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The Role of Virtual Space Addiction and Triangulation in Predicting Emotional Divorce: The Mediating Role of Marital Expectations

Fatemeh Kiamarzi[1], Niloofar Mikaeili[2*], Shabnam Derakhshan[3], Mohamad Narimani[4]

1. Master of Clinical Psychology, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran.
2. Professor, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran.
3. Master of Psychology, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran.
4. Professor, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran.

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Abstract

Abstract

Emotional divorce is one of the most significant family damages, with wide-ranging individual, familial, and social consequences. Accordingly, the present study was conducted to examine the role of virtual space addiction and triangulation in predicting emotional divorce, with the mediating role of marital expectations, in the city of Ardabil. The present study is applied in terms of its purpose and is a descriptive-survey of a correlational type in terms of its nature and method. The statistical population consisted of parents of elementary school students in Ardabil during the 2022–2023 academic year. An initial sample of 230 participants was selected through cluster sampling. To collect data, the Emotional Divorce Questionnaire, Internet Addiction Questionnaire, Marital Expectations Scale, and Triangulation Scale were employed. The data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation coefficient using SPSS (version 24), and structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted using LISREL 8.8 software. The findings indicated that there were significant positive relationships between virtual space addiction ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$), triangulation ($r = 0.54$, $p < 0.01$), and marital expectations ($r = -0.56$, $p < 0.01$) with emotional divorce among parents of elementary school students. Furthermore, the results of examining the mediating role of marital expectations revealed that this variable significantly mediated the relationship between emotional divorce, internet addiction, and triangulation. Therefore, the findings showed that an increase in virtual space addiction and a decrease in marital intimacy could contribute to emotional divorce. Accordingly, identifying underlying factors and providing support for individuals at risk may play an effective role in preventing this family-related damage.

***Corresponding author**
Email: nmikaeili@yahoo.com

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Introduction

Marriage, as the foundation for family formation and raising the next generation, includes a fundamental relationship that enables the provision of the biological, psychological, and social needs of couples (Kazim & Rafique, 2021). Although marriage is no longer a social obligation, individuals seek a satisfying life together (Karney & Bradbury, 2020). Research has shown that marital satisfaction is related to the health and longevity of couples, and its key elements include commitment, love, understanding, and intimate communication (Manap et al., 2016). However, several factors can affect couples' relationships and lead to emotional divorce, a process that begins with a gradual decrease in emotions and an increase in conflict and occurs even before legal divorce (Jarwan & Alferhat, 2020). One of the contributing factors to divorce is cyberspace addiction, where uncontrolled use of the Internet and social networks can negatively affect the quality of couples' communication and reduce marital satisfaction (Lopez-Fernandez & Kuss, 2020; Nourbakhsh, 2019; Stvil et al., 2018). In addition, triangulation, as a family dynamic that introduces a third person into the relationship, can increase conflict and reduce intimacy (Bowen, 1978; Mcleod, 2023). Furthermore, marital expectations play a mediating role in the relationship between these variables and emotional divorce; inappropriate and unmet expectations can lead to dissatisfaction and a decrease in relationship quality (Vanier & Sullivan, 2017). Given the importance of these factors and the research gap in Iran, the present study aimed to investigate the roles of cyberspace addiction and triangulation in predicting emotional divorce through the mediation of marital expectations. The findings of this study can help achieve a deeper understanding of the emotional divorce process and design preventive interventions to improve marital relationships.

Method

The present study is a descriptive-correlational study to test a conceptual model through structural equation modeling. It is cross-sectional in terms of time and quantitative in terms of data type. The statistical population included parents of elementary school students in Ardabil in the academic year 2023-2024. Sampling was carried out using a multi-stage cluster method; educational districts, schools, and classes were selected randomly, respectively. The parents of the students were the final respondents. Considering the five to ten observations for each independent variable, the minimum sample size was estimated to be 200 individuals, and considering the possibility of non-response, 230 individuals were selected.

The research instruments included the Emotional Divorce Questionnaire (Mohammadi et al., 2016) with 36 items in 9 dimensions, the Internet Addiction Questionnaire (Young, 1998) with 20 items, the Marital Expectations Questionnaire (Omidvar et al., 2007) with 32 items, and the Triangulation Questionnaire (Bahrami & Yousefi, 2017) with 16 items, all of which were scored on a five-point Likert scale. All questionnaires had appropriate validity and reliability; the overall reliability of the instruments was reported to be between 0.84 and 0.90 using Cronbach's alpha. Data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation test and structural equation modeling. SPSS (version 24) and LISREL (version 8.8) were used for statistical analysis. All questionnaires were completed anonymously, and the principles of research ethics were observed.

