

Model Fit Determination of Marital Satisfaction Based on Self-Differentiation, Critical Thinking, and Emotional Self-Regulation Mediated by the Feeling of Happiness in Married Women

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The primary objective of this study was to develop and validate a structural model of marital satisfaction among married women, based on self-differentiation, critical thinking, and emotional self-regulation, with happiness as a mediating variable.

Methods: This study utilized a quantitative, descriptive-correlational design with a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach. The sample comprised married women who visited the counseling centers at the University of Tehran between January 2023 and August 2023. A total of 330 participants were selected using convenience sampling. Data were collected using validated questionnaires, including the Self-Differentiation Scale, Critical Thinking Questionnaire, Emotional Self-Regulation Scale, Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, and ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale. The data were analyzed using SEM to assess the model's fit and test the hypothesized relationships between variables.

Findings: The results indicated that the proposed structural model fit the data well, with satisfactory model fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 3.618$, RMSEA = .061, CFI = .923). Self-differentiation ($\beta = .217$, $p = .033$), critical thinking ($\beta = .230$, $p = .01$), and emotional self-regulation ($\beta = .201$, $p = .01$) had significant direct effects on marital satisfaction. Additionally, happiness significantly mediated the relationships between self-differentiation ($\beta = .229$, $p = .01$), critical thinking ($\beta = .178$, $p = .01$), and emotional self-regulation ($\beta = .200$, $p = .01$) with marital satisfaction.

Conclusion: This study underscores the importance of self-differentiation, critical thinking, and emotional self-regulation as key factors influencing marital satisfaction among married women. The mediating role of happiness highlights its significance in enhancing marital satisfaction by fostering positive emotions and reducing stress.

Keywords: Marital satisfaction, self-differentiation, critical thinking, emotional self-regulation, happiness, structural equation modeling, married women.

1. Introduction

The family is the foundation and primary structure of any society and, as a social-emotional unit, serves as a place for growth, development, and change. Therefore, the influence of the family on psychological, emotional, and social balance cannot be overlooked). The most significant factor within the family that plays a crucial role is marital satisfaction among women (Bloch et al., 2014). Marital satisfaction is a set of feelings that include pleasure, satisfaction, and enjoyment experienced by either the woman or the man in all dimensions of marriage, and it plays a very important role in individual health, particularly mental health (Ghahari, 2018). Examining marital processes provides valuable data on the fundamental nature of successful marriages. In successful marriages, the quality of the relationship is high, and individuals are satisfied and content with their relationship. Although the quality of the couple's relationship and marital adjustment are influenced by various factors and extensive research has been conducted on marital satisfaction and the stability of couples' relationships, there are still many unanswered questions in this regard, and coherent research has not yet been conducted (Mazzuca et al., 2018).

Research results indicate that one of the factors affecting marital satisfaction is self-differentiation. The concept of self-differentiation reflects an individual's ability to think realistically about emotionally charged issues within the family (Mohammadi & Alibakhshi, 2021; Sharifi et al., 2020; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). According to Bowen's theory, differentiation occurs in two dimensions: intrapsychic and interpersonal. At the intrapsychic level, differentiation involves the ability to thoughtfully assess situations, have full awareness of personal emotions and feelings, and apply rational reasoning or effective experiences depending on situational needs (Mozas-Alonso et al., 2022; Peleg, 2008; Rizkalla & Rahav, 2016). An individual's level of differentiation develops within the family of origin and is heavily influenced by the dynamics and interactions among family members, impacting their future life. Additionally, individuals enter marital life with patterns of lifestyle and differentiation levels that developed within their family of origin (Işık et al., 2020).

Another factor that may be related to marital satisfaction is critical thinking. Critical thinking, defined as the ability to derive correct and rational conclusions from information collected from various sources, to recognize and apply deductive and inductive reasoning, to distinguish between

fallacies and arguments, and to differentiate opinions from facts, is a powerful factor influencing marital satisfaction. Especially with the presence of various media and virtual social networks, critical thinking skills can be effective in strengthening the family and increasing marital satisfaction (Adnan et al., 2019). In critical thinking, the factors influencing behaviors and attitudes are identified, analyzed, interpreted, and evaluated. Thus, the quality and manner of individuals' thinking play a fundamental role in their mental health (Adnan et al., 2019).

