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The Effects of Religiosity, Forgiveness, and Emotion Regulation on Marital Satisfaction in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Background/ problem: Despite the growing body of studies on marital relationships, there are limited research addressing factors that positively contribute to marital satisfaction.

Objective/ purpose: The study aimed to examine the effect of religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation on marital satisfaction in the Ethiopian context.

Design and Methodology: This correlational study involved 198 civil servants of the Addis Ababa city administration. Stratified and simple random sampling techniques were used to select the participants. Data were collected using a questionnaire. Hierarchical multiple regression was used to analyze the data.

Results: The findings of the correlation analysis indicated that the main study variables were significantly associated with marital satisfaction. Hierarchical regression analysis revealed that religiosity ($\beta = .27, p < .001$), forgiveness ($\beta = .18, p < .001$), and emotion regulation ($\beta = .14, p = .042$) significantly contributed to explaining 32% of the variance in marital satisfaction ($R^2 = .32$) [$F(9, 168) = 8.84, p < .001$].

Conclusion and Implications: In conclusion, the findings suggest that enhancing marital satisfaction among partners is crucial, with religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation being key factors. The positive effect of religiosity highlights the importance of designing programs that encourage partners to engage in different religious activities. Furthermore, by implementing training programs focused on fostering forgiveness and emotion regulation, practitioners can enhance their clients' marital satisfaction. Specifically, holistic counseling and couple's therapy programs that integrate religious teachings, forgiveness exercises, and emotion regulation strategies could help couples to address relationship challenges.

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Originality/Value for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
This study can make a valuable contribution to SDG-3 (good health and wellbeing) and SDG-5 (gender equality). By providing insights into the qualities that influence marital well-being, this study can inform policies and programs designed to promote healthy marital relationships and gender equality within the Ethiopian context.

The overall health of a family in society depends on having a satisfying marital relationship. Marital satisfaction plays a crucial role in enhancing the psychosocial well-being of individuals and families (Wilson & Novak, 2022). A growing body of studies indicates the crucial roles of religiosity, emotion regulation, and forgiveness in enhancing marital satisfaction (Aman et al., 2019; Azimi & Hobby, 2022; Hosu & Năstăsă, 2020). These qualities play a key role in keeping a stable and satisfying marriage, despite

numerous challenges. However, no empirical studies have yet examined the combined effect of these variables on marital satisfaction within a single study.

However, in modern marriages, problems such as marital dissatisfaction and divorce are becoming increasingly common, often due to selfishness, negative attitudes, and the weakening of societal values (Mekonnen et al., 2019). There has been a growing effort to identify positive factors that strengthen marital relationships (Wilson & Novak, 2022). However, a large body of previous studies on marital relationships still primarily focuses on negative factors that contribute to marital dissatisfaction (Fincham et al., 2007; Mekonnen et al., 2019). Since marital satisfaction mainly relies on positive individual qualities, marital studies should focus on exploring factors that strengthen marriages.

Researchers have increased their efforts to identify positive qualities that contribute to marital satisfaction, such as forgiveness, emotion regulation, and religiosity (Aman et al., 2019; Fahimdanesh et al., 2020). For instance, scholars have identified that being religious (Dobrowolska et al., 2020), forgiving each other in marital relationships (Fahimdanesh et al., 2020), and emotion regulation (Hosu & Năstasă, 2020) have been linked to various positive relationship qualities. Most of these studies have primarily been carried out in Western societies, which may limit the applicability of the results to other cultural contexts (David & Stafford, 2015).

Ethiopia is a developing country with an estimated population of about 132 million, making it one of the most populous countries in Africa (United Nations, 2024). Although marriage is one of the most highly valued institutions in Ethiopia, it is currently at risk due to couples' dissatisfaction in various ways (Addisu et al., 2017; Mekonnen et al., 2019). While some western studies have explored the individual relationships between marital satisfaction with religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation, no study has yet attempted to understand the effect of these factors on marital satisfaction in the Ethiopian context (Mekonnen et al., 2019). Factors such as limited attention to strength-oriented research and insufficient data on major life events in Ethiopia (e.g., marriage, divorce, etc.) may contribute to make the study of marital satisfaction in Ethiopia challenging and underexplored. Therefore, the objective of this study was to examine the effect of religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation on marital satisfaction.

