

Predicting Marital Satisfaction Based on Emotion Regulation Strategies and Emotional Orientation Towards Sexual Relation in Married Women

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study was to predict marital satisfaction based on emotion regulation strategies and emotional orientation towards sexual relation in married women.

Methods and Materials: This research was descriptive-correlational in nature. The population of this study comprised married students from the Islamic Azad University of Tehran during the 2022-2023 academic year. From this population, 300 individuals were selected using convenience sampling. The data collection tools included the Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire by Hudson (1992), the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire by Gross and John (2003), and the Emotional Orientation Towards Sexual Relation Questionnaire by Ali Abadian and Hassanzadeh (2017). Data were analyzed using multivariate regression tests and SPSS software version 26.

Findings: The results showed that there is a positive correlation between reappraisal and sexual desire with marital satisfaction, and a negative significant correlation between suppression, fear of sexual intimacy, and indifference towards sexual intimacy with marital satisfaction ($p < 0.05$). Additionally, emotion regulation strategies (reappraisal and suppression) and subscales of emotional orientation towards sexual relation (desire, fear, and indifference) can predict marital satisfaction ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion: Given the results of the study, it is suggested that due to the importance of emotion regulation strategies and sexual desire in improving marital satisfaction, emotional orientation towards sexual relation should be taught to married individuals through workshops. Moreover, educating individuals on emotion regulation can enhance marital satisfaction.

Keywords: Marital Satisfaction, Emotion Regulation Strategies, Emotional Orientation Towards Sexual Relation.

1. Introduction

Marriage is an important social and legal institution that supports stable marital relationships through the provision of a specific set of rights, privileges, obligations, responsibilities, and expectations, thereby ensuring the survival and continuity of the family institution and social structure. Recent developments in marital life necessitate that couples make greater efforts to develop and grow their relationships. Patience, mutual respect, shared values, enjoyment of communication with each other, and conflict resolution skills significantly contribute to the compatibility and satisfaction of couples (Salimi et al., 2019). Marriage is the most important decision in an individual's life; satisfaction with marriage is also the most fundamental factor determining quality of life and mental health. Therefore, most researchers assess marital satisfaction to evaluate the quality of couples' relationships. Marital satisfaction affects physical and mental health, life satisfaction, job success, and quality of social relationships (Shokri et al., 2021). Generally, marital satisfaction can be described as a state in which spouses feel happiness, contentment, joy, and satisfaction with their marital life and relationship (Aman et al., 2019). Marital satisfaction influences psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and even income levels, academic success, and job satisfaction among couples. Conversely, incompatibility in marital relationships leads to social relationship disruptions, tendencies towards social deviations, and the decline of cultural values between spouses. Various factors seem to play a role in influencing marital satisfaction (Bradley & Hojjat, 2017).

In recent years, the importance of the role of emotion regulation in marital relationships has been emphasized in various studies (De France & Hollenstein, 2017). Emotion regulation refers to the processes through which individuals attempt to modify the processes related to the generation of their emotions, usually with the goal of reducing the intensity of emotional experiences. In other words, emotion regulation can be defined as a method through which individuals experience, control, and express their emotions (Eisma & Stroebe, 2021). It appears that poor mental health is associated with fewer emotion regulation strategies, poorer emotional clarity, and non-acceptance of emotions. In contrast, the ability to regulate emotions, given that it involves self-control and self-acceptance, can be helpful (Mirgain & Cordova, 2007). Research shows that difficulties in emotion regulation among couples can lead to reduced

intimacy and marital satisfaction, which in turn can predispose couples to extramarital relationships (Feldhaus & Schlegel, 2013). Previous research has demonstrated a close relationship between emotion regulation and marital satisfaction, indicating that couples with higher marital satisfaction manage the expression of both positive and negative emotions better. Although emotions have a biological basis, individuals can influence the ways in which they express these emotions (Frye et al., 2020). Frye and colleagues reported a relationship between emotion regulation strategies and marital satisfaction; marital satisfaction was inversely related to suppression and directly related to reappraisal (Frye et al., 2020). Additionally, it has been shown that difficulties in emotion regulation are associated with sexual problems and sexual dissatisfaction in marital relationships (Fischer et al., 2022; van den Brink et al., 2018).

