Original Article: Mediating Role of Marital Intimacy in the Relationship between Love Attitudes and Marital Satisfaction among Married Women and Men in Songor, Kermanshah Province of Iran

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigates the mediating role of marital intimacy in the relationship between attitudes toward love and marital satisfaction in married men and women. The statistical population of this study included married men and women in Songor, of whom 174 participants were chosen by convenience sampling. The data were collected using the Love Attitude, Bagarozi Marital Intimacy (2001), and Enrich Marital Satisfaction (1989) questionnaires and analyzed by structural equation modeling using PLS3 software. The results showed that only the components of Eros ($\beta = 0.66$ and $P < 0.001$) and Agape ($\beta = 0.31$ and $P < 0.001$) were significantly and positively associated with marital satisfaction. In addition, marital intimacy was found to be a mediator for the Eros ($\beta = 0.49$ and $P < 0.001$) and Agape ($\beta = 0.31$ and $P < 0.001$) components but not for the other components of the love style. This finding highlighted the mediating role of marital intimacy in the relationship between love and marital satisfaction; therefore, it should be taken into account for promoting marital relationships. Our findings also underlined the need to pay more attention to marital intimacy among couples**.**

Introduction

Family is one of the most important institutions in each society and the main factor affecting mental health. Family is a realm where couples' emotional, material and spiritual needs are fulfilled and a pillar for human emotional formation. The family is a spot for the manifestation of intimate and interpersonal relationships [1]. Healthy and well-formed families guarantee society's well-being. Therefore, family health must be assured to have a healthy society. Marriage can bestow upon couples mental peace, the consequences of which include good feelings and,

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subsequently, marital satisfaction that all couples seek [2]. Marital satisfaction is a feeling, opinion, and attitude that couples have toward their spouses and their relationships with them (Bachem et al., 2018). Marital satisfaction is an important and decisive indicator of the permanence and survival of a family. Marital satisfaction is a phenomenon causing men and women to feel happy and satisfied with their marital life and spouses (Karney & Bradbury, 2020).

Considering the importance of marriage and marital satisfaction, it is necessary to scrutinize the factors affecting them, including "love" as one of the factors that play an important role in achieving and maintaining marital satisfaction. Love is a prerequisite for a successful marital life [3]. It is crucial to understand how people define love. In 1988, Lee explored people's beliefs in and attitudes toward love and how they would define and interpret this entity. In this regard, Lee (1998) described six styles of love, including 1) Eros (i.e., romantic love), which is accompanied by a strong physical desire for the beloved, 2) Ludos (i.e., role-playing love), pastime love devoid of commitment, 3) Sturg (i.e., friendly love): love associated with pleasurable intimacy that grows gradually, 4- Mania (i.e., erotic love): love associated with mental preoccupation due to the fear of being rejected, making the person nervous, 5) Pragma (i.e., realistic love): logical love in which a person chooses his/her partner according to age, religious, and personality considerations, and finally, 6) Agape (i.e., sacrificial love): love with flexibility and generosity in which one would sacrifice himself/herself [4]. Some research on love and marital satisfaction [5-8] indicate that love is the best predictor of the durability of a relationship and reinforcement of marital satisfaction. These studies show that love is a determinant of marital satisfaction, life satisfaction, and the quality of marital life.

Methods

Participants

Regarding the age distribution, 23 (13.3%), 63 (36.2%), 63 (36.2%), and 20 (11.5%) participants belonged to the age groups of 20-30, 30-40, 40-50, and over 51 years old, respectively, the mean and the standard deviation age of 2.47 and 0.873. Out of 166 respondents, 131 were women (75.2%), and 35 were men (20.1%). The mean and standard deviation gender of 1.21 and 0.409. Regarding education, seven respondents (4%) were middle-school graduates; 23 (13.2%) owned diplomas; 12 (6.9%) respondents had an associate degree; 64 (36.8%) had bachelor's degrees; 57 (32.8%) held master degrees, and finally, 3 respondents (1.7%) had a doctorate with the mean and the standard deviation of 3.90 and 1.192. Out of 167 respondents, 31 (17.8%), 22 (12.6%), 32 (18.4%), and 82 (47.1%) of the participants were married for 1-5, 5-10, 10-15, and 15 or more years, respectively with the mean and the standard deviation of 99.2 and 172.1.