This study contributes new knowledge to behavioral science by investigating the positive qualities associated with marital satisfaction. By emphasizing the positive roles of religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation in enhancing marital satisfaction, this study offers insights that can serve as a stepping stone to designing comprehensive intervention strategies that promote healthier marriages. Thus, due to the interdisciplinary nature of this study, professionals such as counselors and social workers could greatly benefit from these findings by implementing couple's-oriented counseling and therapy to support individuals in marital relationships.

Literature Review

This section explores the study's fundamental concepts, which begins with a description of the theoretical framework that addresses the issue under investigation. Furthermore, existing research on the effects of religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation on marital satisfaction is reviewed. Finally, three research hypotheses related to the main variables of this research are proposed.

Theoretical Framework

The vulnerability-stress-adaptation (VSA) theory was used as the theoretical framework for the present study. It was developed in 1995 by Karney and Bradbury. The VSA theory focuses on three variables such as enduring vulnerabilities (e.g., personality, beliefs, and attitudes), stressful life events (e.g., the transition to parenthood and job loss), and adaptive processes (e.g., the emotion experienced during interactions, behavioral skills, and associated cognitions) (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). In the context of

marital relationships, the VSA theory suggests that couples use various adaptive mechanisms to deal with the challenges they experience in a marriage. According to VSA theory, the adaptive process deals with couples' overall employment of positive qualities to cope with challenges they encounter in their marital relationship (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Individuals with stable characteristics, such as religiosity, forgiveness, and emotional regulation, that couples bring to their marriage can serve as protective factors and may be less vulnerable to the negative effects of stress. For example, a high level of religiosity (Mekonnen et al., 2019), forgiveness (David & Stafford, 2015), and emotional regulation (Low et al., 2019) can reduce a couple's vulnerability to stress, ultimately contributing to marital satisfaction. Stressful events experienced by partners can trigger negative behaviors that strain their marital relationships. However, partners with emotion regulation skills (Low et al., 2019), forgiveness (David & Stafford, 2015), and religious beliefs (Mekonnen et al., 2019) are better equipped to manage the negative behaviors that arise from these stressful events.

From the VSA perspective, religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation would be conceptualized as an adaptive process because they provide a relationship with opportunities to overcome challenges. For instance, forgiveness as an adaptive process has been discussed to improve one's ability to overcome marital problems (David & Stafford, 2015). Besides, emotion regulation (Low et al., 2019) and religiosity (Kyambi et al., 2017) are also provide couples with adaptive qualities to deal with different marital problems. Thus, the current study sought to examine the roles of religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation on marital satisfaction within the broader theoretical framework of the VSA Model.

A number of behavioral science theories have been used in understanding marital relationships and satisfaction. For example, social exchange theory states that people stay in relationships that benefit them more than cost them (Siennick et al., 2014). Symbolic interaction theory suggests that the meaning couples attach to marriage influences their behavior and success (Blumer, 1969). Dynamic goal theory posits that marital satisfaction is achieved when couples fulfill their prioritized goals (Li & Fung, 2011). These theories offer further explanations that marital satisfaction is influenced by the rewards received from maintaining a marriage, the symbols associated with marriage, and the perception of marriage as a source of family honor or personal fulfillment.

Ethiopian culture, with its deeply rooted traditional beliefs and religious dogmas, provides a framework that guides individuals, families, and communities to emphasize the holiness of marriage from a religious point of view, promote reconciliation, and take a restrained approach to emotional expression. These could influence the roles of religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation in marital satisfaction in Ethiopian context.

