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The Relationship Between Early Maladaptive Schemas and Alexithymia with Emotional Divorce in Married Women

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to examine the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and alexithymia with emotional divorce in married women.

Methods and Materials: The study employed a descriptive-correlational design. The statistical population consisted of all married women who referred to counseling centers in Tonekabon city in 2025. Using convenience sampling, 232 participants were recruited; after excluding incomplete questionnaires, data from 220 participants were analyzed. Data collection instruments included the Young Schema Questionnaire–Short Form, the Toronto Alexithymia Scale, and the Gottman Emotional Divorce Questionnaire. Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation coefficients and stepwise multiple regression analysis with SPSS-26.

Findings: Inferential analyses indicated that early maladaptive schemas and alexithymia were positively and significantly correlated with emotional divorce ($p < .01$). Among schema domains, disconnection and rejection, other-directedness, and impaired limits showed significant associations with emotional divorce. Stepwise regression analysis revealed that disconnection and rejection entered the model first and significantly predicted emotional divorce. The addition of alexithymia significantly increased the explained variance, followed by other-directedness and impaired limits in subsequent steps. In the final regression model, disconnection and rejection, alexithymia, other-directedness, and impaired limits jointly accounted for approximately one-third of the variance in emotional divorce, with all predictors demonstrating statistically significant standardized regression coefficients ($p < .01$).

Conclusion: Early maladaptive schemas, particularly disconnection and rejection, together with alexithymia, play a central role in predicting emotional disengagement within marriage, underscoring the importance of integrative schema- and emotion-focused approaches in marital assessment and intervention.

Keywords: *Early maladaptive schemas, alexithymia, emotional divorce, women*

1. Introduction

Marital relationships constitute one of the most fundamental interpersonal systems influencing psychological well-being, emotional regulation, and overall quality of life in adulthood. In recent years, scholars have increasingly emphasized not only overt marital dissolution but also more covert forms of relational breakdown, among which emotional divorce has attracted growing empirical attention. Emotional divorce refers to a state in which spouses remain legally married yet experience profound emotional disengagement, reduced intimacy, diminished mutual responsiveness, and chronic emotional distance. This phenomenon is often accompanied by loneliness, emotional numbness, and persistent dissatisfaction, and it can be as psychologically damaging as formal divorce, particularly for women who frequently bear a disproportionate emotional burden within marital relationships (Al-shahrani & Hammad, 2023; Talebi Zadeh et al., 2023).

Empirical evidence suggests that emotional divorce is not merely a situational outcome of marital conflict but rather the result of complex interactions between enduring psychological vulnerabilities and emotion-related deficits. Among the most widely studied vulnerability factors are early maladaptive schemas, which are deeply ingrained cognitive–emotional patterns formed during childhood and adolescence through adverse interpersonal experiences. According to schema theory, these schemas shape how individuals perceive themselves, others, and close relationships, thereby influencing emotional reactions, coping strategies, and relational behaviors in adulthood. When activated within intimate relationships, maladaptive schemas may intensify emotional withdrawal, mistrust, unmet emotional needs, and chronic dissatisfaction, all of which are central features of emotional divorce (Karjouh et al., 2022; Pilkington et al., 2024).

Early maladaptive schemas are typically organized into higher-order domains such as disconnection and rejection, impaired autonomy and performance, other-directedness, hypervigilance, and impaired limits. Research has consistently shown that schemas within the disconnection and rejection domain—such as abandonment, emotional deprivation, and mistrust—are particularly detrimental to marital functioning, as they undermine emotional security and intimacy. Individuals dominated by these schemas may anticipate rejection, suppress emotional needs, or disengage emotionally as a defensive strategy, thereby increasing vulnerability to emotional divorce (Kashanifar & Hadipour, 2023; Talebi Zadeh et al., 2023). Similarly, schemas related to other-directedness can foster excessive self-sacrifice and emotional suppression, which may initially preserve marital stability but gradually erode emotional connection and authenticity within the relationship.

