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Research Paper: The Role of Intimacy and Sexual Knowledge in Predicting Marital Quality with the Mediation of Attachment Style in Iranian Couples

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Abstract

Objective: This study aimed to investigate the role of intimacy and sexual knowledge in predicting marital quality, with attachment style as a mediator, among Iranian couples.

Methods: This research employed a correlational design using structural equation modeling (SEM). The population consisted of couples referred to psychotherapy and welfare centers in Tabriz in 2023, from which 250 participants were selected via multistage random sampling. Data were collected using the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS), Intimacy Scale (IS), Sexual Knowledge Questionnaire (SKQ), and Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R). For data analysis, SPSS version 26 was used for descriptive and correlation analyses, and AMOS version 24 was applied for structural equation modeling to test the hypothesized relationships between variables.

Results: The sample size was found to be adequate for structural equation modeling (KMO=0.89). Intimacy (β=0.41, P<0.001) and sexual knowledge (β=0.20, P<0.01) had direct effects on marital quality, while attachment style significantly mediated these relationships (P<0.001). The proposed model showed a good fit to the data (χ^2/df=2.15, RMSEA=0.06).

Conclusions: They suggest that counselors and therapists should prioritize integrating these essential elements into their therapeutic approaches and interventions to promote healthier, more fulfilling partnerships.

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1. Introduction

The family, as the fundamental unit of society, represents a dynamic and multilayered system characterized by deep emotional bonds, defined roles, and complex interactions (Rahimi et al., 2022). At the core of this system lies marital quality, recognized as a key indicator of marital health and stability (King et al., 2022). Marital quality is a multidimensional construct encompassing satisfaction, adjustment, cohesion, and commitment, and it is influenced by various factors, including psychological characteristics and spousal interactions (Troxel, 2006). Numerous studies have demonstrated that improving marital quality not only enhances the psychological well-being of couples but also positively impacts overall family functioning and even future generations (May et al, 2020). The family, as the fundamental unit of society, represents a dynamic and multilayered system characterized by deep emotional bonds, defined roles, and complex interactions (Rahimi et al., 2022). At the core of this system lies marital quality, recognized as a key indicator of marital health and stability (King et al., 2022). Marital quality is a multidimensional construct encompassing satisfaction, adjustment, cohesion, and commitment, and it is influenced by various factors, including psychological characteristics and spousal interactions (Troxel, 2006). Numerous studies have demonstrated that improving marital quality not only enhances the psychological well-being of couples but also positively impacts overall family functioning and even future generations (Proulx &Felix, 2025).

One of the most influential predictors of marital quality is intimacy. Intimacy, defined as emotional closeness, trust, and mutual support, has repeatedly been identified as a foundational element of marital satisfaction (Nouranipour et al., 2017). Recent studies have demonstrated that emotional intimacy strengthens communication and reduces conflict, thereby enhancing relational well-being (Maboudi et al., 2023; Salehi et al., 2023). Similarly, interventions designed to foster emotional intimacy have been shown to improve marital satisfaction and commitment (Knobloch-Fedders et al., 2020).

Findings from the Flourishing Families Project, which examined 335 couples, further revealed that both emotional and sexual intimacy serve as critical mechanisms: emotional intimacy mediates the effect of partner communication on relationship satisfaction, while sexual satisfaction also contributes significantly through gender-specific dynamics (Dew & Wilcox, 2013).

In non-Western contexts, qualitative research among Iranian couples has highlighted unique cultural facilitators of intimacy, such as reciprocal self-sacrifice, gratitude, shared activities, and reliance on family or spiritual values (Sadeghi et al., 2020). These insights indicate that intimacy in Iran is shaped not only by individual emotions but also by cultural and family norms.

Taken together, the current evidence suggests that intimacy is a multifaceted construct, encompassing emotional, communicative, and cultural dimensions, that

robustly predicts marital quality across diverse contexts. Enhancing intimacy, therefore, represents a promising pathway for interventions aimed at strengthening marital relationships worldwide.

Another important factor influencing marital quality is sexual knowledge, which refers not only to couples' awareness of sexual matters but also to their ability to communicate effectively in this domain. From a theoretical perspective, sexual knowledge provides the cognitive foundation for developing healthy sexual scripts, fostering open communication, and reducing misconceptions about sexual behavior (Byers, 2011). Greater awareness and accurate information enable couples to negotiate sexual needs, manage expectations, and resolve conflicts more constructively, thereby enhancing marital satisfaction and stability (McCarthy, 2021).