Effects of Religiosity on Marital Satisfaction

Due to its close interaction with human life, the role of religiosity in marital relationships is indisputable. Regardless of increased secularism, a growing body of literature has linked religiosity and religious faith with healthy marital relationships (Sauerheber et al., 2021). Religiosity can enhance marital relationships by promoting positive qualities among couples. Religiosity refers to the belief in God and regular participation in various religious faiths and activities (Adeyemo & Adeleye, 2008). Many people from different socio-cultural backgrounds establish their marriage based on religious rituals (Aman et al., 2019). Marriage is usually accompanied by various religious ceremonies when couples decide to spend the rest of their life together in front of God. Furthermore, religious beliefs strengthen the sanctity of marriage, thereby promoting healthy marriage.

Many religious people believe in the sanctity of marriage, which contributes to couples remaining committed to their marriage (Aman et al., 2021). For example, religious practices such as praying together,

reading the Bible, and attending church can enhance marital satisfaction among partners by improving their ability to forgive, be humble, and persevere (Kyambi et al., 2017).

In addition to promoting positive behavior, a high level of religious experience also contributes to a decrease in unfavorable marital behaviors (Perry, 2015). High value attached to religion inhibits people from engaging in socially undesirable marital behavior, such as divorce (Mekonnen et al., 2019). Moreover, in addition to fostering a sense of unity between couples, religiosity also promotes the value of prioritizing one's partner's interests over one's own, contributing to high marital satisfaction (Perry, 2015). This is because religion educates its followers to be patient, forgiving, and committed to marriage, ultimately enhancing marital satisfaction (Aman et al., 2021; Azimi & Hobbi, 2022). Thus, this study hypothesized that:

H1: Religiosity has a positive effect on marital satisfaction among Addis Ababa civil servants.

Effects of Forgiveness on Marital Satisfaction

Forgiveness plays an essential role in enhancing marital satisfaction. According to positive psychology, forgiveness is considered a crucial skill in human relationships, such as marriage (Darbani et al., 2020). Studies have well-documented the positive impact of forgiveness on marital satisfaction (Agu & Nwankwo, 2019; Darbani et al., 2020; Shamsi & Asad, 2021). Forgiveness refers to the tendency to behave positively and avoid revenge towards one's relationship partner who has harmed him or her to maintain their marital relationship (Fincham et al., 2005). Ethiopia's culture which places high values on reconciliation and forgiveness can help couples navigate conflicts and maintain a positive marital relationship. This is because forgiveness is often viewed as a spiritual act that promotes reconciliation and strengthens relationships.

In a marital relationship, forgiveness is often seen as a means to decrease negative thoughts and behaviors toward a spouse who has caused harm (David & Stafford, 2015). Forgiveness, as one of the personal qualities, plays a key role in enhancing healthy marital relationships (Darbani et al., 2020). It contributes to better marital relationships by enhancing positive behavior and overcoming negative behavior (David & Stafford, 2015). Similarly, a growing body of literature has linked forgiveness to marital longevity and dyadic adjustment (Burr et al., 2012). Forgiveness contributes to various positive relationship qualities, such as empathy and positive interpersonal interaction (Burr et al., 2012). Cultivating the quality of forgiveness in marital relationships fills partners with positive feelings, such as a sense of being loved and self-worth, which ultimately fosters marital satisfaction (Fahimdanesh et al., 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis was developed:

H2: Forgiveness has a positive effect on marital satisfaction among Addis Ababa civil servants.

Effects of Emotion Regulation on Marital Satisfaction

Emotion regulation has been linked to positive marital relationships. In their day-to-day life, couples are likely to experience both negative and positive emotions, and how they deal with them will influence their marital outcome (Shamsi & Asad, 2021). Supporting this statement, studies have indicated that emotion regulation contributes to high marital satisfaction (Javed et al., 2022; Tani et al., 2015), better management of marital conflict (Low et al., 2019), and marital adjustment (Hosu & Năstăsă, 2020). Emotion regulation refers to the ability to manage, control, and express emotions when we find ourselves in emotionally-provoking situations (Koole, 2010). In Ethiopia culture, expressing and displaying strong negative emotion is not often acceptable, which may in turn influence partners to resolve their disagreement by restraining their emotion, which may ultimately promote marital satisfaction.