In a healthy marriage, having an appropriate sexual relationship that can lead to marital satisfaction is crucial for the success and stability of the family foundation (Ramos Salazar, 2015). Sexual relations are considered important in marital life both emotionally and physically, and intimacy in sexual relations is one of the key indicators of closeness in relationships and love. Sexual activity is influenced not only by biological factors and reproductive instincts but also by the need to establish connections and express a variety of emotions such as intimacy, love, anger, and aggression (Moleiro & Pinto, 2015). Sexual orientation is one of the greatest sexual differences in humans. In fact, sexual orientation refers to the physical and emotional-psychological arousal of an individual towards the opposite sex (McNulty et al., 2019). It is generally assumed that marital distress, dissatisfaction, or conflicts in non-sexual aspects of the relationship are reflected in the sexual desire levels of couples. Low marital satisfaction can reduce the motivation for sexual intimacy and may even prevent sexual relations. The lack of sexual desire over time can lead to frustration and dissatisfaction. This reciprocal cycle is thought to push some couples towards an escalating pattern of sexual dysfunction (Dehghani Champiri & Dehghani, 2023). It has been shown that women's sexual behaviors and attitudes are likely to change due to factors such as marital life satisfaction, indicating a relationship between marital and sexual satisfaction (Lotfi et al., 2019).

Given the discussed points and the importance of marriage and the role of marital satisfaction in improving marital relationships and consequently reducing tension and divorce among couples, it is essential to examine factors that

can enhance marital satisfaction. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the role of emotion regulation strategies and emotional orientation towards sexual relation in predicting marital satisfaction among married women.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study design and Participant

The present study was applied in terms of its aim and descriptive-correlational in terms of its methodology. The population of this study included married students from the Islamic Azad University of Tehran during the 2022-2023 academic year. From this population, 300 individuals were selected using convenience sampling. Inclusion criteria included being married, being a student, being over 18 years old, and having been married for at least two years. Exclusion criteria included unwillingness to participate in the study and failure to respond to all questionnaire items. Data were collected using the Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire by Hudson (1992), the Emotional Orientation Towards Sexual Relation Questionnaire by Ali Abadian and Hassanzadeh (2017), and the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire by Gross and John (2003).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Marital Satisfaction

This is a 25-item tool designed to measure the extent, severity, or range of problems that a husband and wife may experience in their marital relationship. It does not consider the characteristics of the relationship as a whole, but rather measures the range of problems from the perspective of both husband and wife. This scale has two cutoff scores. A score of 35 or below indicates the absence of significant clinical problems in the relationship. Scores above 35 suggest the presence of considerable clinical problems. Another cutoff score is 70. Scores above 70 almost always indicate that the respondent has more problems. The reliability of this questionnaire, as reported by its original developer, is 0.96 (Ramos Salazar, 2015). The reliability of this index, calculated through Cronbach's alpha in various studies, ranged from 0.86 to 0.96, indicating good reliability. The correlation between this test and the ENRICH test was -0.87. The negative correlation coefficient is due to the fact that higher scores in Hudson's Marital Satisfaction Index indicate lower marital satisfaction, while higher scores in the ENRICH test indicate higher marital satisfaction. This correlation indicates the suitable validity of Hudson's

questionnaire (Aman et al., 2019; Moleiro & Pinto, 2015; Tashvighi et al., 2023).

2.2.2. Emotional Orientation Towards Sexual Relation

This questionnaire was developed by Ali Abadian and Hassanzadeh in 2017. It consists of 50 items and is rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). In the fear of sexual relation subscale, the minimum score is 20 and the maximum score is 100, with higher scores indicating greater fear of sexual relation. In the sexual desire subscale, the minimum score is 20 and the maximum score is 100, with higher scores indicating greater sexual desire. In the indifference towards sexual relation subscale, the minimum score is 10 and the maximum score is 50, with higher scores indicating greater indifference towards sexual relation. The reliability of the Emotional Orientation Towards Sexual Relation Questionnaire was assessed by calculating the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales. The results indicated sufficient internal consistency for the three subscales, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.75 to 0.88 (Aliabadian & Hassanzadeh, 2018).