Measurements

LAS Love Attitude Scale

This questionnaire was developed by Hendrick et al. [9] to examine six types of love styles (i.e., Eros, Ludos, Sturg, Mania, Pragma, and Agape) mentioned in Lee's theory. Each of these six love styles has four elements and answers scored on a 5-point Likert scale from strong agreement to strong disagreement. Hendrick et al. (1998) calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the six love styles, which ranged from 0.68 to 0.87. In Iranian society, the reliability of the tool was confirmed by Bayat (2008), and its Cronbach's alpha coefficient in the present study was obtained as 75%.

Enrich's Couple Satisfaction Scale

This questionnaire was developed by Fowers & Olson (Fowers & Olson, 1989) and contains 47 items. This self-reporting scale provides a valid tool to assess marital satisfaction and is scored on a 5-point Likert scale from the complete agreement (5) to the complete disagreement (1). Olson (1989) reported the instrument's Cronbach's alpha coefficient as 92%. Soleimanian (1994) translated this questionnaire to Persian and reported its

Cronbach's alpha as 95%. Cronbach's alpha in the present study was calculated as 85%.

Bagarozi Marital Intimacy Scale

This questionnaire was developed by Bagarozi in 2001, consisting of 41 questions for evaluating marital intimacy in eight dimensions: emotional, physical, sexual, intellectual, aesthetic, psychological, spiritual, social, and marital recreation. The queries are scored from 1 (I do not have this need at all) to 10 (this need is quite strong in me). In his research, Bagarozi reported that the validity of the questionnaire was equal to 95%. Etemadi (2005) applied this questionnaire in Iran for the first time, reporting its validity based on Cronbach's alpha as 94%. Similarly, Cronbach's alpha of the tool was calculated as 94% in the present study.

Procedure

The statistical population of the present study included married men and women in Songor, Kermanshah province, Iran. The study was conducted in 2020, in which 174 subjects filled out the questionnaires. Since data collection coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to distribute the questionnaires in person. As a result, the subjects were recruited by the convenience sampling method. After obtaining consent for participation, the questionnaires were created using the Google Form platform on June 20, 2020, and their links were made available in Telegram and WhatsApp channels to be filled by those who were eligible to enter the research. The subjects completed and returned the questionnaires, and 43 days after the distribution, data collection was concluded, and data analysis was started.

Ethical considerations

In terms of ethics, it has been reviewed by the Board of the Faculty of Education and Psychology at Alzahra University.

To conform to ethical considerations, the couples were given the necessary assurance about the confidentiality of their information and the fact that they were completely free to participate or not to participate in this research. Criteria for participation in this research included being married, willingness to participate, and ability to read and write. Exclusion criteria encompassed being single, unwilling to participate, and lacking sufficient literacy.

This study was not preregistered.

Results

Primary analyses

The missing data were initially identified and then appropriately managed (by adjusting their percentages and the regression method) before performing data analysis. The percentages of missing data in the present research ranged from 0.6% to 6.3%. Also, outliers were identified and managed accordingly. The regression analysis of the Mahalanobis statistic was conducted for three variables whose total scores were calculated. The numerical values of the Mahalanobis statistic were arranged in descending order and compared by the Chi-square test. In the end, the numerical values obtained were considered outgoing data because the two numerical values of the new data columns were less than 0.001. Finally, the line related to these two numerical values was deleted for normalizing the data. When the numerical values of skewness and kurtosis are between ± 2 and ± 5, respectively, the variable is considered to have a normal distribution (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012). According to the normality analysis in this study, the respective numerical values were between -1.09 and 8.28 for skewness and between -1.27 and 90.57 for kurtosis. Therefore, it can be concluded that the data had a non-normal distribution. As a result, PLS3 software, which is insensitive to non-normally distributed data, was used for data analysis.

Measurement models for each scale

For interpreting factor loads, factor loads with a negative numerical value or factor loads greater than one or less than 0.5 must be removed [10]. Out of 112 items, 25 output

items had less than 0.5 or negative numerical values, including five items of the "marital intimacy" variable, seven items of the "attitude to love" variable, and 13 items of the "marital satisfaction" variable, so they were omitted. The mean and extracted variance (AVE) were calculated to evaluate convergent validity. If the numerical value obtained was greater than 0.5, it could be concluded that the latent variable had acceptable convergent validity. According to the output of the software, the numerical values of the variables were shown to be lower than 0.5, indicating unacceptable convergent validity. Finally, indicators with lower than 0.5 or negative numerical values were excluded. The software output showed that the reliability of the structure (CR) was acceptable (i.e., above 0.7) for the variables. Cronbach's alpha (α) was calculated as 0.75 for the "attitude to love" variable, 0.85 for the "marital satisfaction" variable, and 0.94 for the "marital intimacy" variable (Table 1).