A review of research indicates that emotional self-regulation is also associated with marital satisfaction (Asgari et al., 2022). Emotional self-regulation is one of the components of emotional intelligence. Research findings in this area suggest that in couples' relationships, the better an individual can control their emotions, the more intimacy and satisfaction they experience in their relationship with their spouse. Conversely, those who are unable to recognize their emotions encounter problems in their relationships with their spouse, leading to dissatisfaction and reduced intimacy over time, which consequently lowers marital satisfaction (Baucom et al., 2019; Dunham, 2008; Mazzuca et al., 2018).

According to research findings, the feeling of happiness can play a fundamental role in the level of marital satisfaction (Javidan, 2022; Nezami et al., 2023). The feeling of happiness, like health, is a personal attribute with a high degree of influence. Happiness is an individual's cognitive and emotional evaluation of their life, which includes overall life satisfaction, the presence of positive emotions, and the absence of negative emotions (Samadifard et al., 2019; Sepehrian-Azar et al., 2016). It seems that happiness can be a powerful factor in guiding marital life and marital satisfaction. This factor can mediate the relationship between various variables and marital satisfaction (Shahbazi & Khademali, 2018). Therefore, in this study, it is also considered a mediating variable.

Essentially, marital satisfaction has positive outcomes for both the individual and society, and the absence of it can create numerous problems for couples and the family system, leading to disarray and instability in the quality of family relationships, particularly affecting women due to their unique characteristics. The issues mentioned indicate that marital dissatisfaction is a precursor to separation and divorce. Therefore, this is one of the most important reasons to examine and predict marital satisfaction. Given the significant role of marital dissatisfaction in endangering family and societal health and the fact that the mediating role of happiness in predicting marital satisfaction has not been

considered in scientific and academic studies in Iran, the lack of such fundamental scientific research appears serious. Therefore, the main problem of this study is to provide a structural model of marital satisfaction in relation to self-differentiation, critical thinking, and emotional self-regulation with the mediating role of happiness in women who attend family counseling centers. For this reason, the present study examines the structural model of predicting marital satisfaction. In the proposed research model, direct and indirect relationships between marital satisfaction and self-differentiation, critical thinking, emotional self-regulation, and the feeling of happiness are hypothesized. Therefore, based on the conceptual model, the research question is whether the collected data fit the conceptual model? Hence, the research question based on Conceptual Model No. 1 is whether the collected data fit the conceptual model?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study design and Participant

The present study is classified as quantitative in terms of the research approach. In terms of research objectives, it is categorized as applied research. From a methodological perspective, it is a descriptive-correlational study with a structural model approach. The statistical population of this study included all married women who visited the counseling centers at the University of Tehran during the period from January 2023 to August 2023 (a 6-month period). Since the methodology of structural equation modeling shares similarities with some aspects of multivariate regression analysis, the principles for determining sample size in multivariate regression analysis can be used for determining sample size in structural equation modeling. In multivariate regression analysis, the sample size (observations) to independent variables ratio should not be less than 5. Otherwise, the results from the regression equation may not be generalizable. A more conservative ratio of 10 observations per independent variable has also been suggested. Even considering 15 observations per predictor variable in multiple regression analysis with the ordinary least squares method is considered a good rule of thumb. Therefore, in general, the methodology of structural equation modeling suggests that the sample size should be between 5 to 15 observations per measured variable. In this study, the number of components of the research variables multiplied by 15 was used. Given that the number of components in this study was 21, the sample size

was determined to be 340, with 25 individuals considered for potential dropout. Ultimately, using the convenience sampling method, 330 samples were selected.

The procedure involved distributing the research questionnaires, including those on marital satisfaction, self-differentiation, critical thinking, and emotional self-regulation, to the participants after making necessary arrangements. The necessary information was collected. Before administering the questionnaires, the women were informed about the questionnaires and asked to answer the questions carefully. They were assured of the confidentiality of their information and adherence to research ethics.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Marital Satisfaction

ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire has been widely used as a reliable research tool in numerous studies on marital satisfaction. Olson (1989) developed this questionnaire to assess marital satisfaction and argued that this scale is sensitive to changes that occur over the human life course and within the family. Each of the topics in this questionnaire relates to an aspect of the marital relationship, describing potential problems or identifying strengths. This questionnaire contains 47 questions that assess the level of marital satisfaction among couples. The questionnaire includes 12 subscales, and Cronbach's alpha coefficient in Olson, Fournier, and Druckman's (1989) report for the subscales of Conventional Response, Marital Satisfaction, Personality Issues, Marital Communication, Conflict Resolution, Financial Management, Leisure Activities, Sexual Relationship, Marriage and Children, Family and Friends, Egalitarian Roles, and Religious Orientation were .90, .73, .81, .68, .75, .72, .76, .71, .49, .78, and .81, respectively. This tool is a Likert-type attitude scale with five options ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree," scored from 1 to 5. In Iran, Soleimanian (1994) first calculated and reported the internal consistency of the questionnaire to be .93 for the long form and .95 for the short form. MirHashemi (1996) found a Cronbach's alpha of .92 in a study on the relationship between marital satisfaction and mental health. The correlation between the ENRICH questionnaire and the Family Satisfaction Scale ranged from .41 to .60, and with the Life Satisfaction Scale, it ranged from .41 to .56, indicating construct validity. In a study, Mahdian (1997) found the reliability of this questionnaire to be .93 for men, .94 for women, and .94 for both men and women combined (Mohammadi & Alibakhshi, 2021).

2.2.2. Self-Differentiation

This questionnaire was originally designed by Skowron and Friedlander (1998) and later revised by Skowron and Smith (2003). The responses are scored on a six-point Likert scale. This questionnaire includes four subscales: 1. Emotional Reactivity (ER): This scale contains 11 items that assess individuals' tendencies to respond to environmental stimuli based on automatic responses and emotional outbursts. 2. "I Position" (IP): This subscale contains 11 items that measure the sense of self and the ability to do what one believes in, even under pressure to do otherwise. 3. Emotional Cutoff (EC): This subscale has 12 items that identify the fear of intimacy or being overwhelmed in close relationships and the defensive behaviors to cope with these fears. 4. Fusion with Others (FO): This subscale also has 12 items and reflects intense emotional involvement with significant others and identity formation with parents. This questionnaire contains 46 items, with the "I Position" subscale scored positively and the other three subscales (Emotional Reactivity, Fusion with Others, and Emotional Cutoff) scored inversely. Research has shown that this questionnaire has high validity and reliability. The reliability of the revised form, using Cronbach's alpha, was reported to be .92 for the total scale, .89 for Emotional Reactivity, .81 for the "I Position," .84 for Emotional Cutoff, and .86 for Fusion with Others. Additionally, the relationship between high differentiation and lower anxiety and greater marital satisfaction provides evidence for the construct validity of this scale. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients reported by Skowron and Friedlander (1998) were .88. Younesi (2006) estimated the reliability of this questionnaire to be .81 (Parsakia et al., 2023).

2.2.3. Critical Thinking

To assess critical thinking, the Ricketts (2003) Critical Thinking Disposition Questionnaire was used, which consists of 33 items and includes three subscales. The first part includes 11 items for assessing the Innovation scale, the second part contains 9 items related to the Maturity of Judgment scale, and the third part includes 13 items for the Cognitive Engagement scale. This questionnaire is based on Facione's (1990) Critical Thinking scale. The validity and reliability of this questionnaire were reported to be .79 and .83, respectively, in the research by Gensel et al. (2014). The maximum and minimum scores on this test are 165 and 33, respectively. This tool is scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" (5 points) to "Strongly

Disagree" (1 point). The overall score for critical thinking disposition is obtained by summing the scores of the three subscales, which can be used to determine strong, moderate, and weak dispositions based on the overall score. A total score of 135.31 or higher indicates a strong disposition, a score of 108.91 to 135.30 indicates a moderate disposition, and a score of 108.90 or lower indicates a weak disposition toward critical thinking. The reliability of this questionnaire in Rastjo et al.'s (2016) study was found to be .69, .85, and .82 for the subscales of Innovation, Maturity of Judgment, and Cognitive Engagement, respectively, using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The content validity of this questionnaire was confirmed by five faculty members and experts in the fields of educational sciences and psychology (Mehdizadeh et al., 2021).