2.2.3. Emotion Regulation

This questionnaire was developed by Gross and John in 2003 to measure emotion regulation strategies. It consists of two subscales: reappraisal (6 items) and suppression (4 items). Respondents rate each item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Gross and John reported internal consistency reliabilities of 0.79 for reappraisal and 0.73 for suppression. In Iran, Bigdeli and colleagues reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.83 for reappraisal and 0.79 for suppression (Bigdeli et al., 2013; Gross & John, 2003).

2.3. Data Analysis

The data obtained were analyzed using multivariate regression analysis via SPSS-26.

3. Findings and Results

In this study, the sample included 300 married female students with a mean age of 30.77 years and a standard deviation of 6.91 years. The majority of the sample consisted of undergraduate students (54.3%) and firstborn children (40%). Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of the

variables of marital satisfaction, emotion regulation strategies, and emotional orientation towards sexual relation.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Marital Satisfaction	47.12	6.49
Emotion Regulation Strategies		
Reappraisal	27.66	5.22
Suppression	15.52	4.32
Emotional Orientation to Sexual Relation		
Fear of Sexual Relation	63.28	12.55
Desire for Sexual Relation	70.55	7.25
Indifference to Sexual Relation	32.09	6.98

The hypothesis of the study states that the variables of emotion regulation strategies and emotional orientation towards sexual relation can significantly predict marital satisfaction in married women. To test this hypothesis, multivariate regression analysis was used. Regarding the assumptions of multivariate regression, the assumption of normal distribution was checked and confirmed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The Durbin-Watson test was

used to check the independence of errors, and since the statistic was between 1.5 and 2.5, there was no autocorrelation between the errors. The variance inflation factor (VIF) statistic was between 1 and 3, indicating no multicollinearity in the analysis. Table 2 reports the results of the simultaneous multivariate regression analysis for predicting marital satisfaction based on emotion regulation strategies and emotional orientation towards sexual relation.

Table 2

Results of Regression Analysis for Predicting Marital Satisfaction Based on Emotion Regulation Strategies and Emotional Orientation Towards Sexual Relation

Statistical Index	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Significance Level
Regression	8414.01	5	2804.66	29.73	.001
Residual	23204.91	294	94.32		
Total	31618.92	299			

As shown in Table 2, the significance level is less than 0.05, indicating that the regression model is significant. Table 3 shows the standardized and unstandardized

coefficients and t-statistics of the variables entered into the regression equation.

Table 3

Standardized and Unstandardized Coefficients and t-statistics of Variables Entered into the Regression Equation

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p
Constant	23.97	2.78	---	8.711	.032
Emotion Regulation Strategies					
Reappraisal	0.217	0.040	0.363	5.252	.021
Suppression	-0.215	0.031	-0.411	-9.751	.001
Emotional Orientation to Sexual Relation					
Fear of Sexual Relation	-0.067	0.013	-0.391	-5.322	.001
Desire for Sexual Relation	0.750	0.114	0.352	6.113	.001
Indifference to Sexual Relation	-0.327	0.095	-0.467	-3.454	.008

As the results in Table 3 show, there is a positive relationship between reappraisal and marital satisfaction and a significant negative correlation between suppression and

marital satisfaction. Additionally, reappraisal and suppression strategies were able to predict marital satisfaction with beta coefficients of 0.363 and -0.411,

respectively ($P < 0.05$). Among the subscales of emotional orientation towards sexual relation, there is a positive relationship between desire for sexual relation and marital satisfaction and a significant negative correlation between fear of sexual relation and indifference to sexual relation with marital satisfaction ($P < 0.05$). Desire for sexual relation, fear of sexual relation, and indifference to sexual relation were able to predict marital satisfaction with beta coefficients of 0.352, -0.391, and -0.467, respectively ($P < 0.05$).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to predict marital satisfaction based on emotion regulation strategies and emotional orientation towards sexual relation in married women. The findings showed that among emotion regulation strategies, reappraisal and suppression were positively and negatively correlated with marital satisfaction, respectively. Emotion regulation strategies were able to predict marital satisfaction. This result is consistent with the prior findings (Ashori et al., 2022; Babaei et al., 2024; Damankeshan & Sheikholeslami, 2019; Frye et al., 2020; Riahi et al., 2020; Shoghi et al., 2023; Tashvighi et al., 2023). Tashvighi et al. (2023) showed that reappraisal strategy is directly related to marital satisfaction (Tashvighi et al., 2023). Riahi et al. (2020) reported that in both men and women, overall emotion regulation ability predicts the individual's and their spouse's satisfaction with the relationship. Additionally, in women, the components of impulse control, access to emotion regulation strategies, and clear understanding of emotions predicted the husband's marital satisfaction (Riahi et al., 2020). Damankeshan and Sheikholeslami (2019) showed that adaptive strategies increase marital satisfaction through reducing vengeful thoughts and angry memories, while maladaptive strategies decrease marital satisfaction by increasing vengeful thoughts and angry memories (Damankeshan & Sheikholeslami, 2019). This can be explained by stating that individuals may encounter many negative memories and experiences throughout the day that inherently stimulate their emotions and cause rumination, affecting their mental health. Providing a context for expressing and revealing emotions helps to better process negative traumatic experiences (Frye et al., 2020). Additionally, using emotion regulation strategies enables individuals to use emotional expression to cope with and confront their bitter and unfortunate experiences, manage stressful events, and achieve balance in life. Recognizing

