

# The Association Between Differentiation of Self and Subjective Well-being in Female University Students: The Mediating Role of Marital Satisfaction

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## Abstract

**Background:** Self-differentiation and marital contentment emerge as key predictors of subjective well-being, especially among female university students. The present study aimed to investigate the mediating effect of marital satisfaction on the link between self-differentiation and subjective well-being in female university students.

**Methods:** In this descriptive-correlational study, a convenience sample of 473 married female students from Islamic Azad University, Rasht Branch, Rasht, Iran were recruited to participate in the study in 2023. For data collection, Subjective Well-Being Scale (SWS), Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI), and Marital Satisfaction Scale (MSS) were used. For data analysis, Pearson correlation and bootstrapping were used in SPSS version 26 and Amos version 26, to investigate the link between the variables of the study and mediation significance, respectively.

**Results:** A notable positive direct association between self-differentiation and subjective well-being ( $\beta=0.23$ ,  $P=0.002$ ) was found. Self-differentiation also demonstrated a significant positive indirect effect on subjective well-being through marital satisfaction ( $\beta=0.08$ ,  $P=0.006$ ). Marital satisfaction showed a robust positive direct association with subjective well-being ( $\beta=0.32$ ,  $P<0.001$ ).

**Conclusion:** This study demonstrated that differentiation of self directly and positively predicts subjective well-being in married female university students, while also exerting a significant indirect effect through marital satisfaction. Enhancing self-differentiation can therefore improve marital quality and overall life satisfaction, with important implications for counseling and support programs in higher education settings.

**Keywords:** Mental Health, Well-being, Differentiation, Female Students

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## 1. Introduction

The rising incidence of mental health vulnerabilities in recent years significantly exceeds population norms, with a marked increase in mental disorder experiences among young adults, substantially affecting their subjective well-being (1). Attainment of subjective well-being is recognized as essential for positive social functioning, enabling individual and societal adaptation to life's challenges (2). Consequently, subjective well-being has attracted significant interest within positive psychology research (3). Subjective well-being, as a dimension of mental health, represents the optimal and positive aspect of individual health, distinct from yet interconnected with mental disorders, which constitute the negative aspect. Individuals with high subjective well-being demonstrate a reduced susceptibility to mental disorders and an increased capacity for societal flourishing (4).

Subjective well-being comprises an individual's

comprehensive evaluation of life quality based on personal standards, characterized by subjectivity, stability, and a holistic perspective. It is assessed through continuous subjective evaluations, reflecting personal viewpoints and the experience of diverse emotions (5). Thus, subjective well-being can be conceptualized as encompassing affective components (high positive affect, low negative affect) and cognitive components (general life satisfaction, domain-specific satisfaction) (6). Identifying factors that influence subjective well-being remains a critical research pursuit. Recent studies have highlighted the significance of familial, psychological, and social determinants, with emerging evidence emphasizing the role of differentiation of self and marital satisfaction (7, 8).

Derived from Bowen's family systems theory, self-differentiation represents the skill to balance emotional independence with relational bonds, especially in adulthood—a pivotal stage for growth. Studies showed that greater self-

differentiation aligns with superior emotional control, stronger interpersonal ties, and elevated subjective well-being (7). It signifies a person's potential for personal autonomy in social settings alongside cultivating closeness. This construct shapes an individual's cognitive and emotional processing in interpersonal interactions, particularly during emotionally demanding or socially stressful scenarios that require effective thought and emotion management to avoid maladaptive decision-making, a proficiency often absent in undifferentiated individuals (8). Previous research corroborated that individuals with higher differentiation of self exhibit more adaptive responses to life's challenges, especially adverse events (9). Consequently, these individuals report higher levels of well-being, attributed to their ability to regulate emotions and cognitions, leading to more rational social interactions (10). Furthermore, marital satisfaction can cultivate a supportive environment, enabling individuals to navigate emotional and stressful situations more effectively. Research underscored the significance of relational factors, such as marital satisfaction, in attenuating the detrimental effects of emotional distress on subjective well-being (11).

Marital satisfaction is recognized as a factor potentially augmenting couples' well-being through the enhancement of marital harmony (12). Basically, marital satisfaction reflects the alignment between perceived and desired marital states, encompassing an individual's comprehensive and subjective appraisal of their marriage (13). Interpersonal connections are characterized by reciprocal interactions and exchanges. Within the domain of family studies, a core tenet of behavioral theory posits that positive marital behaviors bolster spouses' overall marital sentiment, while negative behaviors erode positive affect and negatively impact connection perceptions (14). Therefore, it is plausible that marital satisfaction functions as a mediating variable between research constructs and determinants of subjective well-being, as supported by prior research indicating a correlation between differentiation of self and marital satisfaction (15).