Table 1. The measurement model for each scale

Variables	CR	AVE	Cronbach's alpha
Attitude to love	0.73	0.18	0.75
Marital Satisfaction	0.83	0.31	0.85
Marital intimacy	0.93	0.3	0.94

Divergent validity examines differences between variables and tries to determine if two variables measure the same concept. The acceptable value for this index is less than 0.8. To extract the HTMT[1] index, data analysis showed that all research variables had coefficients less than 0.8, indicating acceptable divergence validity.

Measurement models for all scale

The whole model was analyzed in two steps to evaluate the fit of the model. The first step included the evaluation of the fitting indices of the predicted model. Two indices were used in this step, 1) the root mean square standard (SRMR[2]) and 2) the normalized fit index (NFI[3]). The acceptable numerical value is equal to or less than 0.08 for SRMR and greater than 0.9 for NFI. If one of these two indicators fits into the measurement model, it is considered to have an acceptable fitness. The results showed that the whole research model had an SRMR of less than 0.08, indicating a good agreement between the measurement model and the assumed model. In the second step, currency alignment was assessed between variables. Currency alignment occurs when two or more predictor variables show a strong correlation in multivariate regression analysis (i.e., there is a correlation between the predictor variables). In PLS3 software, currency linearity is measured by the Torrent of Variance (VIF) factor. The model was run according to the standard instruction, and the VIF value of the predictor variables was calculated as 1.34, which was less than five, negating any currency alignment between the predictor variables.

Structural model's fitness

A structural model deals with the relationship between hidden variables based on research hypotheses. Therefore, path coefficients between research variables must be analyzed first. After analyzing the PLS3 algorithm that displays the numerical values of the assumed relationships between the variables, beta coefficients were added to the drawn model. These coefficients ranged from +1 to -1, with numerical values close to one, indicating positive and strong relationships. Consequently, the "β" and "t" coefficients were calculated for the components of the Eros and Agape love styles according to the exogenous variables of "attitude to love" and "marital intimacy," showing a positive predictive value for marital satisfaction (Table 2).

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[1] Heterotrait- Terotrait-Monotrait Ratio

[2] Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual

[3] Normal Fit Index

Table 2. Evaluation of the significance coefficients for the Eros and Agape love styles

	t-value	p-value	β
Eros and marital satisfaction	10.04	0.000	0.66
Marital intimacy and marital satisfaction	3.21	0.001	0.24
Agape and marital satisfaction	4.06	0.000	0.31
Marital intimacy and marital satisfaction	7.68	0.000	0.47

Based on research hypotheses, a structural model deals with the relationship between hidden variables. At this point, the coefficient of determination (R^2) was calculated for latent endogenous variables. The R^2 index ranges from 0 to 1; the closer the number is to one, the more accurate the prediction of the assumed model is. The three R^2 numerical values of 0.19, 0.33, and 0.67 indicate weak, moderate, and strong coefficients of determination, respectively (Hair et al., 2014). In this study, the R^2 value for the endogenous variable was obtained as 0.65 in relation to the Eros component of the "attitude to love" and "marital intimacy" variables. In addition, the R^2 values were equal to 0.40, 0.37, 0.37, 0.38, and 0.42 regarding the relationship of marital intimacy with the Ludus, Sturg, Pragma, Mania, and Agape components, respectively. Overall, the R^2 value in this group was strong.

The "f^2" effect size estimates the intensity of the relationship between the hidden variables of the hypothetical model, reflecting that by removing one variable, to what extent the other variable would affect the determination coefficient of the endogenous variable. (Cohen, 1988) introduced three cut-off lines, 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35, representing small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively, to determine the effect size of one exogenous variable on the endogenous variable in the assumed model. According to our data, the numerical values of f^2 were obtained at 1.001 and 0.133 for the Eros component related to the exogenous variables of "attitude to love" and "marital intimacy," respectively. Extrapolating Cohen's proposed (1988) cut-off lines to our data, the effect of the Eros component on the endogenous variable (i.e., marital satisfaction) was greater for the "attitude to love" than the "marital intimacy" exogenous variable. Also, the f^2 numerical value of the Ludus component was 0.396 for "attitude to love" and 0.142 for "marital intimacy."