Findings

In this study, 200 individuals (between the ages of 20 and 40) participated, of whom 73% were women (146) and 27% were men (54). The participants' educational levels ranged from high school (39%) to PhD (2.5%), and their marital history ranged from 6 to 17 years. Descriptive analyses showed that the skewness and kurtosis of all variables, including emotional divorce, cyberspace addiction, marital expectations, and triangulation, were within the permissible range (-2 to 2) and had a normal distribution.

Table 1. *Correlation matrix of research variables*

Variables	Emotional divorce	Cyberspace addiction	Marital expectations	Triangulation
Emotional divorce	1			
Cyberspace addiction	**.58	1		
Marital expectations	**-.56	**-.65	1	
Triangulation	**.54	**.64	**-.62	1

The correlation analyses showed that emotional divorce had a positive and significant relationship with cyberspace addiction ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$) and triangulation ($r = 0.54$, $p < 0.01$) and a negative and significant relationship with marital expectations ($r = -0.56$, $p < 0.01$). Factor analysis showed significant factor loadings for all items ($p < 0.05$).

Table 2. *Direct effects of research variables*

Variables	Standard coefficients	T value	Standard error	Sig.
Cyberspace addiction → emotional divorce	.30	3.56	.057	P < .001
Cyberspace addiction → marital expectations	-.40	-5.40	.031	P < .001
Triangulation → emotional divorce	.25	2.95	.072	P < .001
Triangulation → marital expectations	-.39	-5.21	.034	P < .001
Marital expectations → emotional divorce	-.20	-2.54	.080	P <.05

Structural equation modeling had a good fit (CFI = 0.93, NFI = 0.91, GFI = 0.88, RMSEA = 0.075, $\chi^2/df = 2.13$). Direct effects showed that cyberspace addiction ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$) and triangulation ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$) had positive and significant effects, and marital expectations had a negative and significant effect on emotional divorce ($\beta = -0.20$, $p < 0.05$). Cyberspace addiction and triangulation also had negative and significant relationships with marital expectations.

Table 3. *Results of indirect effects analysis*

Research hypotheses	T-sobel	Standard path coefficient	VAF	Test result
Cyberspace addiction → marital expectations → emotional divorce	3.923	.080	.211	P < .001
Triangulation → marital expectations → emotional divorce	3.722	.078	.238	P < .001

The Sobel test showed that marital expectations had a partial mediating role in the relationship between cyberspace addiction (VAF = 21%) and triangulation (VAF = 23%) with emotional divorce. Thus, these variables affected emotional divorce both directly and indirectly through marital expectations.

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the roles of cyberspace addiction and triangulation in predicting emotional divorce through the mediation of marital expectations. The findings showed that there was a positive and significant relationship between cyberspace addiction and emotional divorce, which is consistent with previous research (Abbasi, 2019; Adzaho et al., 2020; Alavi & Mahoor, 2022; Bahrani et al., 2018; Besra, 2020; Khajeh Noori & Naqshbandi, 2023; Nagshbandi et al., 2021; Parvaz et al., 2021; Valenzuela et al., 2014). Excessive use of social networks reduced intimacy, increased emotional tensions, and replaced real-life interactions between couples (Ahmed et al., 2021; Agbaria, 2021; Longstreet & Brooks, 2017). The findings also showed that there was a positive and significant relationship between triangulation and emotional divorce, which is consistent with previous research (Dehghani Sheshdhod & Yousefi, 2019; Kianipour, 2019; Vandijk et al., 2021, 2022). Triangulation, by involving a third party or using children as messengers, violated natural family boundaries and increased conflict and transfered emotional dependence to a third party (Baker & Eichler, 2014; Etkin et al., 2014; Kerig & Swanson, 2010). Moreover, marital expectations played a mediating role between cyberspace addiction and triangulation with emotional divorce. Reduced marital expectations due to excessive use of cyberspace and triangulation led to dissatisfaction, emotional distance, and an increased likelihood of emotional divorce (Andreassen & Pallesen, 2014; Rhoades et al., 2009; Rothman, 2017). Failure to meet expectations discouraged couples and reduced their motivation to fulfill marital roles, leading to conflict and emotional separation (Miller & Tedder, 2011). Overall, the findings indicated that controlling cyberspace addiction, reducing triangulation,

and managing marital expectations can prevent emotional divorce. It is recommended that preventive interventions such as counseling and family education be implemented.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest was declared by the authors.

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