Emotion regulation in the context of a relationship has behavioral, emotional, and cognitive consequences. For example, difficulties in emotion regulation among partners have been associated with ineffective dyadic coping strategies (Levesque et al., 2017). It is believed that effective emotion regulation employed by couples can contribute to positive marital relationships by boosting their harmonious

relationship between married couples (Low et al., 2019). Particularly, the ability of couples to regulate their emotions will also play a pivotal role in building satisfying marital relationships. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that:

H3: Emotion regulation has a positive effect on marital satisfaction among Addis Ababa civil servants.

Overall, despite their positive contributions to marital satisfaction, there is still a lack of research regarding the combined effects of religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation on marital satisfaction worldwide, especially in non-Western cultures such as Ethiopia. Thus, given Ethiopia's unique cultural context with deeply rooted religious beliefs, norms promoting reconciliation and restrained emotion expression and the scarcity of existing studies, it is crucial to explore the combined effect of these factors in relation to marital satisfaction.

Method

Research Design

This study applied a descriptive correlational research design. Data were collected at a single point in December 2023 after obtaining consent from each participant.

Research Setting

Although Ethiopia is home to people of different cultural backgrounds, marriage is regarded as one of the most valued social institutions throughout the nation. Addis Ababa where this study conducted is the capital city of Ethiopia. Addis Ababa city administration consists of a total of ten sub-cities. The city is inhabited by people from diverse cultural backgrounds. According to the Central Statistical Agency, the population of Addis Ababa is estimated to be 5.7 million (United Nations, 2024). Despite the high prevalence of marriage-related problems in the city (Tadesse, 2014), there is a lack of studies that investigate the factors that contribute to marital satisfaction in Addis Ababa.

Population and Sample

According to information from the Addis Ababa public service office, the target population of this study consisted of 400 married civil servants. Participants were selected using stratified and simple random sampling. Based on their population size, participants were initially categorized (stratified) proportionally according to their gender (female = 196; male = 204). Subsequently, participants were selected from each stratum (female = 97, male = 101) using simple random sampling techniques. Therefore, a total of 198 participants were drawn based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table. The inclusion criteria for sampling were: (a) being married, (b) being in a marriage for at least one year, and (c) being able to read and write in the Amharic language; whereas the exclusion criteria were: (a) being underage, and (b) having health-related problems.

Instruments

This study used the English version of questionnaire items adapted from prior studies. The survey questionnaires were administered to collect data, which consisted of background information, religiosity, forgiveness, emotion regulation, and marital satisfaction. All the measures used in the present study were translated from English into Amharic and back-translated to ensure language equivalence. This process followed the translation and cross-cultural adaptation guidelines established by Beaton et al. (2000). Translation and back-translation were performed by language experts.

All measures in Amharic were reviewed by three experts in the fields of measurement and evaluation, social psychology, and social work to evaluate the content validity of each item. The experts' review was based on the relevance, clarity, and cultural appropriateness of the items. The number of items

retained from the expert review for marital satisfaction, religiosity, forgiveness and emotion regulation were 24, 18, 10, and 14 respectively. These items underwent a pilot study to assess their reliability. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha scores of all measures were above 0.70, indicating good reliability. Finally, there were a total of 44 items. The variables were measured as follows.

Marital Satisfaction

Marital satisfaction was measured using 16 items adapted from the couple's satisfaction index (CSI-32) (Funk & Rogge, 2007). The CSI items measured participants' satisfaction with various aspects of their marital relationship, such as love, care, and expectations. All items were scored on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; higher scores correspond with greater marital satisfaction. An example item is: "My partner and I often have fun together." Overall, the CSI is a better measure of marital satisfaction with a high-reliability score ($\alpha = .94$).