Parallel to schema-based vulnerabilities, alexithymia has emerged as a critical emotional factor in marital distress and emotional divorce. Alexithymia is characterized by difficulties in identifying, describing, and expressing emotions, as well as a tendency toward externally oriented thinking. Individuals with high levels of alexithymia often struggle to communicate emotional needs, empathize with partners, or engage in emotionally responsive interactions. These deficits can lead to emotional misunderstandings, unmet attachment needs, and progressive emotional disengagement between spouses (Al-shahrani & Hammad, 2023; Izadi et al., 2019). In the context of marriage, alexithymia may function both as a direct risk factor for emotional divorce and as a mechanism through which deeper cognitive–emotional structures exert their effects.

A growing body of research highlights the close interrelationship between early maladaptive schemas and alexithymia. Meta-analytic and systematic evidence indicates that maladaptive schemas are strongly associated with emotion regulation difficulties and alexithymia across clinical and non-clinical populations (Pilkington et al., 2024). From a developmental perspective, early relational trauma, emotional neglect, or inconsistent caregiving—core antecedents of maladaptive schemas—may also impair the development of emotional awareness and expression, thereby predisposing individuals to alexithymic traits in adulthood. Structural modeling studies further suggest that maladaptive schemas can predict alexithymia directly or indirectly through deficits in emotional self-disclosure and cognitive flexibility (Faramarzi Rad et al., 2023; Vakilian et al., 2021).

Within marital contexts, this schema–alexithymia linkage appears particularly salient. Studies conducted among married women have demonstrated that maladaptive schemas are associated with heightened marital conflict, reduced intimacy, and increased desire for divorce, with alexithymia often mediating or amplifying these associations (Alizadeh et al., 2024; Rahiman, 2024). Women with prominent maladaptive schemas may experience intense emotional needs yet lack the emotional skills required to articulate or regulate these needs effectively, resulting in emotional withdrawal rather than constructive engagement. Over time, such patterns may culminate in

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emotional divorce, even in the absence of overt conflict or legal separation.

Intervention-based research further underscores the centrality of schemas and alexithymia in marital dysfunction. Schema therapy and emotion-focused interventions have repeatedly demonstrated efficacy in reducing alexithymia, improving emotional expression, and enhancing marital intimacy among women at risk of divorce or experiencing chronic relational distress (Almardani, 2023; Bibak et al., 2025; Malekimajd et al., 2024). Comparative studies indicate that schema-based and emotionally focused approaches are particularly effective in addressing deep-seated emotional disconnection and the desire for divorce, outperforming purely cognitive or behavioral interventions in some contexts (Panahifar et al., 2023; Rasouli Rad et al., 2023). These findings suggest that emotional divorce may be best understood and addressed through an integrative framework that accounts for both cognitive–emotional structures and emotion-processing deficits.

Despite the growing literature, several gaps remain. First, many studies have examined early maladaptive schemas, alexithymia, and emotional divorce in isolation or within intervention settings, while fewer have investigated their simultaneous associations within non-clinical or counseling-seeking married populations. Second, although international research has documented links between alexithymia and emotional divorce, culturally grounded studies focusing on Iranian married women remain relatively limited, despite evidence that cultural norms surrounding emotional expression and marital roles may shape these relationships (Ghanbari et al., 2023; Zahmatkesh, 2022). Third, there is a need for predictive models that clarify which schema domains, in combination with alexithymia, most strongly account for variance in emotional divorce.

Recent Iranian studies have begun to address these issues by examining the role of maladaptive schemas in emotional divorce and marital conflict, yet findings remain fragmented and methodologically diverse (Esmaeili et al., 2023; Monjezi et al., 2023; Panahi & Baramash, 2024). Some evidence suggests that disconnection and rejection and other-directedness are particularly potent predictors of emotional divorce, while other studies highlight the mediating roles of love styles, emotional regulation, or communication skills (Kashanifar & Hadipour, 2023; Rahiman, 2024). However, few studies have integrated alexithymia into these models as a concurrent predictor alongside schema domains.