others' emotions also helps individuals establish effective and efficient interpersonal communication with others, including their spouse, which can positively impact marital satisfaction.

The study results also showed that among the subscales of emotional orientation towards sexual relation, desire for sexual relation was positively correlated with marital satisfaction, while fear of sexual relation and indifference to sexual relation were negatively and significantly correlated with marital satisfaction. All three subscales of emotional orientation towards sexual relation (desire, fear, and indifference) were able to predict marital satisfaction. This result is consistent with the prior findings (Dehghani Champiri & Dehghani, 2023; Karimnejad et al., 2011; McNulty et al., 2019; Mohsenikabir et al., 2021; Radmehr & Kakoujoybari, 2020). Radmehr and Kakoujoybari (2020) showed a significant relationship between sexual beliefs and sexual performance with marital satisfaction (Radmehr & Kakoujoybari, 2020). Karimnejad et al. (2011) also found a significant relationship between sexual schemas, sexual satisfaction, and marital satisfaction (Karimnejad et al., 2011). Mohsenikabir et al. (2021) reported that expressive and instrumental behaviors have a positive and significant relationship with marital satisfaction. Sexual satisfaction can mediate the relationship between expressive and instrumental behaviors and marital satisfaction (Mohsenikabir et al., 2021). This can be explained by stating that sexual relation is one of the most important aspects of the relationship between husband and wife. Satisfying basic needs, particularly sexual needs, and establishing a fulfilling sexual relationship, which is a component of intimacy between couples, allows them to establish a rich physical and psychological connection with their spouse, thereby improving the quality of the marital relationship and increasing marital satisfaction. Therefore, the greater the couple's desire and inclination to establish a sexual relationship with each other, the more likely it is that intimacy will increase, leading to higher marital satisfaction.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

Overall, the study results showed a positive relationship between reappraisal and desire for sexual relation with marital satisfaction, and a significant negative correlation between suppression, fear of sexual relation, and indifference to sexual relation with marital satisfaction. Additionally, emotion regulation strategies (reappraisal and suppression) and the subscales of emotional orientation

towards sexual relation (desire, fear, and indifference) can predict marital satisfaction. Therefore, it is recommended that the importance of emotion regulation strategies and desire for sexual relation in improving marital satisfaction be taught to married individuals through workshops. Furthermore, educating individuals on emotion regulation can enhance marital satisfaction.

This study, like other studies, faced limitations. The present sample only included married students from the Islamic Azad University of Tehran during the 2022-2023 academic year, so the generalizability of the findings to other groups requires further studies. Other limitations include the use of convenience sampling and self-report instruments. Future studies are recommended to use longitudinal designs and larger samples (across different groups) to examine these factors, providing more comprehensive information. Additionally, future research should consider using alternative tools, such as in-depth interviews, instead of self-report instruments.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this 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. This article is derived from the first author's doctoral dissertation in psychology at the Islamic Azad University, Sari Branch, and has received ethical approval with the code IR.IAU.SARI.REC.1402.099 from the ethics committee of the Islamic Azad University, Sari Branch. All subjects received information about the research process and were assured of the confidentiality of their information and its use only for research purposes. Participants were informed that participation in the research was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Informed consent forms were completed and signed by all participants.

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