According to the cut-off lines proposed, the effect of the Ludus component on "marital satisfaction" was greater for "attitude to love" compared to "marital intimacy." However, the effects of the other components of the "attitude to love" exogenous variable on the endogenous variable (i.e., marital satisfaction) were smaller compared to the effects of the other exogenous variable (i.e., marital intimacy).

Mediating role of marital intimacy

The mediating variable explains the relationship between the predictor and criterion variables by ascertaining the process between them. The method described by Baron & Kenny (Baron & Kenny, 1986) was used to analyze the mediator variable.

The mediator will be complete when there is a significant relationship between the predictor and criterion variables (i.e., there will be no significant relationship between the predictor and criterion variables when the mediator variable is added).

The mediator will be partial when there is a significant relationship between the predictor and criterion variables (i.e., after adding the mediator, the relationship between the predictor and criterion variables is still statistically significant, but the beta coefficient decreases).

To analyze the data, a model was applied as a predictor variable for each component of the "love attitude " variable and the criterion variable. Then the beta coefficient was determined for the relationship between the components of the predictor variable and the criterion variable. Next, the mediator variable was added to the model, and the path between the predictor variable and the components of the mediator variable was drawn by an arrow. Also, a path was drawn between the criterion

and mediator variables, as well as between the components of the predictor variable and the criterion variable. To analyze the model, the model's coefficients were presented to its paths, showing that marital intimacy was a partial mediator for the Eros component (Table 3) and a complete mediator for the Agape component (Table 4).

Table 3. Coefficients of the relationship between the mediator variable and the Eros component

Criterion variable	Predictor variable	Mediator model	Direct model
Marital satisfaction	Eros	0.66*	0.79
Marital satisfaction	Marital intimacy	0.24	
Marital intimacy	Eros	0.49	

The statistical significance level is 0.001

Table 4. Coefficients of the relationship between the mediator variable and the Agape component

Criterion variable	Predictor variable	Mediator model	Direct model
Marital satisfaction	Agape	0.31	0.51
Marital satisfaction	Marital intimacy	0.47	
Marital intimacy	Agape	0.31	

Discussion

Society pays exorbitant costs annually to resolve marital conflicts. Identifying the factors affecting marital satisfaction and marital conflicts can improve couples' health and relationships. Studies on social lifestyles and couples' lives have shown that a warm and romantic relationship between spouses greatly upgrades their marital satisfaction. Research has shown that love can be one of the best and most effective predictors of the permanency and survival of marital relationships and marital satisfaction [11]. Other predictors of marital satisfaction include intimacy and pleasure experienced by couples in their interactions with each other. Therefore, this study investigated the mediating role of marital intimacy in determining the relationship between love attitudes and marital satisfaction in married men and women.

Testing the first hypothesis of this research showed that there was a significant relationship between the Eros component of the "attitude to love" variable and marital satisfaction. This finding was in line with the results of [12-14]. The romantic love style (*i.e.,* Eros, which is characterized by a strong physical desire for the beloved one), also known as the poetic lovemaking style, is associated with high self-confidence, extraversion, and compatibility. So,

it can be said that couples with the Eros love style share more similar desires in their marital relationship. These results suggest that this love style can be an effective predictor of marital satisfaction.

We also noticed a significant relationship between the Agape love style and marital satisfaction, which was in line with the findings of [15-17] but in contrast with the findings of [18]. As a result of the Agape love style (i.e., sacrifice), there is a strong desire to take care of the beloved one with great generosity. According to the findings of this study, people with the Agape love style tend to sacrifice themselves for their beloved ones (i.e., spouses), and this scarification is accompanied by a certain flexibility. This kind of love brings satisfaction to couples. There was no significant relationship between the other components of attitude to love and marital satisfaction.

Considering the second hypothesis of this research, the results showed that the Eros and Agape love styles were significantly associated with marital intimacy. Considering the relationship between the romantic love style (i.e., Eros) and marital intimacy, it can be concluded that intimacy is the result of a warm and romantic relationship between couples. Having a warm and romantic relationship makes couples feel comfortable with each other and experience pleasant connections. In other

words, romantic relationships herald intimacy between spouses. Furthermore, people with the self-sacrifice love style (i.e., Agape) tend to focus on their love and commitment to their beloved partners by constantly caring about and supporting them. This is the situation in which spouses can feel the intimacy with each other.