Empirical evidence supports these theoretical assumptions. For example, McCarthy (2021) reported that sexual knowledge was positively associated with sexual satisfaction, which in turn predicted overall marital quality. Similarly, Torabi et al. (2023), in a study of couples in Tehran, showed that sexual education interventions increased marital satisfaction by nearly 30%. In addition, international findings suggest that sexual knowledge contributes to reducing sexual anxiety, improving mutual consent, and strengthening intimacy (Gott & Hinchliff, 2003).

Despite these findings, the role of sexual knowledge has received limited scholarly attention in Iran due to cultural taboos surrounding sexual issues. Consequently, its mechanisms and broader impacts on marital quality have not been fully explored. Nevertheless, based on existing evidence, sexual knowledge appears to serve as both a protective factor against marital dissatisfaction and a facilitator of intimacy and trust between partners, ultimately contributing to higher marital quality across cultural contexts.

Attachment style, as another important psychological construct, plays a central role in shaping marital dynamics. According to Bowlby's attachment theory (1988), attachment styles (secure, avoidant, anxious) serve as internal working models that guide individuals' expectations and behaviors in close relationships. Secure attachment fosters trust, effective communication, and emotional regulation, all of which contribute to marital satisfaction and stability. In contrast, avoidant attachment is often characterized by emotional distancing and low responsiveness, which may hinder intimacy and increase marital dissatisfaction, while anxious attachment tends to produce excessive dependency and conflict due to heightened fear of rejection (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019).

Empirical evidence strongly supports these theoretical foundations. Hosseini et al. (2021) found that secure attachment was positively correlated with marital satisfaction ($r = .62$) among Iranian couples, whereas insecure attachment exacerbated marital conflicts. Internationally, Fraley et al (2005) emphasized that secure attachment not only predicts higher marital satisfaction but also

buffers against stress and conflict. More recent findings have confirmed that secure attachment enhances intimacy, empathy, and sexual satisfaction, while insecure patterns undermine emotional closeness and communication (Chan et al, 2020).

Taken together, these findings suggest that attachment style is not merely a background characteristic but a dynamic relational framework. Secure attachment appears to amplify the positive effects of intimacy and sexual knowledge on marital quality, while insecure styles may weaken or distort these effects. Therefore, understanding and addressing attachment patterns is critical in marital counseling and interventions aimed at improving relationship quality.

Despite this evidence, a review of the literature reveals that most studies have examined intimacy, sexual knowledge, and attachment style in isolation, with fewer attempts to integrate these variables within a causal model. For instance, Nouranipour et al. (2017) explored the relationship between intimacy and marital quality but overlooked the mediating role of attachment style. Similarly, McCarthy (2021) addressed sexual knowledge without considering its effects through attachment style. This research gap is even more pronounced in Iran, where cultural restrictions have limited the study of sexual issues, and comprehensive models that combine these variables remain scarce (Rahimi et al., 2022). Previous studies have provided valuable insights into the predictors of marital quality, yet several gaps remain. For instance, Nouranipour et al. (2017) explored the relationship between intimacy and marital quality in Iranian couples, but overlooked the mediating role of attachment style. Similarly, McCarthy (2021) examined sexual knowledge and its impact on sexual satisfaction and marital quality, without addressing its indirect effects through relational variables such as attachment. International research further emphasizes these gaps: Brassard et al. (2023) demonstrated that attachment insecurity reduces the benefits of intimacy on marital outcomes, while Li and Chan (2019) found that secure attachment enhances the positive effects of both intimacy and sexual knowledge. However, these studies were conducted mainly in Western or East Asian contexts, limiting their applicability to Iranian cultural settings. In Iran, most studies have examined intimacy and marital satisfaction in isolation. For example, Sanaei et al. (2000) and Hosseini et al. (2021) confirmed that intimacy and attachment are strong predictors of marital quality, but neither integrated sexual knowledge into their models. More recent Iranian studies, such as Torabi et al. (2023), highlighted the importance of sexual education for couples' satisfaction, but again failed to investigate its interaction with intimacy or attachment. Additionally, Rahimi et al. (2022) noted that cultural taboos surrounding sexual issues have constrained research in this area, resulting in limited conceptual models that capture the interplay of these factors.