Religiosity

Religiosity was measured using 12 items adapted from the youth religiosity and spirituality scale (YRSS-37) (Hernandez, 2011). Participants in the present study were mainly asked to rate the extent to which they adhere to their religious teachings. The responses were scored on a 4-point scale, ranging from 0 = Never to 3 = Always; with a higher score indicating higher religiosity. An example item is: "How often do you pray before meals?" In this study, the internal consistency reliability of this scale was .94.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness was measured using eight items adapted from the marital offense-specific forgiveness scale (MOFS-10) (Fincham, 2010). Participants are asked to indicate the extent to which they make sacrifices and forgive their partner's misbehavior for the sake of their marriage. The items are scored on a 4-point scale, ranging from 0 = Never to 3 = Always; higher scores correspond with greater forgiveness. An example item is: "I continue to feel disappointed with my partner for what he/she did." In this study, the internal consistency reliability of the scale was .89.

Emotion Regulation

Emotion regulation was assessed using eight items adapted from the difficulties in emotion regulation scale (DERS-36) (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). The items measure the participants' ability to regulate their emotions when provoked by their partner's misbehavior. The items are scored on a 4-point scale, ranging from 0 = Never to 3 = Always. A higher score indicates higher emotional regulation. A sample item is: "How often do you feel easily upset by your partner's misbehavior?". In this study, the internal consistency reliability of the scale was .90.

Control Variables

Background variables such as age, sex, duration of the marriage, level of education, number of children, and monthly income were anticipated to be related to marital satisfaction. Thus, these variables were controlled during data analysis.

Procedure

First, ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the researchers' institution. Second, after obtaining permission from the Addis Ababa City Administration, two research assistants were recruited and trained for one day in data collection techniques. Third, after being informed about the ethical considerations necessary for participation in this study, participants provided their written consent. Finally, the questionnaire was administered in person to each participant with the help of the research assistants, who instructed them to return it within a week. The data collection process lasted three weeks, from December 3rd to December 23rd, 2023.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics software version 26. First, descriptive analysis was used to examine the characteristics of the participants and variables. Second, a Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between the study variables. Finally, a hierarchical regression analysis was run to investigate the effect of religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation on marital satisfaction, while controlling for background variables. The results of the preliminary analyses indicated that the data did not violate the assumptions of normality, outliers, linearity, and homoscedasticity. Besides, the examination of multicollinearity in this study revealed that tolerance, VIF values, and relationships between variables were within the normal bounds, suggesting that multicollinearity was not a problem in this study.

Results

This section began with sample characteristics, followed by correlational analysis. Lastly, the hypotheses were examined using hierarchical multiple regression.

Sample Characteristics

Data collection took place in December 2023 through individual survey administration. The majority of the participants were male ($n = 101$; 51.0%). The majority of the participants had children ($n = 161$, 82.0%). The average age of the participants was 40.30 years ($SD = 8.61$). In terms of their level of education, the majority of the participants held a bachelor's degree or higher ($n = 114$, 57.6%). 25.8% ($n = 51$) had a college diploma, 6.1% ($n = 12$) had a college certificate, and 10.6% ($n = 21$) had completed elementary or secondary education. The average duration of marriage was 12.22 years ($SD = 7.99$). The participants had an average of 2.01 children and received an average monthly salary of 85.28 USD ($SD = 50.41$).

Correlational Analysis

All variables were measured and analyzed at the ratio level, except gender. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations among variables. The study found a positive correlation between the participants' marital satisfaction and religiosity ($r = .32, p < .001$), emotion regulation ($r = .21, p < .001$), forgiveness ($r = .18, p = .014$), age ($r = .37, p < .001$), sex ($r = -.15, p = .031$), education level ($r = .15, p = .034$), and number of children ($r = .15, p = .041$). In addition, the level of religiosity among participants was positively correlated with forgiveness ($r = .16, p = .021$). There were varying levels of inter-correlations among these variables, ranging from fairly substantial to modest.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlational Analysis among the Study Variables ($n = 198$)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Age	40.30	8.61	-									
Gender	-	-	-.19**	-								
Educational level	4.39	1.03	.02	-.28**	-							
Duration of marriage	12.22	7.99	.64**	.05	-.14	-						
Number of children	2.01	1.41	.40**	-.01	.08	.50**	-					
Income	4,861.14	2,873.91	.05	-.29**	.52**	-.09	.05	-				
Religiosity	22.33	6.48	.22**	.06	-.00	.15*	.06	.03	-			
Emotion regulation	19.46	3.86	.00	-.02	.04	-.14*	.21**	-.01	.01	-		
Forgiveness	17.61	3.36	-.02	-.08	-.01	-.00	-.07	.05	.16*	.03	-	
Marital satisfaction	64.61	11.82	.37**	-.15*	.15	.13	.15*	.13	.32**	.21**	.18*	-