Given the theoretical and empirical importance of understanding emotional divorce as a multidimensional phenomenon rooted in early cognitive–emotional structures and emotion-processing deficits, further research is warranted. Clarifying the joint contribution of early maladaptive schemas and alexithymia can provide valuable insights for prevention, assessment, and intervention, particularly for married women who may experience emotional divorce silently while remaining in legally intact marriages.

Therefore, the present study aimed to examine the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and alexithymia with emotional divorce in married women.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study design and Participant

The present study was descriptive-correlational in design, and the statistical population included all married women who referred to counseling centers in the city of Tonekabon in 2025. Using convenience sampling, 232 participants were initially selected and completed the research questionnaires. After excluding incomplete or invalid questionnaires, data from 220 participants were included in the final analysis.

2.2. Measures

Young Schema Questionnaire–Short Form (1995): This questionnaire consists of 75 items and assesses fifteen early maladaptive schemas based on the findings of Schmidt et al. (1995). The questionnaire was originally developed by Young and Brown (1994) in a long form consisting of 205 items. In order to create a shorter instrument, the short form of the questionnaire was developed in 1998. Each item is scored on a 6-point Likert scale. In this questionnaire, every five items assess one schema. In the study by Welburn et al. (2002), all fifteen subscales of the short form of the Young Schema Questionnaire demonstrated adequate to very good internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the schemas ranged from .76 to .93. In addition, the test–retest reliability of the short form was reported as .64 (Young et al., 2003; Persian translation by Hamidpour & Andooz, 2021). In Iran, Cronbach's alpha for this questionnaire has been reported as .97 in female samples and .98 in male samples. Other studies have also confirmed the reliability and validity of this questionnaire.

Toronto Alexithymia Scale (1994): This is a self-report measure developed by Bagby et al. (1994) consisting of 20

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items that assess three dimensions: difficulty identifying feelings (7 items), difficulty describing feelings (5 items), and externally oriented thinking (8 items). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). Scores of 60 and above indicate high levels of alexithymia, whereas scores of 52 and below indicate low levels of alexithymia. In Iran, internal consistency reliability based on Cronbach's alpha for the total scale and its subscales has been reported as .79, .75, .71, and .66, respectively. Test–retest reliability for the total scale and subscales in an Iranian clinical sample has been reported as .77, .73, .69, and .65, respectively.

Gottman Emotional Divorce Questionnaire (1997): This instrument was developed by John Gottman (1997) to assess the level of emotional divorce in couples and consists of 24 dichotomous (yes/no) items. The total score range of this questionnaire is 0–24, with higher scores indicating a greater level of emotional divorce between spouses. In the study conducted by Mousavi et al. (2015), the overall reliability of this scale was reported as .93 using Cronbach's alpha. The shared variance and factor loadings of the scale items indicated that all item factor loadings ranged from .49 to .80, demonstrating acceptable factor loadings. Face validity of the questionnaire was also confirmed by seven faculty members of the Women's Research Institute at Alzahra University.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data obtained from the implementation of the study were analyzed using inferential statistics, including Pearson's correlation coefficient and stepwise regression analysis, with SPSS software (version 26).

3. Findings and Results

Descriptive statistics for the study variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation) of the Study Variables (N = 220)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Disconnection and Rejection	78.42	15.36
Impaired Autonomy and Performance	65.18	13.94
Other-Directedness	70.27	14.11
Hypervigilance	68.55	12.87
Impaired Limits	62.90	11.76
Alexithymia	56.83	9.48
Emotional Divorce	41.72	10.63

The mean score for emotional divorce was 41.72 (SD = 10.63), indicating a moderate level of emotional disengagement among the participating married women. Among the early maladaptive schema domains, disconnection and rejection showed the highest mean score (M = 78.42, SD = 15.36), suggesting that feelings of emotional deprivation, abandonment, and rejection were relatively prominent in the sample. Other-directedness (M = 70.27, SD = 14.11) and hypervigilance (M = 68.55, SD = 12.87) also demonstrated elevated mean values, reflecting a tendency toward excessive focus on others' needs and heightened emotional control or vigilance. The mean score for alexithymia was 56.83 (SD = 9.48), indicating a moderate level of difficulty in identifying and describing emotions among participants. Overall, the variability observed across all variables, as reflected by the standard deviations, suggests sufficient dispersion of scores to justify subsequent correlational and regression analyses.