Shenaar-Golan and Lans (15) found that women exhibiting higher differentiation of self in significant life decisions, such as family planning, reported greater marital satisfaction and overall well-being compared with their less differentiated

counterparts. In developing contexts, exemplified by Iran, where marriages are often arranged and women have limited partner selection, they frequently rely on their husbands for economic and social support. This reflects a relative lack of familial bargaining power and exposes women lacking autonomy to pervasive mistreatment and discrimination across various life domains (16). Building on previous research that highlighted the distinct roles of self-differentiation and marital satisfaction in well-being (17), the present study addresses a gap in the literature by examining the mediating role of marital satisfaction in the relationship between self-differentiation and subjective well-being. Uncovering primary predictors and precursors of subjective well-being is essential for shielding students from mental health risks and supporting their adaptive functioning. Notably, higher subjective well-being correlates with decreased vulnerability to mental disorders and amplified societal engagement (4). The primary aim of this study was to quantify the degree to which marital satisfaction explains the relationship between self-differentiation and subjective well-being among female university students.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Design

Using a descriptive-correlational framework with structural equation modeling (SEM), this study investigated the relationship between self-differentiation and subjective well-being, emphasizing the mediating role of marital satisfaction. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual framework of the study.

### 2.2. Selection and Description of Participants

The target population comprised female students at Islamic Azad University, Rasht Branch, Iran, in the 2023 academic year. Following institutional

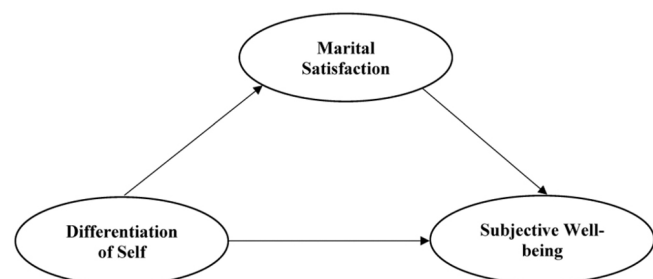


Figure 1: The figure shows the conceptual model.

ethical approvals, convenience sampling technique was used. Sample size followed SEM guidelines recommending 10-15 participants per estimated parameter (18). With roughly 30 parameters (paths, variances, covariances) in the model, a minimum of 450 participants was targeted. To account for potential incomplete responses, 473 participants were recruited. The inclusion criteria were: willingness to participate, provision of informed consent, active university enrollment, female gender, and being currently married. The exclusion criteria were incomplete questionnaire responses (exceeding 10% omission) and demonstrated indifference during questionnaire completion (e.g., uniform responses across items). Prior to administration of the research instruments, the study participants were thoroughly briefed and steps were taken to minimize potential sensitivity.

### 2.3. Data Collection and Measurements

*Subjective Well-being Scale (SWS):* SWS evaluates emotional, psychological, and social facets of well-being via 45 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree), producing scores from 45 to 225, with elevated scores signifying higher subjective well-being. The first 12 items target emotional well-being, the next 18 items cover psychological well-being, and the final 15 items assess social well-being (19). The scale shows adequate face validity, internal consistency, and reliability (20). Ebrahimi and colleagues (20) documented a Cronbach's alpha of 0.80, alongside a CVI of 0.85 and CVR of 0.78 for the Persian adaptation. In this study, Cronbach's alpha for SWS was 0.83.

*The Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI):* Developed by Skowron and Friedlander (21), DSI is a 45-item self-report measure assessing individuals' self-differentiation levels. Items are rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1=not at all true of me to 6=very true of me), yielding total scores from 45 to 270, where higher values denote stronger self-differentiation. It comprises four subscales—affektive congruence, self-evaluation, emotional avoidance, and emotional reactivity—with an overall score calculated from all items. Previous research supported its reliability, including a test-retest correlation of 0.84 (22). Ghavibazou and colleagues (22) validated the Persian DSI, noting a CVI of 0.87 and CVR of 0.80. In our study, internal consistency was adequate, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83.

*The Marital Satisfaction Scale (MSS):* comprises 35 items that assess key facets of marital quality, such as satisfaction, communication, and conflict management. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), yielding total scores ranging from 35 to 175, with higher scores indicating greater marital satisfaction. By comparison, the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale offers wider coverage of marital elements, encompassing personality factors, communication, and financial aspects (23). The Persian MSS version displays acceptable reliability, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.74, CVI of 0.82, and CVR of 0.76 (24). In our study, it achieved strong internal consistency, evidenced by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.79.