Taken together, prior research suggests that intimacy, sexual knowledge, and attachment are each important for marital quality, yet few studies, especially within Iran, have examined them simultaneously in a single conceptual model. The present study,

therefore, seeks to address this gap by testing both the direct and indirect effects of intimacy and sexual knowledge on marital quality through attachment style, thereby contributing a more comprehensive framework to the literature.

This gap underscores the necessity of the present study. Understanding how intimacy and sexual knowledge influence marital quality through attachment style may inform the development of more effective interventions for couples. The significance of this study is particularly heightened in the Iranian context, where marital conflicts and limited sexual awareness are common challenges, exacerbated by cultural taboos and the lack of adequate education (Torabi et al., 2023).

This research aims to test a conceptual model demonstrating how intimacy and sexual knowledge affect marital quality through the mediating role of attachment style. In this study, marital quality was operationalized and measured using the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS; Busby et al., 1995), which assesses satisfaction, consensus, and cohesion between partners.

Drawing on attachment theory and marital quality research, it was hypothesized that attachment anxiety and avoidance would be negatively associated with intimacy, whereas sexual knowledge would be positively associated with intimacy. In turn, intimacy would positively predict marital quality. In addition, direct paths from attachment dimensions and sexual knowledge to marital quality were specified to test both direct and indirect (mediated) effects. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual model of the study.

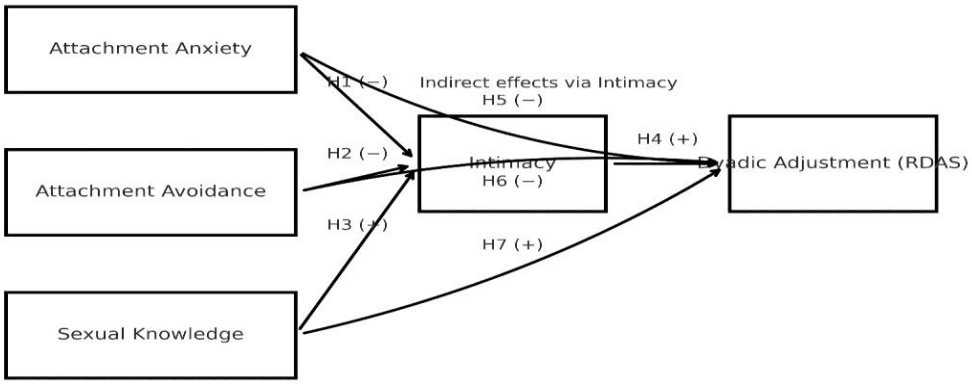

Figure 1
Conceptual Model of the Study

2. Method

The population consisted of married couples who attended psychotherapy centers and the Welfare Organization of Tabriz in 2023 (N = 3,000).

A sample size of 250 participants was considered appropriate based on Kline's (2020) guideline, ten times the number of model parameters (25 parameters). The sampling was carried out in two stages: first, psychotherapy centers were randomly selected, and then, from the couples referred to these centers, participants were recruited through purposive sampling, given the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The inclusion criteria were residence in Tabriz, experiencing marital conflict, and willingness to participate in the study. Exclusion criteria included incomplete responses to the research instruments or withdrawal from the study.

2.1. Instruments

Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS): The RDAS was developed by Busby et al. (1995), which consists of 14 items. Responses are rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from *never* (0) to *always* (5). The scale comprises three subscales: consensus (items 1–6), satisfaction (items 7–10), and cohesion (items 11–14). The minimum possible score is 0, and the maximum is 69, with higher scores reflecting greater marital adjustment. Internal consistency has been reported with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.79 to 0.90 (Holist et al., 2005). In Iranian samples, Cronbach's alpha was 0.85 (Yousefi, 2011). Convergent validity with the Marital Satisfaction Scale was established ($p < .001$).

Intimacy Scale (IS): The IS was designed by Walker and Thompson (1983) and includes 17 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). The total score ranges from 17 to 85, with higher scores reflecting greater marital intimacy. The IS is unidimensional and does not include subscales. Internal consistency in Iranian samples was very high ($\alpha = 0.96$; Sanaei et al., 2000). Convergent validity was demonstrated through significant correlation with the Love Questionnaire ($r = .88$)

Sexual Knowledge Questionnaire (SKQ): This measure was developed by Hooper et al. (1992) and contains 15 items assessing knowledge of sexual health. Items are scored dichotomously (correct = 1, incorrect = 0), yielding a possible range of 0–15. Higher scores indicate greater sexual knowledge. Rahimi (2009) reported an internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.82 in Iranian samples. Content validity was confirmed through expert review by specialists in sexual health (McCarthy, 2021).

Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised (ECR-R): Developed by Waller et al. (2000), this 36-item self-report instrument measures adult attachment across two subscales: anxiety (18 items) and avoidance (18 items). Responses are given on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). Scores for each subscale range from 18 to 126, with higher scores reflecting greater attachment anxiety or avoidance. Waller et al (2005) reported a

test-retest reliability of 0.70, while Iranian research demonstrated Cronbach's alpha of 0.78 (Shokarkan et al., 2006). Validity has been established through significant correlations with the Hazan and Shaver (1990) Attachment Scale (r = .40–.60).

2.2. Procedure

After obtaining approval from the heads of the selected centers and receiving ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the University of Mohaghegh Ardabili (IR.UMA.REC.1402.093), data collection was conducted from October to December 2023. Questionnaires were administered in person, with couples completing them separately after providing informed consent. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation, and they were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The study involved no physical or psychological harm to the participants. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 (descriptive statistics) and AMOS version 24 (structural modeling). The significance level was set at 0.05.

3. Results

Data from 250 couples were analyzed. The mean age of the participants was 32.36 years (SD = 0.72).

Table 1

Demographic Variables of Couples (n=250)

Demographic Variable	Level	Percentage	Number
Husband's Education	Elementary	10.4	26
	Middle School	13.6	34
	High School	36.8	92
	Diploma	39.2	98
	Bachelor's Degree and Higher	0.0	
Wife's Education	Elementary	12.8	32
	Middle School	17.6	44
	High School	47.2	118
	Diploma	22.4	56
	Bachelor's Degree and Higher	00.0	0
Number of Children	1	27.6	69
	2	42.4	106
	3	28	70
	4	1.6	4
	More than 4	0.4	1
Husband's Occupation	Unemployed	1.2	3
	Government Employee	26	65
	Self-Employed	67.06	169
	Other	5.2	13
Wife's Occupation	Housewife	69.6	174

Demographic Variable	Level	Percentage	Number
	Government Employee	5.6	14
	Self-Employed	24.8	62
	Other	0	0
Age (years); Mean (Standard Deviation)			(72.0)32.36

Table 1 described the demographic profile of the participants, revealing a diverse yet representative sample. Among husbands, education levels are predominantly moderate to high, with the highest frequencies at diploma (39.2%) and high school (36.8%), while only 10.4% hold elementary education. A similar pattern is observed for wives, with a stronger emphasis on high school (47.2%) and diploma (22.4%), and minimal representation at higher levels (less than 5%). The number of children is mostly limited to 1–3 (98% of the sample), reflecting modern small-family structures. Occupationally, husbands are primarily self-employed (67.6%) or government employees (26%), whereas wives are predominantly housewives (69.6%), with limited shares in government employment (5.6%) and self-employment (24.8%). The mean age of participants is 32.36 years (SD = 7.20), indicating a young and mature sample. These characteristics suggest an urban-rural community with moderate education levels and traditional gender-based employment patterns, providing a suitable context for investigating family dynamics.

Descriptive statistics of the study variables are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Descriptive indices (mean and standard deviation) of research variables among couples (N = 250)

Variable	Kurtosis	Skewness	Maximum – Minimum	Standard deviation	mean
Marital quality	-0.399	0.592	20-63	12.42	35.93
Agreement	-0.489	0.682	11-35	8.92	18.13
Satisfaction	0.656	0.686	7-21	5.84	11.102
Coherence	0.960	0.850	7-20	5.43	11.86
Intimacy	-0.292	-0.666	6-18	5.80	14.06
Sexual knowledge	-0.251	-0.039	11-38	8.13	23.96
Attachment style (secure)	-0.435	0.253	20-83	16.16	46.31