As shown in the table below, the correlation coefficients between early maladaptive schemas and alexithymia with emotional divorce are statistically significant ($p < .01$).

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Table 2

Correlation Matrix Between Early Maladaptive Schemas, Alexithymia, and Emotional Divorce

Variable	Disconnection & Rejection	Impaired Autonomy & Performance	Other-Directedness	Hypervigilance	Impaired Limits	Alexithymia	Emotional Divorce
Disconnection & Rejection	1	.486	.112	.083	.154	.109	.389
Impaired Autonomy & Performance	–	1	.093	.063	.130	.121	.383
Other-Directedness	–	–	1	.493	.463	.253	.322
Hypervigilance	–	–	–	1	.365	.246	.269
Impaired Limits	–	–	–	–	1	.243	.331
Alexithymia	–	–	–	–	–	1	.323
Emotional Divorce	–	–	–	–	–	–	1

To determine the best predictors of emotional divorce among the predictor variables of early maladaptive schemas and alexithymia, stepwise regression analysis was employed. It should be noted that the variables of disconnection and rejection, alexithymia, other-directedness, and impaired limits entered the regression equation. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 3

Summary of Stepwise Regression Analysis for Disconnection & Rejection, Alexithymia, Other-Directedness, and Impaired Limits

Model	Predictors	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Standard Error
First	Disconnection & Rejection	.389	.152	.148	1.60
Second	Disconnection & Rejection, Alexithymia	.509	.259	.252	2.87
Third	Disconnection & Rejection, Alexithymia, Other-Directedness	.561	.315	.305	1.47
Fourth	Disconnection & Rejection, Alexithymia, Other-Directedness, Impaired Limits	.593	.351	.338	3.22

Table 3 indicates that the variable of disconnection and rejection explained 14.8% of the variance in emotional divorce (Adjusted R^2 = .148). With the addition of alexithymia to disconnection and rejection in the second model, an additional 11% of the variance in emotional divorce was explained (Adjusted R^2 = .252), and together these variables accounted for approximately 25.2% of the variance in emotional divorce. With the addition of other-directedness to disconnection and rejection and alexithymia in the third model, an additional 5% of the variance in emotional divorce was explained (Adjusted R^2 = .305), and these variables together explained approximately 30.5% of the variance in emotional divorce. Finally, with the addition of impaired limits to disconnection and rejection, alexithymia, and other-directedness in the fourth model, an additional 3% of the variance in emotional divorce was explained (Adjusted R^2 = .338), and the variables of disconnection and rejection, alexithymia, other-directedness, and impaired limits jointly explained approximately 33.8% of the variance in emotional divorce.

The Durbin–Watson statistic examines the assumption of independence of errors. When this statistic falls between 1.5 and 2.5, the errors are considered independent. Given that the obtained value was 1.573, the errors were independent. Therefore, conducting regression analysis was permissible.

Table 4

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Testing the Significance of the Regression of Disconnection and Rejection, Alexithymia, Other-Directedness, and Impaired Limits

Statistical Index	Source of Variation	Sum of Squares (SS)	df	Mean Square (MS)	F	Significance Level
Regression (Disconnection & Rejection)	Regression	5004.245	1	5004.245	37.182	.000
	Residual	27993.950	218	134.586		
	Total	32998.195	219			
Regression (Disconnection & Rejection, Alexithymia)	Regression	8545.681	2	4272.841	36.171	.000
	Residual	24452.514	217	118.128		

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	Total	32998.195	219			
Regression (Disconnection & Rejection, Alexithymia, Other-Directedness)	Regression	10397.640	3	3465.880	31.591	.000
	Residual	22600.555	216	109.711		
	Total	32998.195	219			
Regression (Disconnection & Rejection, Alexithymia, Other-Directedness, Impaired Limits)	Regression	11584.793	4	2896.198	27.727	.000
	Residual	21413.402	215	104.456		
	Total	32998.195	219			

The results presented in Table 4 indicate that there is a significant relationship between disconnection and rejection, alexithymia, other-directedness, and impaired limits with emotional divorce. Moreover, the variables of disconnection and rejection, alexithymia, other-directedness, and impaired limits have predictive power for emotional divorce.