Regarding the third hypothesis of the study, a significant relationship was observed between marital intimacy and marital satisfaction, which was consistent with the findings [19-21]. According to these findings, it appears that intimacy between couples is one of the important factors determining the permanency of marital life. On the other hand, the lack of intimacy can render marital relationships doomed to failure. The quality of marital life depends on intimacy between spouses. Intimacy refers to the spouse's attention to establishing and maintaining a close relationship with his/her partner, which would subsequently upgrade their marital satisfaction, marital life, and matrimonial relationships [22].

The results of this study showed that marital intimacy could play a mediating role between the Eros and Agape components of the "attitude to love" variable and marital satisfaction. This observation denoted that intimacy could probably play this mediating role when couples were willing to present themselves desirably in their relationship, and this is only possible when the spouses love each other. A romantic (i.e., Eros) love between couples brings them a sincere and encouraging relationship, allowing them to effectively and generously express their needs to their partners. Altogether, these events will ultimately increase marital satisfaction among couples.

In this study, the divine love style, due to its altruism and ideal thinking about love, was found to help create long-term, satisfying relationships. In addition, the lover and the beloved have no expectations from each other and are eager to sacrifice their interests for the sake of the other. These spouses enjoy marital satisfaction and marital intimacy, which bring them warm interpersonal relationships; in this way, the relationship between the divine love style and marital satisfaction can be justified.

Our results revealed no mediating role for marital intimacy when it came to the connection of marital satisfaction with the Ludos, Sturg, Pragma, and Mania love styles. As mentioned earlier, none of these love styles were significantly associated with marital satisfaction, so intimacy could not be regarded as a mediator in such a model; intimacy can play a mediating role only when it is significantly associated with a love style that can predict marital satisfaction, which was not true for the styles mentioned above [23-25].

Research limitations

1) Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, only individuals and couples who had access to cyberspace were enrolled [26].

2) Despite the researcher's emphasis on the confidentiality of information, the answers provided by some couples might not be honest.

Implications of findings

1) The findings of this study can be useful to family counselors and therapists for enriching their counseling and couple therapy sessions and helping their clients with love and intimacy problems [27].

2) Our findings can be applicable in premarital counseling centers to familiarize couples with lovemaking styles and intimacy needs [28].

Suggestions for further research

1) It is suggested to investigate the potential mediating role of other variables, such as emotion regulation, in future studies [29].

2) It is recommended to enroll unmarried individuals in studies on love styles to help them better understand love and marital life and establish appropriate relationships with their future spouses [30].

Conclusion

The family is a social institution primarily formed based on matrimonial relationships between a man and a woman. The family is a realm where couples seek satisfaction with their different physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual needs. Being aware of these needs and knowing how to satisfy them are important pillars of family affairs. A healthy family requires constructive and intimate interactions between spouses, who are required to love each other and exude intimacy and empathy toward each other. Marital satisfaction can reflect the love and intimacy between couples. The present study showed that marital intimacy could play a mediating role between marital satisfaction and the Eros and Agape love attitudes, highlighting the essential role of intimacy in reinforcing love and marital satisfaction between spouses. Therefore, more attention should be paid to encouraging intimacy between couples, which requires implementing training programs on how to establish and preserve intimate long-term marital relationships. Intimacy is another important determinant of marital satisfaction. Many marital conflicts are due to the lack of intimacy and couples' inappropriate relationships. It has been reported that the lack of intimacy between couples reduces marital satisfaction and increases marital boredom. Studies show that intimate relationships between couples stabilize marital life, which would otherwise be unstable and may lead to infidelity. A significant correlation has been reported between intimacy and marital satisfaction, but the mediating role of intimacy in the link between love and marital satisfaction has not been investigated so far. When discussing marital satisfaction, it is also important to pay attention to communication between couples and the warmth of their relationships. The degree of intimacy between spouses is reflected in the way through which they express their relationships and needs and solve their problems, which would finally determine their marital satisfaction. Research has shown that romantic relationships and ultimate marital satisfaction are highly dependent on the conflict resolution strategies employed by couples. Conflicts arise when intimacy and marital satisfaction between spouses wane, which in turn will further decrease marital satisfaction, compromise couples' mental well-being, and result in emotional problems, pushing couples toward extramarital affairs. Learning the desired relationship accompanied by love and respect is an important step toward creating and/or increasing intimacy between couples. According to the above-mentioned points, this study aimed to investigate the role of marital intimacy in determining the relationship between attitudes toward love and marital satisfaction in married men and women.

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