### 2.4. Procedure

Eligible participants were recruited via convenience sampling through announcements in classes, university social media groups, and student affairs offices during the 2023 academic year. Individuals who expressed interest attended an information session in which the study's purpose, voluntary nature, confidentiality, and right to withdraw were fully explained. Informed consent forms were distributed and signed by those who agreed to participate. To address the potential sensitivity of marital and personal topics, participants completed the questionnaires anonymously; completion typically took 30–45 minutes. Researchers were available to clarify instructions without influencing responses. Completed questionnaires were checked for eligibility; those with more than 10% missing data or patterned indifferent responding were excluded. Data collection continued until 473 valid responses were obtained.

### 2.5. Data Analysis

After rigorous data cleaning and confirmation of SEM prerequisites, the dataset was analyzed with SPSS version 26 and Amos version 26. Pearson correlations evaluated the relationship among self-differentiation, marital satisfaction, and subjective well-being. SEM tested the proposed latent variable pathways and model adequacy. Bootstrapping assessed marital satisfaction's mediation, offering dependable indirect effect estimates.

### 3. Results

The age distribution of the participants was as follows: 116 (24.53%) were aged 20-25 years, 263 (55.60%) were aged 25-30 years, and 94 (19.87%) were aged 30-35 years. Regarding level of education, 216 (45.67%) were undergraduate students, 226 (47.87%) were graduate students, and 31 (6.55%) were PhD students. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients for subjective well-being, differentiation of self, and marital satisfaction among the participants.

The mean values revealed moderate levels of subjective well-being ( $M=136.47$ ,  $SD=11.52$ ), comparatively high levels of differentiation of self ( $M=159.63$ ,  $SD=33.04$ ), and moderately high marital satisfaction ( $M=105.62$ ,  $SD=18.47$ ). All variables displayed statistically significant positive intercorrelations: subjective well-being with self-differentiation ( $r=0.36$ ) and marital satisfaction ( $r=0.39$ ), alongside self-differentiation with marital satisfaction ( $r=0.53$ ). Such patterns imply that greater self-differentiation and marital satisfaction align with enhanced subjective well-being in this cohort.

SEM was used to test the proposed associations within the present model. Prior to analysis, the fundamental assumptions of SEM, namely normality, absence of multicollinearity, and independence of errors, were evaluated. Variable normality was verified through skewness and kurtosis, showing normal distributions for all

measures (Table 1). Multicollinearity was assessed with Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) (all  $<10$ ) and tolerance ( $>0.1$ ) values, ruling out concerns. Error independence was confirmed using a Durbin-Watson statistic of 1.98, within the range of 1.5–2.5.

Model fit to the data was assessed through multiple indices, namely  $\chi^2/df$ , NFI, CFI, IFI, TLI, and RMSEA (Table 2). All metrics confirmed adequate fit. Figure 2 depicts the structural model of the study.

Table 3 outlines the direct and indirect path coefficients ( $\beta$ ) along with P values from the proposed model, assessing links between self-differentiation, marital satisfaction, and subjective well-being among female university students. Key results included a robust positive direct impact of self-differentiation on marital satisfaction ( $\beta=0.36$ ,  $P<0.001$ ), linking stronger self-differentiation to elevated marital satisfaction. Similarly, marital satisfaction positively influenced subjective well-being directly ( $\beta=0.32$ ,  $P<0.001$ ), associating greater marital satisfaction with improved well-being.

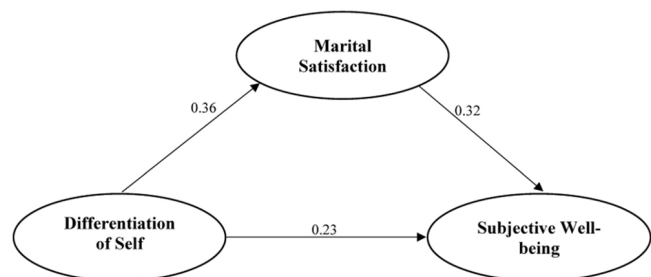


Figure 2: The figure shows the structural model of the study.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations for Study Variables

Variables	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3
1- Subjective well-being	136.47	11.52	0.13	-0.11	1		
2- Differentiation of self	159.63	33.04	-0.04	-0.07	0.36**	1	
3- Marital satisfaction	105.62	18.47	0.10	0.65	0.39**	0.53**	1