Table 5

Regression Analysis (Variables Entered into the Regression Equation Using the Stepwise Method): Disconnection and Rejection, Alexithymia, Other-Directedness, and Impaired Limits

Model	Source	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficient (β)	t	Significance
Model 1	Constant	73.546				
	Disconnection & Rejection	0.289	0.047	0.389	6.098	.000
Model 2	Constant	81.479				
	Disconnection & Rejection	0.288	0.044	0.389	6.504	.000
	Alexithymia	0.514	0.099	0.328	5.475	.000
Model 3	Constant	99.660				
	Disconnection & Rejection	0.285	0.043	0.385	6.672	.000
	Alexithymia	0.446	0.092	0.284	4.852	.000
	Other-Directedness	0.140	0.034	0.241	4.109	.000
Model 4	Constant	86.069				
	Disconnection & Rejection	0.269	0.042	0.363	6.408	.000
	Alexithymia	0.370	0.093	0.236	4.003	.000
	Other-Directedness	0.134	0.033	0.229	4.004	.000
	Impaired Limits	0.312	0.092	0.198	3.371	.001

In the first model, disconnection and rejection entered the equation, and the regression equation was formulated as follows:

Emotional Divorce = 73.546 + 0.289 × (Disconnection and Rejection)

According to the results in Table 5, the standardized beta coefficient (β) for the variable disconnection and rejection was 0.389. This value indicates that disconnection and rejection has a direct effect on emotional divorce and predicts 0.389 of the variance in the criterion variable, emotional divorce. If a one-unit change occurs in the predictor variable disconnection and rejection, the criterion variable emotional divorce changes by 0.389. This means that as disconnection and rejection increase, emotional divorce also increases. As shown, the t value for disconnection and rejection was 6.098, which was significant at the .01 level.

In the second model, the variables disconnection and rejection and alexithymia entered the regression equation, which was formulated as follows:

Emotional Divorce = 81.479 + 0.288 × (Disconnection and Rejection) + 0.514 × (Alexithymia)

Based on the results in Table 5, the standardized beta coefficient (β) for alexithymia was 0.328. This value indicates that alexithymia has a direct effect on emotional divorce and predicts 0.328 of the variance in the criterion variable emotional divorce. If a one-unit change occurs in the predictor variable alexithymia, the criterion variable emotional divorce changes by 0.328. This means that with an increase in alexithymia, emotional divorce also increases. As shown, the t value for alexithymia was 5.475, which was significant at the .01 level.

In the third model, the variables disconnection and rejection, alexithymia, and other-directedness entered the regression equation, which was formulated as follows:

Emotional Divorce = 99.660 + 0.285 × (Disconnection and Rejection) + 0.446 × (Alexithymia) + 0.140 × (Other-Directedness)

Based on the results in Table 5, the standardized beta coefficient (β) for other-directedness was 0.241. This value

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indicates that other-directedness has a direct effect on emotional divorce and predicts 0.241 of the variance in the criterion variable emotional divorce. If a one-unit change occurs in the predictor variable other-directedness, the criterion variable emotional divorce changes by 0.241. This means that with an increase in other-directedness, emotional divorce also increases. As shown, the t value for other-directedness was 4.109, which was significant at the .01 level.