2.2.4. Emotional Self-Regulation

The Emotional Self-Regulation Questionnaire was developed by Gross and John (2003) and contains 10 items that measure two subscales: emotional suppression and cognitive reappraisal. Participants respond to each item on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1 point) to "Strongly Agree" (7 points). A higher score on this questionnaire indicates higher emotional self-regulation. The internal consistency of this scale was estimated at .72 for men and .79 for women (Gross & John, 2003). In their research, Mohammadi and Mousavi (2019) reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .71 for the cognitive reappraisal subscale and .81 for the emotional suppression subscale.

2.3. Data Analysis

To analyze the research variables, the assumptions of the structural equation model were first examined, and then the research hypotheses were tested using structural equations through the LISREL software.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic findings of the study showed that among the participants, 78 individuals were aged between 20 to 30 years, 121 individuals were between 31 to 40 years, 97 individuals were between 41 to 50 years, and 44 individuals were over 50 years old. Additionally, among the participants, 75 individuals had a diploma or lower educational degree, 154 individuals had a bachelor's degree,

89 individuals had a master's degree, and 22 individuals had a doctoral degree.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Self-Differentiation Variable Scores

Statistical Index	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Emotional Reactivity	38.39	6.885	-1.123	1.117
"I Position"	42.66	5.853	-0.788	0.499
Emotional Cutoff	45.06	7.763	-0.174	-0.479
Fusion with Others	43.96	6.640	-0.311	-0.229
Self-Differentiation Total	170.08	17.932	-0.477	0.762
Innovation	32.18	5.340	-0.841	1.285
Cognitive Maturity	24.22	4.143	-0.766	0.765
Cognitive Engagement	37.31	6.174	-0.900	0.560
Critical Thinking Total	93.70	13.247	-0.976	1.371
Emotional Suppression	30.25	6.296	-1.089	1.417
Cognitive Reappraisal	21.19	4.178	-0.620	0.368
Emotional Self-Regulation Total	51.44	10.017	-0.973	1.218
Positive Affect	17.11	3.794	-0.374	-0.395
Satisfaction Level	14.75	3.550	-0.340	-0.212
Lack of Negative Affect	16.07	4.127	-0.437	-0.287
Happiness	47.93	9.509	-0.435	-0.090
Conventional Response	10.99	2.914	-0.705	0.058
Marital Satisfaction	11.74	2.758	-0.998	1.039
Personality Issues	13.25	2.986	-0.674	0.003
Marital Communication	10.38	3.277	-0.304	-0.590
Conflict Resolution	12.48	3.238	-0.346	-0.583
Financial Management	11.07	2.890	-0.543	-0.063
Leisure Activities	13.14	3.215	-0.728	-0.049
Sexual Relationship	10.86	3.005	-0.370	-0.502
Marriage and Children	12.28	3.239	-0.361	-0.429
Family and Friends	9.38	3.361	-0.036	-0.689
Egalitarian Roles	11.73	3.237	-0.243	-0.553
Religious Orientation	12.08	2.720	-0.864	0.654
Marital Satisfaction Total	139.40	24.121	-0.425	0.545

In Table 2, the results of the correlations between the variables of self-differentiation, critical thinking, emotional self-regulation, and happiness with marital satisfaction are presented. All calculated correlation coefficients were positive and significant at the .01 alpha level ($p < .01$). The

positive correlation indicates that there is a direct relationship between self-differentiation, critical thinking, emotional self-regulation, and happiness with marital satisfaction in married women.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix Between Research Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1-Self-Differentiation	1				
2-Critical Thinking	.439*	1			
3-Emotional Self-Regulation	.511*	.871*	1		
4-Happiness	.527*	.610*	.643*	1	
5-Marital Satisfaction	.514*	.576*	.590*	.576*	1

* $p < .01$.

To examine the model fit of the mediating role of happiness in the relationship between self-differentiation,

critical thinking, and emotional self-regulation with marital satisfaction in married women, structural equation modeling

(SEM) was used. Before using SEM, univariate outliers were examined using a box plot, and multivariate outliers were assessed using Mahalanobis distance, which were subsequently removed from the dataset. Skewness and kurtosis of the variable scores were calculated using SPSS, and the results showed that none of the skewness and kurtosis values exceeded the range of ± 1 . The normality of the data was tested using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, and the results indicated that the distribution of the model variable scores was normal ($p > .05$). The assumption of error independence was tested using the Durbin-Watson statistic for the regression equations in the research model, and the obtained value confirmed the assumption. The assumption of multicollinearity between variables was assessed using Pearson correlation coefficients between pairs of variables. Given that a bivariate correlation of .90 or higher indicates multicollinearity, this issue was not observed in the present research data. Additionally, tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) statistics were

calculated to examine multicollinearity. The results showed that none of the tolerance values were smaller than the allowable limit of .10, and none of the VIF values exceeded the allowable limit of 10. Therefore, based on the two mentioned indices, no multicollinearity was observed in the data. After testing the assumptions and ensuring their validity, structural equation modeling was used to evaluate the proposed model.

The chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df) falls within the acceptable range of 1 to 5. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is .061, and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) is .052, both of which are smaller than the criterion value of .08. Finally, the GFI, CFI, and IFI indices are all greater than the required value of .90. Considering all the calculated fit indices, the fit of the structural model for self-differentiation, critical thinking, and emotional self-regulation on marital satisfaction with the mediating role of happiness is confirmed.

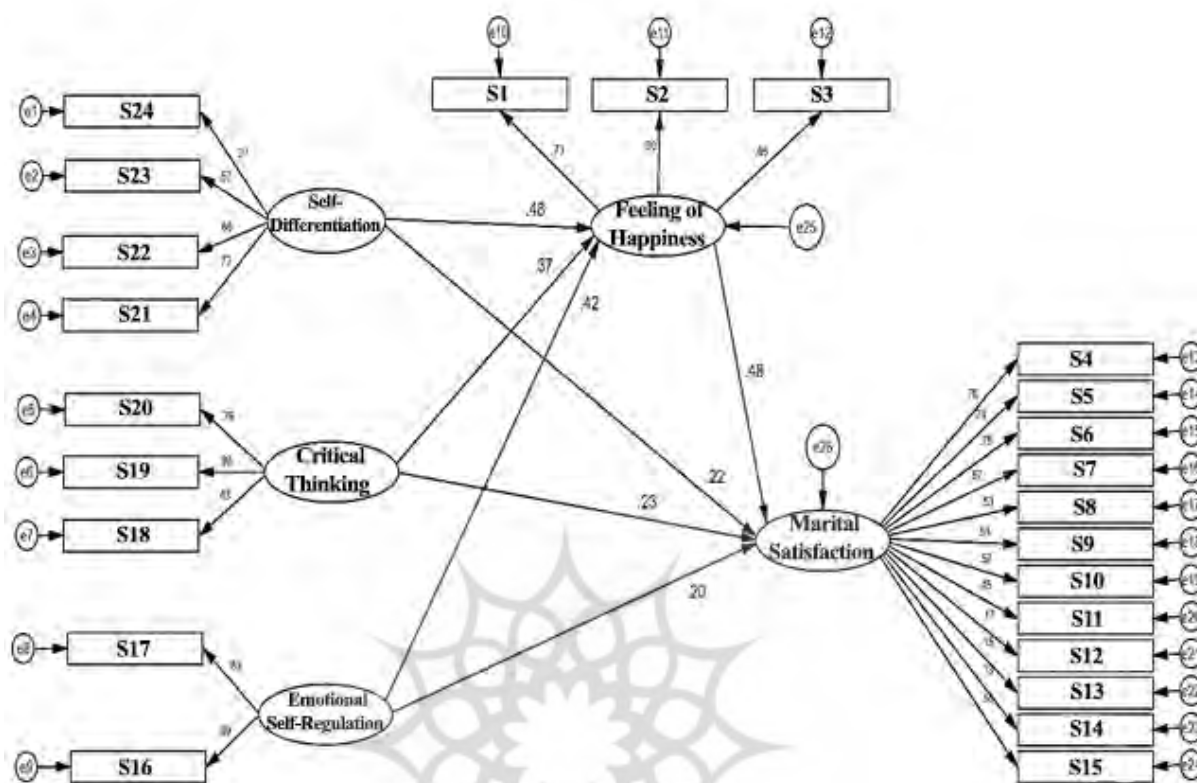
Table 3

Standardized and Unstandardized Coefficients of Measurement Models

Path	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	C.R.	p
Self-Differentiation → Emotional Reactivity	1	.207		
Self-Differentiation → "I Position"	2.344	.571	3.128	.002
Self-Differentiation → Emotional Cutoff	3.249	.597	3.143	.002
Self-Differentiation → Fusion with Others	3.328	.715	3.178	.001
Critical Thinking → Innovation	1	.787		
Critical Thinking → Cognitive Maturity	.869	.881	13.608	.001
Critical Thinking → Cognitive Engagement	.924	.629	11.226	.001
Emotional Self-Regulation → Emotional Suppression	1	.832		
Emotional Self-Regulation → Cognitive Reappraisal	.788	.988	12.956	.001
Happiness → Positive Affect	1	.735		
Happiness → Satisfaction Level	.790	.598	9.400	.001
Happiness → Lack of Negative Affect	.980	.646	10.032	.001
Marital Satisfaction → Conventional Response	1	.780		
Marital Satisfaction → Satisfaction	.955	.789	15.100	.001
Marital Satisfaction → Personality Issues	1.002	.758	14.408	.001
Marital Satisfaction → Marital Communication	.992	.667	12.432	.001
Marital Satisfaction → Conflict Resolution	.801	.526	9.554	.001
Marital Satisfaction → Financial Management	.716	.527	9.573	.001
Marital Satisfaction → Leisure Activities	.784	.518	9.394	.001
Marital Satisfaction → Sexual Relationship	.649	.453	8.132	.001
Marital Satisfaction → Marriage and Children	.273	.170	2.964	.003
Marital Satisfaction → Family and Friends	.244	.146	2.549	.011
Marital Satisfaction → Egalitarian Roles	.216	.134	2.343	.019
Marital Satisfaction → Religious Orientation	.712	.562	10.260	.001

Figure 1

Standardized Coefficients of the Mediating Role of Happiness in the Relationship Between Self-Differentiation, Critical Thinking, Emotional Self-Regulation, and Marital Satisfaction



In Figure 1, the standardized coefficients of the proposed model to examine the mediating role of happiness in the relationship between self-differentiation, critical thinking, and emotional self-regulation with marital satisfaction are shown, respectively.

The results of the measurement model analysis are presented in Table 3. The significance of the regression weights for the measurement model variables—self-differentiation, critical thinking, emotional self-regulation, happiness, and marital satisfaction—indicates that all indicators are valid for their respective latent variables.

Table 4

Path Coefficients of Direct and Indirect Effects on Marital Satisfaction

Path	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient	t-statistic	Significance Level
Direct Effects				
