the study, namely that there is a significant difference in difficulty in emotion regulation, emotional literacy, and sexual knowledge and attitudes between married female students with emotional divorce experience and other married female students, was confirmed at the 99% confidence level (p < .01).

There is a significant difference between married female students with emotional divorce experience and other married female students in the variable difficulty in emotion regulation. A comparison of the results for difficulty in emotion regulation in the two groups of married female students with emotional divorce experience and other married female students showed that the level of difficulty in emotion regulation was higher in the group of married female students with emotional divorce experience than in the group of other married female students.

$F(1, 178) = 565.574$; $p < .01$; Partial $\eta^2 = 0.761$.

Furthermore, there is a significant difference between married female students with emotional divorce experience and other married female students in the variable emotional literacy. The results related to emotional literacy in the two groups of married female students with emotional divorce experience and other married female students indicate that the level of emotional literacy in the group of married female students with emotional divorce experience is lower than in the group of other married female students.

$F(1, 178) = 6252.896$; $p < .01$; Partial $\eta^2 = 0.778$.

In addition, there is a significant difference between married female students with emotional divorce experience and other married female students in the variable sexual knowledge and attitudes. A comparison of the results for sexual knowledge and attitudes in the two groups showed that the level of sexual knowledge and attitudes in the group of married female students with emotional divorce experience is lower than in the group of other married female students.

$F(1, 178) = 6810.470$; $p < .01$; Partial $\eta^2 = 0.747$.

4.   Discussion

The findings of the present study demonstrated significant differences between married female students with emotional divorce experience and other married female students across three major psychological domains: difficulty in emotion regulation, emotional literacy, and sexual knowledge and attitudes. The results indicated that women who had experienced emotional divorce exhibited substantially higher levels of emotion regulation difficulties, along with markedly lower levels of emotional literacy and sexual knowledge and attitudes. These findings align with the broader literature emphasizing the central role of emotional and sexual competencies in maintaining marital stability and preventing emotional disengagement (Akbari et al., 2020; Alaghband et al., 2019; Momeni & Azadi-Fard, 2015).

The elevated difficulty in emotion regulation observed in women with emotional divorce experience is consistent with theoretical perspectives that consider emotion regulation a foundational mechanism for sustaining intimacy, managing conflict, and fostering relational health. The multidimensional model of emotion regulation proposed by Gratz and Roemer emphasizes that deficiencies in emotional awareness, acceptance, impulse control, and access to adaptive regulation strategies can lead to interpersonal dysfunction and relational dissatisfaction (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Empirical evidence supports this framework. For instance, research in couple therapy contexts shows that emotion regulation difficulties mediate the relationship between marital satisfaction and depressive symptom

trajectories, underscoring the bidirectional interaction between emotional skills and relational well-being (Morgan et al., 2024). Studies among women facing marital crises, including infidelity and divorce, also reveal that targeted emotion regulation interventions significantly reduce emotional reactivity, anger rumination, and relational distress (Payamani et al., 2024; Teymouri et al., 2020).

In the context of emotional divorce specifically, Iranian studies consistently identify emotion regulation difficulty as a key predictor of emotional distancing and detachment between partners. Akbari et al. reported that maladaptive schemas and poor emotion regulation strongly predict emotional divorce, suggesting that individuals with weaker regulatory capacities may be more vulnerable to escalating cycles of conflict, avoidance, and emotional withdrawal (Akbari et al., 2020). Similarly, Mousavi Khorrami and colleagues found that emotional divorce is significantly associated with attachment insecurities and sexual dysfunction, with emotional intelligence mediating these associations and indicating the pivotal role of emotional processing and regulation (Mousavi Khorrami et al., 2020). In line with these findings, the present study demonstrates that women experiencing emotional divorce possess substantially weaker emotion regulation abilities than their peers, which likely contributes to reduced intimacy, prolonged unresolved conflicts, and eventual emotional disengagement. Overall, the pattern of results confirms that emotion regulation difficulties are not merely correlated with emotional divorce but may serve as a core mechanism driving the deterioration of emotional bonds in marital relationships.