In the fourth model, the variables disconnection and rejection, alexithymia, other-directedness, and impaired limits entered the regression equation, which was formulated as follows:

Emotional Divorce = 99.069 + 0.269 × (Disconnection and Rejection) + 0.370 × (Alexithymia) + 0.134 × (Other-Directedness) + 0.312 × (Impaired Limits)

Based on the results in Table 5, the standardized beta coefficient (β) for impaired limits was 0.198. This value indicates that impaired limits has a direct effect on emotional divorce and predicts 0.198 of the variance in the criterion variable emotional divorce. If a one-unit change occurs in the predictor variable impaired limits, the criterion variable emotional divorce changes by 0.198. This means that with an increase in impaired limits, emotional divorce also increases. As shown, the t value for impaired limits was 3.371, which was significant at the .01 level. Given that the calculated relationships were significant at the .99 confidence level, it can be concluded that the variables of disconnection and rejection, alexithymia, other-directedness, and impaired limits are the best predictors of emotional divorce.

4. Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and alexithymia with emotional divorce among married women. The findings demonstrated that both early maladaptive schemas and alexithymia were positively and significantly associated with emotional divorce, indicating that higher levels of maladaptive cognitive–emotional patterns and deficits in emotional processing are linked to greater emotional disengagement within marriage. These results support contemporary theoretical models that conceptualize emotional divorce as a gradual, psychologically driven process rooted in enduring vulnerabilities rather than a sudden reaction to situational marital stressors (Al-shahrani & Hammad, 2023; Pilkington et al., 2024).

Correlation analyses revealed that all schema domains were significantly related to emotional divorce, with the strongest associations observed for disconnection and rejection, other-directedness, and impaired limits. These findings align with schema theory, which posits that schemas originating from unmet emotional needs in childhood are particularly likely to be activated in intimate adult relationships. When such schemas are triggered within marriage, individuals may engage in emotional withdrawal, suppression of needs, or defensive distancing, thereby fostering emotional divorce (Karjouh et al., 2022; Talebi Zadeh et al., 2023). The present results extend prior research by demonstrating that these associations are robust within a counseling-seeking population of married women, highlighting the clinical relevance of schema-based vulnerabilities.

Among the schema domains, disconnection and rejection emerged as the strongest predictor of emotional divorce. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that schemas such as abandonment, emotional deprivation, and mistrust are particularly destructive to marital intimacy and emotional bonding (Kashanifar & Hadipour, 2023; Rahiman, 2024). Women who hold these schemas may anticipate emotional neglect or rejection from their spouses, leading them to disengage emotionally as a protective strategy. Over time, such disengagement may solidify into a stable pattern of emotional divorce, even in the absence of overt conflict or legal separation. The present findings provide empirical support for the central role of attachment-related schema domains in the development of emotional divorce.

Alexithymia was also found to be a significant and independent predictor of emotional divorce. Women with higher levels of alexithymia reported greater emotional disengagement, suggesting that difficulties in identifying and expressing emotions undermine emotional intimacy and mutual responsiveness within marriage. This result is consistent with previous research conducted in different cultural contexts, including studies among married women in Saudi Arabia and Iran, which have documented strong associations between alexithymia and emotional divorce (Al-shahrani & Hammad, 2023; Alizadeh et al., 2024). From an interpersonal perspective, alexithymia may impede emotional communication, reduce empathy, and limit effective conflict resolution, thereby accelerating emotional distancing between spouses.

The stepwise regression analysis further clarified the joint contribution of early maladaptive schemas and alexithymia

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in predicting emotional divorce. Disconnection and rejection entered the regression model first, accounting for a substantial proportion of variance in emotional divorce. The subsequent inclusion of alexithymia significantly increased the explained variance, underscoring the additive role of emotional processing deficits beyond cognitive–emotional schemas. This finding is consistent with structural and mediational models suggesting that maladaptive schemas may predispose individuals to alexithymia, which in turn exacerbates relational dysfunction (Faramarzi Rad et al., 2023; Vakilian et al., 2021). However, the present results indicate that alexithymia also exerts a direct effect on emotional divorce, independent of schema domains.