Note. *M*=mean, *SD*=Standard Deviation. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .001$

Hierarchical Regression Analyses

Except for gender (categorical variable), which was converted into dummy variables, the other background variables were treated as continuous variables. Table 2 shows the findings of a hierarchical regression analysis to illustrate variable(s) that can predict marital satisfaction after controlling for demographic variables. The demographic variables (age, sex, education level, marital duration, number of children, and income level) were entered in step 1, explaining 17.5% of the variance in marital satisfaction. Among these control variables, age was a significant predictor of marital satisfaction ($\beta = .48, p < .001$). After entering the three variables (religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation) at step 2, the model explained the overall variance of 32.1% [$F(9, 168) = 8.84, p < .001$].

The three variables (religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation) explained an additional 14.6% of the variance in marital satisfaction, after controlling for demographic variables, R-squared change (ΔR^2) = .14, F change (3, 168) = 12.04, $p < .001$. In the final model, only four variables were statistically significant: age recorded the highest beta ($\beta = .40, p < .001$), followed by religiosity ($\beta = .27, p < .001$), forgiveness ($\beta = .18, p < .001$), and finally, emotion regulation ($\beta = .14, p = .042$). The results support all hypotheses of the study.

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Predictive Factors for Marital Satisfaction After Controlling for Demographic Variables

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	R^2	Adjusted R^2	R^2 change	F change
Step 1							
Age	.66	.13	.48**	.17	.14		
Gender	-.63	2.68	-.01**				
Educational level	.85	.98	.07				
Marital duration	-.25	.15	-.17				
Number of Children	-.05	.70	-.00				
Income level	.00	.00	.04				
Step 2							
Age	.56	.12	.40**	.32	.28	.14	12.04**
Sex	-1.41	2.49	-.04				
Educational level	1.42	.90	.12				
Marital duration	-.18	.14	-.12				
Number of Children	-.37	.67	-.04				
Income level	3.00	.00	.00				
Religiosity	.49	.12	.27**				
Emotion regulation	.44	.21	.14*				
Forgiveness	.66	.23	.18**				

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion of Main Results

The present study contributes new knowledge to behavioral science by revealing positive qualities that influence marital satisfaction. It sheds light on the need for a new practical approach expected of practitioners in the field of behavioral science.

Correlation analysis revealed a significant and positive association of marital satisfaction with religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation. Consistent with this study, previous studies have also identified a positive relationship between religiosity and marital satisfaction (Sauerheber et al., 2021). Individuals who engage in religious practices tend to have stronger beliefs about marriage and marital

relationships, which are associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction. Correlation analysis also showed a positive correlation between forgiveness and marital satisfaction. In line with the present study, prior research also indicates that participants who have a high level of forgiveness towards their partners' misbehavior are likely to report higher levels of marital satisfaction than those with a low level of forgiveness (Shamsi & Asad, 2021). Additionally, the findings corroborate the role of forgiveness with the attributes of accommodation and remaining faithful (Fincham et al., 2007).

Moreover, the correlational analysis indicates a positive association between emotion regulation and marital satisfaction. Supporting the findings of this study, prior research has also confirmed a positive link between emotion regulation and marital satisfaction (Tani et al., 2015). It seems that participants' ability to regulate their emotions is linked to their reports of high marital satisfaction. Emotion regulation is a crucial skill for managing marital conflict (Low et al., 2019). It is believed that identifying and implementing emotion regulation strategies may help to mitigate differences that arise between partners.