The second major finding of this study revealed that emotional literacy was significantly lower in women with emotional divorce experience. Emotional literacy, a central component of emotional intelligence, includes the ability to recognize, label, interpret, and express emotions constructively (Goleman, 1995). According to meta-analytic evidence, emotional intelligence—including emotional literacy—predicts romantic relationship satisfaction, conflict resolution quality, and relational stability (Jardine et al., 2022). Insufficient emotional literacy can hinder empathetic communication, reduce the quality of emotional exchanges, and predispose couples to misinterpretations and escalating tensions. Such deficits likely impede the development of intimacy and emotional connection, ultimately contributing to emotional divorce.

Iranian literature consistently supports the protective function of emotional literacy. Alaghband et al.

demonstrated that emotional literacy, coping styles, and emotional intelligence jointly predict emotional divorce, with emotional regulation serving as a mediating mechanism (Alaghband et al., 2019). Shareh and Foshtanqi similarly found that emotional intelligence and marital satisfaction significantly predict women's quality of life, reinforcing the relational importance of emotional competencies (Shareh & Foshtanqi, 2019). Hadian and Amini further showed that emotional intelligence, communication skills, and marital conflict patterns predict marital degradation, suggesting that declining emotional literacy may be an early indicator of relational breakdown (Hadian & Amini, 2019). These findings help explain the present study's results: deficiencies in emotional literacy likely lead to communication breakdowns, unresolved emotional injuries, and chronic misunderstanding—all antecedents of emotional withdrawal. The strong negative correlation between emotional literacy and emotional divorce found in related studies thus mirrors the differences observed between the two groups of women in this research.

The third major finding pertained to sexual knowledge and attitudes, which were significantly lower among women who had experienced emotional divorce. Sexuality represents a central dimension of marital life, strongly intertwined with emotional intimacy, relationship satisfaction, and general marital functioning (Masters & Johnson, 1966). Research in Middle Eastern contexts has emphasized that sexual desire, satisfaction, and relational intimacy compose an interconnected system; deficits in one domain often reverberate across others (Attaky et al., 2021). In Iran, where cultural norms may limit open discussion and education about sexual matters, lack of sexual knowledge and restrictive attitudes can contribute to dissatisfaction, avoidance, and emotional distancing within marriages (Momeni & Azadi-Fard, 2015). The findings from Momeni and Azadi-Fard revealed that sexual knowledge and attitudes are significant predictors of emotional divorce, with more accurate and positive perspectives associated with lower emotional disengagement (Momeni & Azadi-Fard, 2015). Likewise, Mousavi Khorrami et al. found that sexual function components, when combined with emotion regulation and emotional intelligence, effectively predict emotional divorce, pointing to the intricate interplay between sexual and emotional processes (Mousavi Khorrami et al., 2020).

The present study's findings align with this evidence, suggesting that lower sexual knowledge and more restrictive attitudes may contribute to sexual dissatisfaction, decreased

intimacy, and ultimately emotional separation. They also correspond with Amato's seminal work highlighting that sexual dissatisfaction is one of the major contributors to divorce and marital breakdown (Amato, 2000). Furthermore, programs designed to strengthen relational emotional capacities—such as the EMOVERE emotional education program—have demonstrated that improvements in emotional understanding and expression can enhance relationship satisfaction and intimacy levels in young couples (Mónaco et al., 2021). These findings imply that enhancing emotional literacy and emotion regulation may indirectly strengthen sexual intimacy and reduce the risk of emotional divorce.