\*\* $P<0.01$ ; SD: Standard Deviation

Table 2: Fit indicators of the research model

Fit indicators	$\chi^2$	df	$(\chi^2/df)$	CFI	TLI	IFI	NFI	RMSEA
Model	264.20	263	1.01	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.96	0.003

df: Degrees of freedom;  $\chi^2/df$ : Chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio; CFI: Comparative Fit Index; TLI: Tucker-Lewis Index; IFI: Incremental Fit Index; NFI: Normed Fit Index; RMSEA: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation

Table 3: Direct and indirect path in the research model

Paths	$\beta$	P
Differentiation of self $\rightarrow$ Marital satisfaction	0.36	0.001
Marital satisfaction $\rightarrow$ Subjective well-being	0.32	0.001
Differentiation of self $\rightarrow$ Subjective well-being	0.23	0.002
Differentiation of self $\rightarrow$ Subjective well-being through marital satisfaction	0.08	0.006



Self-differentiation also directly boosted subjective well-being significantly ( $\beta=0.23$ ,  $P=0.002$ ). Moreover, the mediated indirect pathway from self-differentiation to subjective well-being through marital satisfaction proved to be significant and positive ( $\beta=0.08$ ,  $P=0.006$ ), underscoring the partial mediation of marital satisfaction in this relationship.

#### 4. Discussion

Based on the study results, a robust link was found between self-differentiation and marital satisfaction in female university students. These outcomes aligned with earlier studies, including Mohammadi and colleagues (25), which linked higher self-differentiation to enhanced emotional control and interpersonal problem-solving, thereby boosting marital satisfaction. Işık and co-workers (26) likewise documented a favorable relationship between self-differentiation and improved marital adaptation alongside life satisfaction. Shenaar-Golan and Lans (15) further validated these patterns, highlighting self-differentiation and emotional independence while showing that self-differentiation during pivotal marital choices elevates satisfaction levels.

From a Bowenian perspective, differentiation of self is crucial for achieving individuation and maintaining equilibrium between personal autonomy and interpersonal connectedness (27). Individuals with high differentiation of self can cultivate effective connections while preserving a strong sense of personal identity and values. They possess a robust self-concept and respond to emotional stimuli with composure and thoughtful deliberation, rather than impulsive emotional reactions (25). It is important to note that differentiation of self does not equate to emotional detachment or avoidance of interpersonal connections. Differentiated individuals can establish deep and meaningful connections while maintaining healthy boundaries. They can effectively interact with others, preserving emotional and intellectual autonomy, thereby fostering a balanced integration of individuality and relationality, which in turn promotes marital satisfaction (26). Consequently, differentiation of self, as a psychological competency, facilitates a balanced interplay between independence and interdependence within marital dynamics. This balance enhances communication, mitigates

conflict, fosters intimacy, and ultimately contributes to marital satisfaction. Therefore, couples with higher differentiation of self are more likely to experience stable, healthy, and fulfilling marital bonds.

The present study further uncovered a favorable relationship between self-differentiation and subjective well-being, whereby those with stronger self-differentiation experience elevated well-being. These outcomes resonated with earlier studies, including Abdi Zarrin and Nikkhah Siruei (8), who positioned self-differentiation as a major well-being predictor through its significant positive link to student well-being. Hocaoglu and Işık (7) also echoed this issue, verifying the positive self-differentiation–subjective well-being association and linking it to emotional detachment—a trait of differentiated individuals—that promotes greater well-being. Tarkhan (10) similarly stressed the role of self-differentiation in forecasting personal well-being.

The observed association can be explained by the fact that individuals with high differentiation of self display greater assertiveness in stressful situations and act independently with confidence. They avoid excessive emotional dependence and maintain clear beliefs, allowing them to establish healthy relational boundaries while remaining behaviorally flexible. Consequently, they can acknowledge and learn from their mistakes, striving for rectification (8). This emotional awareness and cognitive appraisal ability enable them to make more independent and rational decisions, leading to higher subjective well-being. Conversely, individuals with low cognitive self-differentiation tend to make hasty, ill-considered decisions and exhibit poor control over negative emotions. They are highly dependent on others and lack a defined sense of identity. Fear of abandonment compels them to sacrifice their individuality for assurance and support. This dependence and emotional dysregulation result in increased social distress and heightened susceptibility to physical and psychological symptoms, leading to lower well-being (9).

Consistent with expectations, marital satisfaction demonstrated a positive association with subjective well-being, indicating that elevated marital satisfaction predicts greater subjective well-being. This result aligned with previous

studies (28, 29), which established a positive correlation between marital satisfaction and well-being. Similarly, Mäki and co-workers (30) found that increased marital harmony is associated with higher levels of well-being.