The findings in this study also indicate a positive link between marital satisfaction and background factors such as gender, age, education level, and number of children. These findings concur with prior research that also identified a positive correlation between being male and having a higher level of education (Guo & Huang, 2005) with a high degree of marital satisfaction. However, despite the prior report of a negative association between age and the number of children with marital satisfaction (Addisu et al., 2017), this study rejects that association. Such inconsistency may be attributed to better economic status due to the employment status of the participants and belonging to a collectivist culture that highly values having more children, which is ultimately linked to increased age (Onyishi et al., 2012). It is believed that when partners feel economically secure enough to support their families, they may decide to have more children. In Ethiopian culture, having children is highly valued and respected. Similarly, a study by Fatima and Ajmal (2012) discusses children as a strengthening factor in couples' relationships.

The results of hierarchical regression analysis showed that all main variables (i.e., religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation) have significant positive effects on marital satisfaction. The overall model explained 32% of the variance in marital satisfaction. The positive relationship between religiosity and marital satisfaction, supports hypothesis 1. Participants with a high level of religiosity tend to have a high level of marital satisfaction. This finding is consistent with those of previous studies (Perry, 2015). This is because religious practice improves the ability of forgiveness, patience, and perseverance among partners, ultimately enhancing marital satisfaction (Aman et al., 2021; Azimi & Hobby, 2022; Kyambi et al., 2017). Religiosity not only enhances marital satisfaction but also plays a crucial role in strengthening one's positive character. Studies have also supported the idea that religious beliefs contribute to higher levels of commitment and effort in relationships (Aman et al., 2021). Religious beliefs strengthen the sanctity of marriage, thereby promoting marital satisfaction (Aman et al., 2019). This finding is also in line with the VSA theory, which states that religiosity provides partners with adaptive qualities to deal with various marital problems, thereby positively influencing marital satisfaction (Kyambi et al., 2017). The findings also play a significant role in fostering satisfying marriages across diverse cultural contexts. Regardless of its variations across cultures, religiosity offers shared values, social support, moral guidance, rituals, and coping mechanisms that contribute to overall marital satisfaction.

The positive relationship between forgiveness and marital satisfaction, supports hypothesis 2. Supporting this finding, prior research has also confirmed that forgiveness positively influences marital satisfaction (Agu & Nwankwo, 2019). Reaffirming the findings of this study, scholars have also well-documented that forgiveness contributes to better marital relationships by enhancing one's ability to deal with negative behaviors (David & Stafford, 2015). Moreover, the qualities of forgiveness, including a willingness to sacrifice, promote marital relationships by enhancing individuals' positive behaviors (Fahimdanesh et al., 2020). Our finding is also consistent with the assumptions of the VSA theory, which suggests that forgiveness provides couples with adaptive qualities that, in turn, influence marital success

(David & Stafford, 2015). Despite the variations in understanding and practice across cultures, forgiveness is a crucial tool that can help partners cultivate a healthy marital relationship. By promoting reconciliation, willingness to sacrifice, and strengthening the bonds between partners, forgiveness might contribute to a broader understanding of marital relationships within diverse cultural contexts.

The positive relationship between emotion regulation and marital satisfaction, supports hypothesis 3. This finding is similar to previous studies (Tani et al., 2015). For instance, scholars have linked positive relationship qualities such as marital conflict resolution (Low et al., 2019), and marital adjustment (Hosu & Năstasă, 2020) with emotion regulation. Moreover, consistent with the VSA theory's assertion, which discusses the positive role of emotion regulation in equipping couples with adaptive qualities to address various marital problems (Low et al., 2019). Regardless of cultural variation, marriage is likely to be accompanied by different emotion-provoking incidents. Thus, these findings are pertinent for building and maintaining satisfying marriages across diverse cultural contexts. By reducing conflict, and promoting positive emotions, emotion regulation can contribute to marital satisfaction.