Another important observation from this study is the strong interrelationship among emotion regulation, emotional literacy, and sexual knowledge and attitudes. The correlational analyses revealed significant associations among these variables, reinforcing theoretical and empirical claims that emotional and sexual competencies interact dynamically to influence marital functioning. The cognitive–contextual framework of marital conflict suggests that emotional processes shape cognitive appraisals, which in turn influence behavioral responses and relationship outcomes (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Low emotional literacy may impair emotional understanding, leading to maladaptive emotion regulation and consequently undermining sexual intimacy. Conversely, inadequate sexual knowledge and dissatisfaction may heighten emotional vulnerability and stress, straining partners' regulation capacities. The observed patterns in this study thus confirm existing theoretical predictions and provide empirical evidence supporting integrative models of emotional divorce. These findings also align with the mediational patterns identified in studies examining relationships among emotional intelligence, coping styles, marital satisfaction, and emotional divorce (Alaghband et al., 2019; Mousavi Khorrami et al., 2020).

Finally, the findings are consistent with research examining predictors of emotional divorce during periods of heightened societal stress, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Sadeghzadeh et al. found that emotional divorce became more prevalent under pandemic-related stressors, with emotional vulnerabilities and insufficient coping mechanisms playing significant roles (Sadeghzadeh et al., 2023). Shahi and Eskandari similarly reported that emotional divorce is influenced by complex interactions among love style, resilience, and social support, suggesting that couples lacking emotional and relational resources may be more susceptible to emotional detachment (Shahi & Eskandari, 2025). These patterns echo findings in the present study, indicating that emotional competencies are essential buffers against relational deterioration. Additionally, studies emphasizing marital commitment and family power structure as central predictors of emotional divorce highlight the broader relational context in which emotional and sexual competencies operate (Jahanbakhshie et al., 2025).

5. Conclusion

Taken together, the current findings reinforce the view that emotional divorce is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by individual emotional capacities, interpersonal communication, sexual knowledge, and contextual factors.

The present study is subject to several limitations. First, the use of self-report questionnaires may introduce response biases such as social desirability or inaccurate self-assessment, particularly concerning sensitive constructs like sexual knowledge and emotional functioning. Second, the convenience sampling method limits the generalizability of the findings, as married female university students may differ from the broader population of married women in terms of age, socioeconomic status, education, and cultural exposure. Third, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inferences, as the observed associations do not establish temporal ordering or directionality between emotional divorce and psychological variables. Fourth, cultural norms surrounding discussion of emotional and sexual matters may have influenced participants' willingness to disclose accurate information, thereby affecting measurement accuracy. Finally, the study focused solely on women, preventing comparisons across genders and limiting understanding of dyadic processes in emotional divorce.

Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs to clarify the causal pathways linking emotion regulation, emotional literacy, and sexual knowledge to emotional divorce. Multi-informant approaches—including partner reports and observational assessments—may help overcome the limitations of self-report data and provide richer insights into relational dynamics. Future studies should also include both partners to examine dyadic interactions and mutual influences. Experimental and intervention studies could assess the effectiveness of emotional literacy training, couple-based emotion regulation programs, and sexual education modules in reducing emotional divorce risk. Additionally, future research should explore the role of cultural, socioeconomic, and religious factors and examine

whether these variables moderate the relationships observed in this study. Expanding samples beyond university populations would further enhance generalizability.

Practitioners working with couples or married female students should consider integrating emotional literacy training, emotion regulation skill-building, and comprehensive sexual education into counseling programs. Prevention initiatives on university campuses could offer workshops tailored to newly married students to strengthen emotional competencies and promote healthy communication. Individual and couple therapy should address emotional disengagement early by identifying deficits in emotional and sexual competencies. Psychoeducational programs can help women and couples clarify misconceptions about sexual functioning and develop more adaptive attitudes. Overall, empowering individuals with emotional and sexual knowledge may serve as a protective mechanism against emotional divorce and enhance marital well-being.

Authors' Contributions

S. S. led the study design, coordinated participant recruitment, and managed data collection procedures. Z. A. conducted the statistical analyses, including descriptive and multivariate comparisons, and contributed to interpreting the psychological constructs examined. A. H. developed the theoretical framework, assisted in selecting and validating measurement instruments, and contributed to writing and revising the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the article.

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.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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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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