This association can be explained by the fact that marital satisfaction facilitates a balance between individual and relational needs, enabling individuals to experience marital fulfillment while pursuing personal growth. This balance contributes to robust interpersonal functioning, reduced relational stress, marital happiness, and marital cohesion. Consequently, this synergy of relational satisfaction and personal development appears to meet the prerequisites for enhancing subjective well-being (28). A supportive spouse is a critical source of social support, positively correlating with subjective well-being. However, not all marriages are more advantageous than singlehood in terms of subjective well-being. Indeed, marital conflict, separation, or divorce can precipitate psychological and health problems. Remaining in an unsatisfactory marriage is significantly associated with diminished happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and overall health, as well as increased psychological distress. Furthermore, remaining in an unhappy marriage is often more detrimental than divorce, as individuals dissatisfied with their marriages report lower contentment compared with divorced or remarried individuals (29). Thus, maintaining a satisfying marital bond is crucial for achieving, enhancing, and sustaining high subjective well-being.

Indirect pathway examination showed that self-differentiation impacts subjective well-being through marital satisfaction. Notably, stronger self-differentiation linked to elevated marital satisfaction, which subsequently fostered greater subjective well-being. These findings correspond with earlier studies, including Işık and co-workers (26), who identified full mediation by marital adjustment in the self-differentiation–life satisfaction relationship. Shenaar-Golan and Lans (15) similarly reported that mothers with superior self-differentiation displayed heightened subjective well-being, mediated by improved marital satisfaction, versus those with lesser differentiation.

This observation can be explained by the ability of individuals with high differentiation of self to effectively balance autonomy and dependence

within marital dynamics. This balance potentially reduces marital conflict, fosters intimacy, and improves communication between partners (25). Furthermore, increased marital satisfaction can mitigate life stressors and provide a robust source of support, thereby enhancing subjective well-being (28). In essence, marital satisfaction fosters feelings of security, support, and belonging, which contribute to improved subjective well-being. Consequently, as evidenced by this study, differentiation of self indirectly impacts subjective well-being through the enhancement of marital satisfaction. In other words, higher differentiation of self likely promotes better marital functioning, which increases marital satisfaction and ultimately improves individual subjective well-being.

#### *4.1. Limitations*

The findings of this study, while illuminating the intricate pathways linking differentiation of self to subjective well-being through marital satisfaction, are not without limitations that warrant cautious interpretation. Beyond the reliance on convenience sampling technique, which may limit the generalizability of results to broader populations of married female university students in Iran or similar contexts, the cross-sectional design precludes establishing causality among the variables; longitudinal research would be essential to discern whether enhancements in differentiation of self precede improvements in marital satisfaction and well-being over time. Additionally, the exclusive use of self-report measures introduces potential response biases, such as social desirability, particularly in a cultural milieu where marital harmony is highly valued, potentially inflating associations. The focus of the study on married female students at a single institution further restricted diversity in terms of socioeconomic status, marriage duration, or cultural subgroups, overlooking how factors like arranged versus love marriages might modulate these relationships.

#### **5. Conclusions**

Our study offered robust evidence for the proposed links between self-differentiation, marital satisfaction, and subjective well-being in married female university students. The strong direct positive impact of self-differentiation on subjective well-being emphasizes the value of

personal emotional independence and regulation for advancing mental health. Moreover, the mediating function of marital satisfaction reveals the intricate balance of individual and relational elements in shaping well-being. In particular, elevated self-differentiation seems to bolster marital satisfaction, thereby elevating subjective well-being. This suggests that interventions aimed at fostering differentiation of self may yield dual benefits, both directly enhancing individual well-being and indirectly promoting it through improved marital dynamics.

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### Authors' Contribution

Elahe Nadi: Substantial contributions to the conception and design of the work; acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data for the work; drafting of the work. Saeed Bakhtiarpour: Substantial contributions to the conception and design of the work, analysis and interpretation of data for the work; reviewing the work critically for important intellectual content. Behnam Makvandi: Substantial contributions to the conception and design of the work, analysis and interpretation of data for the work; reviewing the work critically for important intellectual content. Parviz Asgari: Substantial contributions to the conception and design of the work, analysis and interpretation of data for the work; reviewing the work critically for important intellectual content. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work, ensuring that any questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the study are appropriately investigated and resolved.

**Conflict of interests:** None declared.

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### Ethical Approval

The Ethics Committee of the Islamic Azad

University, Ahvaz Branch, Ahvaz, Iran approved the present study with the code of IR.IAU.AHVAZ.REC.1402.161. Also, written informed consent was obtained from the participants.

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