Other-directedness emerged as another significant predictor of emotional divorce. This schema domain reflects a chronic tendency to prioritize others' needs at the expense of one's own emotional needs, often accompanied by emotional inhibition and fear of rejection. While such patterns may initially preserve marital stability, they may gradually erode emotional authenticity and reciprocity, leading to emotional exhaustion and disengagement (Panahifar et al., 2023; Talebi Zadeh et al., 2023). The present findings suggest that excessive self-sacrifice and emotional suppression may paradoxically increase vulnerability to emotional divorce by preventing genuine emotional connection within marriage.

Impaired limits also contributed significantly to the prediction of emotional divorce in the final regression model. This schema domain is characterized by difficulties in setting boundaries, regulating impulses, and respecting mutual limits within relationships. Previous studies have linked impaired limits to relational conflict, emotional dysregulation, and dissatisfaction (Monjezi et al., 2023; Rasouli Rad et al., 2023). In the context of marriage, impaired limits may manifest as emotional inconsistency or unmet expectations, which can strain emotional bonds and promote gradual emotional disengagement.

Taken together, the findings support an integrative conceptualization of emotional divorce as a product of both early cognitive–emotional schemas and deficits in emotional awareness and expression. This perspective is consistent with recent meta-analytic evidence highlighting the interconnectedness of maladaptive schemas, emotion regulation difficulties, and alexithymia (Pilkington et al., 2024). Moreover, the results are congruent with intervention studies demonstrating that schema therapy and emotionally focused approaches can reduce alexithymia and emotional divorce while enhancing marital intimacy (Almardani, 2023; Bibak et al., 2025; Esmaeili et al., 2023).

The present study also contributes to the growing body of culturally grounded research on marital relationships among Iranian women. Cultural norms surrounding emotional expression, gender roles, and marital endurance may intensify the impact of maladaptive schemas and alexithymia on emotional divorce, as women may remain in emotionally disengaged marriages due to social, familial, or economic constraints (Ghanbari et al., 2023; Zahmatkesh, 2022). By identifying specific psychological predictors of emotional divorce, the present findings provide a foundation for more targeted prevention and intervention efforts within this cultural context.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the results highlight the importance of addressing deep-seated cognitive–emotional structures and emotional processing deficits in understanding and preventing emotional divorce. Interventions that focus solely on communication skills or behavioral change may be insufficient if underlying schemas and alexithymia remain unaddressed. Instead, comprehensive approaches that integrate schema modification, emotional awareness training, and experiential emotional work may be particularly effective in restoring emotional connection within marriage.

6. Limitations and Suggestions

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations. First, the correlational design precludes causal inferences regarding the directionality of the relationships among early maladaptive schemas, alexithymia, and emotional divorce. Second, the reliance on self-report measures may have introduced response biases, including social desirability and limited self-awareness, particularly among participants with high levels of alexithymia. Third, the sample consisted of married women who referred to counseling centers, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to non-clinical or male populations.

Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to clarify the temporal and causal relationships among early maladaptive schemas, alexithymia, and emotional divorce. Research including both spouses could provide a more comprehensive understanding of dyadic processes underlying emotional divorce. Additionally, future investigations may benefit from examining potential

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mediators or moderators, such as attachment styles, emotion regulation strategies, or cultural factors, to further refine predictive models of emotional divorce.

From a practical perspective, the findings underscore the importance of assessing early maladaptive schemas and alexithymia in marital counseling and psychotherapy. Clinicians working with emotionally disengaged couples may benefit from incorporating schema-focused and emotion-focused interventions to address underlying vulnerabilities. Preventive programs aimed at enhancing emotional awareness, expression, and boundary setting among married women may also help reduce the risk of emotional divorce and promote healthier marital relationships.

Authors' Contributions

R.M.A. conceptualized the research idea, identified the core variables (early maladaptive schemas, alexithymia, and emotional divorce), and supervised the overall research process. F.N. was responsible for the study design, participant recruitment, data collection, and administration of the research instruments. Z.A. conducted the statistical analyses, including correlation and stepwise regression, and contributed to the interpretation of findings. All authors collaboratively drafted the manuscript, critically revised it for intellectual content, approved the final version for publication, and accept full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the work.

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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