Due to the controlled nature of the background variables, the observed effects of this study were valid and truly due to religiosity, forgiveness, and emotional regulation, rather than being influenced by confounding factors. Besides, the study contributes to VSA theory (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) by incorporating the significance of religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation within the marital context in particular and by highlighting its role in advancing the overall understanding of behavioral science in general. Generally, the positive contributions of religiosity, forgiveness, and emotional regulation can be attributed to their alignment with Ethiopian culture, which views marriage as a sacred institution bestowed by God/Allah.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. Firstly, its reliance on self-reported data may be considered a limitation due to its susceptibility to bias. Participants may over-report their level of marital satisfaction due to the high social desirability associated with marriage. Therefore, it would be more informative if future research is conducted using qualitative data collection methods such as observation, interview, and focus group discussion. Secondly, because the design is cross-sectional, the researcher cannot draw any conclusions about the directionality of the research findings. Thus, future research would require longitudinal data to determine the direction of the relationship between these variables.

Implications for Behavioral Science

The study has an original contribution to behavioral science theory and practice. This study is interdisciplinary as it integrates concepts from psychology, sociology, and social work. The interdisciplinary nature of this study not only benefits various fields within behavioral science by providing comprehensive and valuable insights for improved intervention strategies, but it also bridges the gaps between these fields by offering a holistic understanding of marital satisfaction. The positive effect of religiosity on marital satisfaction highlights the importance of encouraging partners to participate in various religious activities. The present study could provide insights to concerned bodies, particularly religious leaders, counselors, and social workers, to implement religious education programs aimed at fostering healthy marital relationships.

Counselors and social workers can improve their clients' marital satisfaction by guiding them toward various religious practices and beliefs. This may include assisting clients in connecting with a religious leader or organization that aligns with their faith. Additionally, interested clients can be provided with religious resources, such as books or scriptures, that they may find beneficial. This study provides further insight into behavioral science, highlighting the importance of religiousness in fostering a positive relationship environment and promoting fulfilling marital relationships.

Additionally, the study's revelation of the positive effects of forgiveness and emotion regulation in enhancing marital satisfaction could be beneficial to behavioral science practitioners, such as counselors and social workers, in devising methods to promote positive relationship skills. Particularly, it serves as a guide for implementing strength-oriented interventions aimed at promoting positive relationship behaviors, such as forgiveness and emotion regulation skills, to enhance marital satisfaction. This can be accomplished by providing opportunities for couples to share success stories of forgiveness, discuss the benefits of these qualities, and learn how to integrate them into their daily lives. Besides, couples' ability to regulate their emotions can be enhanced through education that helps them identify triggering factors that lead to resentment, manage their emotions, and focus on the positive aspects of their relationship.

This, in turn, positively impacts healthy relationship environments. Thus, behavioral scientists can benefit from this study to apply psychosocial intervention programs aimed at enhancing partners' religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation skills to better equip them in dealing with marital problems. This study also provides valuable insights for future research in the field of behavioral science. The researchers could examine how cultural factors influence religiosity, forgiveness, and emotional regulation on marital satisfaction. Besides, future studies could focus on implementing religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation programs in marital relationships to evaluate their impact on enhancing marital satisfaction.

Conclusion

This study aimed to contribute new knowledge to behavioral science by examining the effects of religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation on marital satisfaction. The findings revealed that religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation have positive effects on marital satisfaction. By highlighting the importance of religiosity, forgiveness, and emotion regulation as essential qualities to promote marital satisfaction, this study makes a novel practical contribution to professionals in the field of behavioral science. New knowledge in behavioral science will specifically contribute to understanding of marital relationship dynamics within the Ethiopian context. This suggests that practitioners such as counselors and social workers should emphasize strength-oriented interventions to improve marital satisfaction. These insights underscore the need to incorporate religiosity, forgiveness, and emotional regulation into designing and implementing marriage counseling and training programs. Despite its essential contribution to the field of behavioral science, further research is required to advance our understanding.

Declarations

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of School of Psychology, Addis Ababa University, approved in 23/06/2023.

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