Table 2 presented the descriptive statistics for the key variables in the study. Marital quality scores averaged 35.93 (SD = 12.42), with a moderate positive skewness (0.592) indicating a slight left-leaning distribution and platykurtic shape (-0.399), suggesting

variability in relationship perceptions. Agreement and satisfaction subscales showed means of 18.13 (SD = 8.92) and 11.10 (SD = 5.84), respectively, both with positive skewness (>0.68) and near-normal kurtosis, reflecting generally moderate levels with some higher outliers. Coherence averaged 11.86 (SD = 5.43), exhibiting the strongest positive skewness (0.850) and leptokurtic distribution (0.960), implying a concentration around lower values. Intimacy scores were higher at 14.06 (SD = 5.80), with negative skewness (-0.666) pointing to a right-leaning tail and platykurtic form. Sexual knowledge had a mean of 23.96 (SD = 8.13), nearly symmetric (skewness ≈ 0), and platykurtic. Secure attachment style scored highest at 46.31 (SD = 16.16), with mild positive skewness (0.253) and platykurtic kurtosis, indicating a predominantly secure sample with moderate variability. Overall, the variables display acceptable ranges and distributions suitable for parametric analyses, highlighting average to above-average relational and attachment qualities in the sample.

Table 3 displays the Pearson correlation coefficients among marital quality, intimacy, sexual knowledge, and secure attachment in couples.

Table 3

Correlation matrix among predictor, mediating, and dependent variables in the final model

	1	2	3	4
1. Marital quality	1			
2. Intimacy	0.41**	1		
3. Sexual knowledge	0.20**	0.15**	1	
4. Attachment style (secure)	0.18*	0.15**	0.25**	1

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Table 3 displayed the Pearson correlation coefficients among marital quality, intimacy, sexual knowledge, and secure attachment style. All associations are positive and statistically significant, with marital quality showing the strongest correlation with intimacy ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$), followed by secure attachment ($r = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$) and sexual knowledge ($r = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$). Weaker but significant links emerge between intimacy and sexual knowledge ($r = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$), intimacy and secure attachment ($r = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$), and sexual knowledge and secure attachment ($r = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$). These moderate positive correlations suggest interconnected relational factors, where higher intimacy and secure attachment may enhance marital quality, with sexual knowledge playing a supportive role, supporting the study's hypotheses on their interrelations.

As shown in Table 4, the standardized coefficients and critical ratios for all paths in the revised (final) model were examined**.**

Table 4

Standardized coefficients of the modified (final) pattern paths

Path	Standard coefficients	Standard error	Critical ratio	Significance level (P)
Marital Quality → Intimacy	0.32	0.00	4.09	<0.001
Marital Quality → Agreement	0.05	0.00	0.47	0.625
Marital Quality → Satisfaction	-0.22	0.16	-3.17	0.001
Marital Quality → Coherence	-0.23	0.03	-3.57	<0.001
Marital Quality → Extreme Imitation	0.02	0.07	0.35	0.713
Marital Quality → Attachment Style	0.24	0.05	3.72	<0.001
Marital Quality → Isolation	-0.19	0.46	-2.81	0.005
Marital Quality → Sexual Knowledge	-0.73	0.34	-6.94	<0.001
Intimacy → Attachment Style	0.66	0.00	5.20	<0.001
Sexual Knowledge → Attachment Style	0.480	0.161	5.250	<0.001

Intimacy (β = 0.41, p < .001) and sexual knowledge (β = 0.20, p < .01) had direct effects on marital quality. Bootstrap analysis (2,000 samples) demonstrated that the indirect effects of intimacy (β = 0.15, CI = 0.09–0.22) and sexual knowledge (β = 0.10, CI = 0.04–0.17) through attachment style were significant (p < .001).