Self-Differentiation → Marital Satisfaction	.304	.217	2.137	.033
Critical Thinking → Marital Satisfaction	.109	.230	3.643	.01
Emotional Self-Regulation → Marital Satisfaction	.077	.201	3.238	.01
Indirect Effects				
Self-Differentiation → Happiness → Marital Satisfaction	.321	.229		.01
Critical Thinking → Happiness → Marital Satisfaction	.085	.178		.01
Emotional Self-Regulation → Happiness → Marital Satisfaction	.076	.200		.01

Table 4 presents the results related to the path coefficients for the direct effects of self-differentiation, critical thinking,

and emotional self-regulation on marital satisfaction. Based on the results, all direct path coefficients are positive and

significant at the specified alpha levels. Therefore, the research hypotheses regarding the direct effects of self-differentiation, critical thinking, and emotional self-regulation on marital satisfaction in married women are confirmed.

Table 4 also presents the results for the indirect effects of self-differentiation, critical thinking, and emotional self-regulation on marital satisfaction through the mediating variable of happiness. The coefficients for these indirect effects are all significant at the .01 alpha level. Therefore, the research hypotheses regarding the mediating role of happiness in the relationships between self-differentiation, critical thinking, emotional self-regulation, and marital satisfaction in married women are confirmed.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to determine the fit of a model for marital satisfaction based on self-differentiation, critical thinking, and emotional self-regulation, with the mediating role of happiness among married women. The research findings indicated that the structural model fit for self-differentiation, critical thinking, and emotional self-regulation on marital satisfaction with the mediating role of happiness is confirmed by the data. The significance of the regression weights related to the measurement model variables—self-differentiation, critical thinking, emotional self-regulation, happiness, and marital satisfaction—indicates that all indicators are valid for their respective latent variables. In a comparative analysis concerning the research hypothesis, the findings of this study align with the results of both domestic and international research, such as the prior (Bloch et al., 2014; Dunham, 2008; Ghahari, 2018; Işık et al., 2020; Javidan, 2022; Mazzuca et al., 2018; Mohammadi & Alibakhshi, 2021; Mozas-Alonso et al., 2022; Nezami et al., 2023; Peleg, 2008; Rizkalla & Rahav, 2016; Sepehrian-Azar et al., 2016; Shahbazi & Khademali, 2018; Sharifi et al., 2020; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). The results of this research demonstrated that self-differentiation has a direct effect on marital satisfaction among married women. In a comparative analysis of the research hypothesis, namely the direct effect of self-differentiation on marital satisfaction among married women, the findings of this study are consistent with the results of prior research (Asgari et al., 2022; Işık et al., 2020; Javidan, 2022; Mohammadi & Alibakhshi, 2021; Mozas-Alonso et al., 2022; Parsakia et al., 2023; Peleg, 2008;