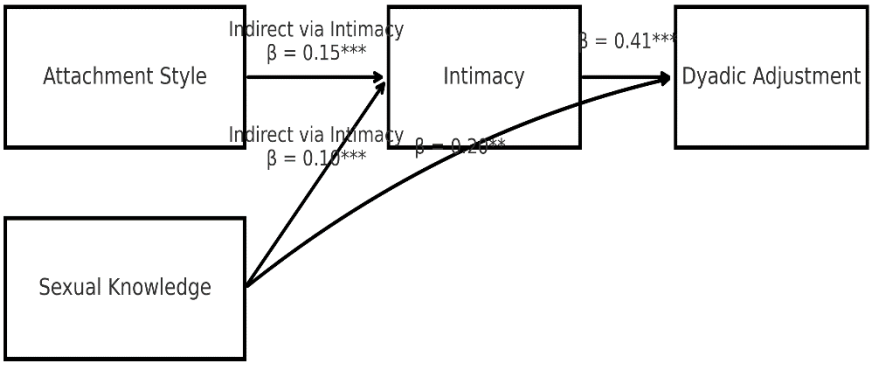

Figure 2

Structural model with standardized path coefficients

The hypothesized structural model demonstrated acceptable fit indices (χ^2/df = 2.15, GFI = 0.92, CFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.06), indicating a good fit to the data. As shown in Figure 2, intimacy had a significant direct effect on dyadic adjustment ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < .001$). Sexual knowledge also directly predicted dyadic adjustment ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < .01$).

Furthermore, the bootstrap test with 2000 resamples indicated significant indirect effects. Intimacy mediated the relationship between attachment style and dyadic adjustment ($\beta = 0.15$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.22], $p < .001$). In addition, intimacy mediated the association between sexual knowledge and dyadic adjustment ($\beta = 0.10$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.17], $p < .001$). These findings confirm both the direct and indirect pathways specified in the conceptual model.

4. Discussion

The present study demonstrated that intimacy, sexual knowledge, and attachment style play significant roles in predicting marital quality. Specifically, intimacy showed a strong positive association with marital quality, confirming that emotional closeness is a fundamental element of stable and satisfying relationships. This result is consistent with findings by King et al. (2022) and Greeley et al. (2021), who reported that intimacy fosters cohesion and reduces conflict, thereby improving overall relationship quality. In Iran, Nouranipour et al. (2017) also confirmed a strong positive correlation, suggesting that intimacy serves as a universal emotional factor underlying marital success across both Western and Iranian cultural contexts. A possible explanation is that intimacy nurtures trust and emotional security, which in turn promotes constructive communication and positive interactions between partners.

Sexual knowledge also emerged as a significant positive predictor of marital quality, although with a smaller effect size compared to previous studies. In Iran, Torabi et al. (2023) highlighted the benefits of sex education in enhancing marital satisfaction, while McCarthy (2021) reported a stronger association in Western contexts. The modest effect observed in the current study may be due to cultural taboos surrounding sexual topics in Iran, which limit open discussion and formal education in this domain. Consequently, sexual knowledge may have a constrained influence in more conservative societies, whereas its impact is more pronounced in contexts where sexual communication is socially accepted.

Attachment style further clarified the mechanisms through which intimacy and sexual knowledge contribute to marital quality. The mediating role of attachment is consistent with Bowlby's (1988) theoretical framework and complements empirical studies, such as Hosseini et al. (2021), who found a positive association between secure attachment and marital satisfaction among Iranian couples. The present findings extend this work by showing that secure attachment not only strengthens direct associations but also amplifies the indirect benefits of intimacy and sexual knowledge. This aligns with Fraley (2005), who emphasized that secure attachment enhances the effects of

emotional and relational resources, whereas insecure styles (anxious or avoidant) undermine them.

Taken together, these findings suggest that intimacy is a central emotional resource, sexual knowledge provides necessary cognitive skills, and secure attachment functions as a relational context in which these factors exert their maximum effect. The results converge with prior research on intimacy and attachment but diverge somewhat from international findings on sexual knowledge, highlighting the moderating role of cultural context. These results underscore the importance of addressing both emotional and educational aspects of marital relationships while fostering secure attachment patterns in couples counseling and educational interventions.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study highlight intimacy, sexual knowledge, and attachment style as key determinants of marital quality. Intimacy emerged as the strongest predictor, underscoring its universal role in fostering emotional security and trust within couples. Sexual knowledge also contributed positively, though its effect appeared weaker in the Iranian context, pointing to the influence of cultural barriers on sexual communication and education. Importantly, the mediating role of attachment style clarified that secure attachment amplifies the benefits of both intimacy and sexual knowledge, while insecure styles may diminish them.

These findings contribute to the literature by integrating emotional, cognitive, and relational factors in explaining marital quality and by emphasizing the cultural nuances of sexual knowledge. Practically, the results suggest that interventions aimed at improving marital relationships should not only strengthen intimacy and provide sexual education but also focus on fostering secure attachment patterns. Such integrated approaches can enhance marital quality and resilience, ultimately supporting the well-being of couples in both clinical and community settings.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the writing of this article. Also, this research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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