Rizkalla & Rahav, 2016; Sharifi et al., 2020; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998).

According to this study, the idea of divorce is inconsistent with marital commitment. Reasons that support marriage include understanding the seriousness of commitments and having a clear perception of the consequences of divorce. In explaining the results, it can be stated that, based on Bowen's theory, self-differentiation includes emotional and cognitive separation and independence from others, and individuals acquire an understanding of their identity through the process of individuation. This differentiation from the family of origin enables them to take responsibility for their thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and actions. In other words, a differentiated individual is able to approach life's issues and problems rationally and logically, avoiding emotional reactions. Therefore, these individuals have the ability to resolve issues peacefully. On the other hand, individuals with low levels of self-differentiation experience higher anxiety and a greater fusion between intellect and emotions, leading to emotional tensions in their relationships with others. According to Bowen's theory, it can be said that women with low levels of self-differentiation are less capable of making rational decisions when facing life's challenges and problems (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). These women, due to their dependency on the family of origin and the overlap between the two systems, encounter issues that increase conflicts and ultimately lead to marital dissatisfaction. Therefore, it can be concluded that women with higher levels of self-differentiation are more capable of improving marital satisfaction.

The results of the study showed that critical thinking has a direct effect on marital satisfaction among married women. In a comparative analysis concerning the research hypothesis, namely the direct effect of critical thinking on marital satisfaction among married women, the findings of this study are consistent with the results of research by domestic and international researchers (Adnan et al., 2019; Mehdizadeh et al., 2021). Critical thinking skills provide the groundwork for solving problems, reaching a mutually agreed-upon practical solution, and creating a collaborative atmosphere, which commits the couple to resolving issues in a way that both partners feel a sense of equality. This, in turn, increases marital intimacy and leads to marital satisfaction. It can also be said that decision-making is a simple form of higher-order thinking, as decision-making is a very active process that uses a set of necessary knowledge to interpret, analyze, and manipulate information in an unconventional way. Critical thinking leads to higher-order thinking by

requiring deeper interaction and understanding. Therefore, by incorporating critical thinking into the marital environment, each spouse needs to focus on both superficial observation and fundamental structures and situational causes, resulting in a deeper understanding of the acquired information. This can help adjust negative interpretations that are based on superficial processing, foster the hope of correcting and adjusting superficial cognitions, and, after applying this type of thinking in interpersonal relationships, feel competent to change superficial thoughts. Thus, when each spouse can use this thinking to correct superficial interpretations, they can feel effective, optimistic, and hopeful for solving problems in the short term, and in the long term, they can improve relationships by changing deep-seated thoughts based on incorrect attributions, ultimately increasing marital satisfaction (Adnan et al., 2019; Mehdizadeh et al., 2021).

The results of the study showed that emotional self-regulation has a direct effect on marital satisfaction among married women. In a comparative analysis of the research hypothesis, namely the direct effect of emotional self-regulation on marital satisfaction among married women, the findings of this study are consistent with the results of research by domestic and international researchers (Asgari et al., 2022; Baucom et al., 2019; Bloch et al., 2014; Dunham, 2008; Ghahari, 2018; Javidan, 2022; Mazzuca et al., 2018). (Javidan, 2022; Nezami et al., 2023; Samadifard et al., 2019; Sepehrian-Azar et al., 2016; Shahbazi & Khademali, 2018) The findings showed a positive significant correlation between hope and happiness with marital satisfaction among married students. Additionally, the results of the regression analysis revealed that 13% of the total variance in marital satisfaction was predicted by hope and happiness variables. It can be concluded that increasing hope and happiness enhances marital satisfaction among married students. Therefore, considering the importance of marital satisfaction among married students and the role of hope and happiness in predicting it, it is necessary to raise awareness among married students about the importance of hope and happiness. These findings emphasize the importance of emotion regulation because it leads to improved marital satisfaction.

The results of the study indicated that happiness mediates the relationship between self-differentiation and marital satisfaction among married women. In a comparative analysis of the research hypothesis, namely the mediating role of happiness between self-differentiation and marital satisfaction in married women, the findings of this study are

consistent with those of domestic and international researchers (Javidan, 2022; Nezami et al., 2023; Samadifard et al., 2019; Sepehrian-Azar et al., 2016; Shahbazi & Khademali, 2018). In explaining these findings, it can be stated that happiness mediates the relationship between self-differentiation and marital satisfaction in married women. Happiness has a supportive effect by maintaining negative affect at a low level, leading to adaptive improvement in individuals. There is also a dynamic relationship between happiness and stress and emotions, such that individuals with higher happiness experience reduced stress. They recover more effectively from problems and emotional impacts, which in turn increases marital satisfaction. It can also be suggested that the greater the happiness, the higher the marital satisfaction among married women. This may be because as happiness increases in life, positive emotions among couples increase, leading them to view problems as positive phenomena. In this case, they resolve issues through appropriate mutual communication rooted in positive emotions, which leads to marital satisfaction.

The results of the study also showed that happiness mediates the relationship between critical thinking and marital satisfaction among married women. In explaining these findings, it can be stated that happiness mediates the relationship between critical thinking and marital satisfaction in married women. Happiness is a common goal for all human beings, as all human efforts in life are directed toward achieving this goal. On the other hand, marital satisfaction is one of the most effective factors and one of the most important indicators of life satisfaction. Accordingly, the relationship between happiness and marital satisfaction is reciprocal; just as increased happiness is related to increased marital satisfaction, increased marital satisfaction is also related to increased happiness. Happiness alters individuals' cognitive and emotional structures and others' perceptions of them and their environment, leading to improved mental health and reduced problems between couples. Happiness does not change an individual's life circumstances, but it changes their perspective on life and what surrounds them, influencing their beliefs and perceptions of life issues. All of this leads individuals to focus on matters that are the opposite of failure and depression (Samadifard et al., 2019; Sepehrian-Azar et al., 2016). Therefore, it fosters a more positive outlook on life events, providing the basis for improving marital satisfaction.

The results of the study also indicated that happiness mediates the relationship between emotional self-regulation

and marital satisfaction among married women. In a comparative analysis of the research hypothesis, namely the mediating role of happiness between emotional self-regulation and marital satisfaction in married women. In explaining these findings, it can be stated that happiness mediates the relationship between emotional self-regulation and marital satisfaction in married women. Additionally, it can be explained that happiness facilitates couples' relationships and determines the type of communication pattern they adopt. Therefore, it can be said that individuals who are stronger in communication skills experience greater intimacy and are more satisfied with their relationships, which in turn increases their marital satisfaction. Adhering to related issues leads to enduring and deep feelings in relationships, which can be seen in sharing and expressing thoughts and feelings with a spouse (Javidan, 2022). This satisfaction and happiness are either reinforced or manifested through them, gradually deepening the intimacy between individuals, which leads to increased emotional self-regulation, ultimately resulting in increased marital satisfaction.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

Like other studies, this research faced several limitations. The research population was limited to the city of Tehran, specifically to married women who visited the counseling centers of the University of Tehran between January 2023 and August 2023. This study was purely cross-sectional and examined the positive effects of the program only over a few months. It is suggested that the sampling method could be simple random sampling to minimize sampling errors. It is also recommended that further studies assess this research on married women in other cities. It is suggested that educational workshops on self-differentiation, critical thinking, self-regulation, and happiness in married women be established. Specialized meetings on self-differentiation, critical thinking, self-regulation, and happiness in married women should be held. The most capable and qualified therapists and psychologists familiar with and proficient in self-differentiation, critical thinking, self-regulation, and happiness should be employed at the University of Tehran counseling centers to improve marital satisfaction among married women. Based on the research findings and the direct impact of self-differentiation, critical thinking, and emotional self-regulation on marital satisfaction, it is recommended that therapists and psychologists use these three variables as influential factors on marital satisfaction

and create conditions for improving marital satisfaction among married women.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

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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