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Comparison of the Effectiveness of the Integrated Gottman and Emotion-Focused Therapy Model with the Imago Therapy Approach on Marital Adjustment and Love Styles in Married Students with Early Marriages

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aimed to compare the effectiveness of an integrated Gottman-EFCT model and Imago Therapy on marital adjustment and love styles in married students with early marriages.

Methods and Materials: The study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test, post-test, and control group. Forty-four participants were randomly assigned into two intervention groups: Integrated Gottman-EFCT ($n = 15$) and Imago Therapy ($n = 14$), along with a control group ($n = 15$). Each group underwent ten sessions of the respective therapy. Data were collected using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) to assess marital adjustment and the Love Attitudes Scale (LAS) for love styles. ANOVA and t-tests were used to compare pre-test and post-test scores across groups.

Findings: Significant improvements were observed in both intervention groups for marital adjustment and love styles. In the Gottman-EFCT group, the post-test mean for marital adjustment increased from 89.56 ($SD = 9.45$) to 110.65 ($SD = 8.90$) ($t = 5.23$, $p = 0.001$), while the Imago Therapy group showed a similar improvement from 88.45 ($SD = 9.34$) to 108.90 ($SD = 9.15$) ($t = 5.10$, $p = 0.001$). Love styles also significantly improved, with Eros increasing in the Gottman-EFCT group from 22.15 ($SD = 3.50$) to 28.75 ($SD = 3.10$) ($t = 4.87$, $p = 0.001$). The ANOVA results showed a significant between-group effect for marital adjustment ($F = 72.21$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.78$).

Conclusion: Both the Integrated Gottman-EFCT and Imago Therapy interventions were effective in improving marital adjustment and enhancing positive love styles in couples with early marriages. However, the integrated approach demonstrated a stronger effect across most variables, suggesting that a combined therapeutic approach may be more beneficial in addressing marital issues.

Keywords: Emotion-focused couples therapy, Imago therapy, Gottman, marital adjustment, love styles.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, marital therapy has gained significant attention due to its effectiveness in addressing complex issues within couples' relationships (Houshmandi, 2022; Javidan, 2022). Early marriages, often fraught with numerous socio-cultural and developmental challenges, require unique interventions to enhance marital adjustment and love styles (Abedi et al., 2024; Akrami, 2022; Babaei et al., 2024; Godarzi & Khojaste, 2020; Khorasaniyan, 2022). Among the various therapeutic approaches, Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT) and Gottman Method Couples Therapy (GMCT) have emerged as two highly effective models, especially in addressing emotional disconnection and maladaptive communication patterns within relationships (Behrang et al., 2021; Zuccarini et al., 2013). Additionally, Imago therapy, pioneered by Harville Hendrix, focuses on healing childhood wounds through marital interaction and has been widely researched for its efficacy in improving marital quality and intimacy (Amini Khoei et al., 2014; Fatemi et al., 2016).

Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy, developed by Sue Johnson, is rooted in attachment theory and seeks to foster a secure emotional bond between partners (Ardakhani & Seadatee Shamir, 2022). EFCT identifies patterns of emotional disconnection and guides couples through a process of recognizing and altering their negative interaction cycles. The therapy is structured around stages, beginning with de-escalating negative cycles, followed by restructuring interactions to create a secure emotional attachment, and finally, consolidating new patterns of connection (Goldman & Greenberg, 1992; Zuccarini et al., 2013). EFCT has been extensively studied and is particularly effective in improving marital satisfaction and intimacy (Asadi et al., 2020; Behrang et al., 2021; Wiebe et al., 2017).

EFCT's success has been demonstrated in various populations, including couples dealing with infidelity, communication issues, and emotional dysregulation. For instance, Asgari et al. (2022) demonstrated that EFCT effectively improved emotional regulation and differentiation in women affected by marital infidelity (Asgari et al., 2022). Similarly, research by Ghahari et al. (2021) highlighted EFCT's ability to reduce marital conflict and enhance emotion regulation, particularly in couples facing heightened emotional distress (Ghahari et al., 2021). The approach's focus on emotional safety and connection has made it a preferred therapeutic model in addressing the deep-rooted emotional needs of couples (Welch et al., 2019).

John Gottman's work on couples' relationships is grounded in years of empirical research and focuses on creating lasting relational stability and emotional resilience. GMCT is centered on the concept of the "Sound Relationship House," which emphasizes building friendship, managing conflict constructively, and creating shared meaning within the relationship (Gottman, 1993; Gottman, 1999; Gottman & Tabares, 2018; Hicks, 2004). Key interventions in GMCT include enhancing couples' emotional attunement, fostering positive affect during conflict, and developing repair mechanisms to navigate relational stress (Garanzini, 2017; Gottman & Tabares, 2018).

Studies have shown GMCT to be particularly effective in enhancing marital adjustment and reducing emotional and relational burnout. Saadati Shamir et al. (2019) found that GMCT significantly improved family functioning and marital adjustment in couples applying for divorce, indicating its efficacy in high-conflict relationships (Saadati Shamir, 2019). Similarly, Havassi et al. (2017) observed that GMCT reduced marital burnout and improved conflict resolution styles, thus contributing to greater emotional intimacy and resilience in couples (Havaasi et al., 2017; Havassi et al., 2017). Research has also shown GMCT to be effective in same-sex couples, broadening its application across diverse populations (Garanzini, 2017).

Imago therapy, developed by Harville Hendrix, focuses on healing childhood wounds that manifest in adult relationships. The therapy seeks to uncover unconscious patterns and defense mechanisms that partners bring into their relationship, which often lead to conflict and disconnection. By promoting conscious dialogue and empathy, Imago therapy aims to transform conflict into a healing opportunity, enabling couples to reconnect on a deeper emotional level (Amini Khoei et al., 2014; Fatemi et al., 2016).

Imago therapy has been extensively applied to couples struggling with various issues, including communication breakdowns and emotional disconnection. Research by Aslani et al. (2015) demonstrated the therapy's effectiveness in improving marital quality among couples referred to counseling centers (Aslani, 2015). Similarly, Rahmanishamsh et al. (2022) highlighted Imago therapy's positive impact on psychological well-being and forgiveness in divorced women, further emphasizing its utility in addressing relational trauma (Rahmanishamsh et al., 2022). Additionally, Fereydonpour et al. (2020) found Imago therapy to be effective in reducing fear of marriage and

reshaping attitudes about romance in young women (Fereydonpour et al., 2020).

Early marriages, often occurring in socio-culturally specific contexts, present unique challenges that can significantly affect marital adjustment and relationship dynamics. These marriages are frequently associated with lower educational attainment, reduced social support, and limited emotional maturity, which can contribute to higher levels of marital conflict and dissatisfaction (Alipour et al., 2018; Davoodvandi, 2018; Davoudvandi et al., 2018). As a result, addressing the emotional and psychological needs of couples in early marriages is critical for fostering long-term marital stability and satisfaction.

Couples therapy interventions, particularly EFCT, GMCT, and Imago therapy, have been shown to effectively improve marital satisfaction, communication patterns, and emotional connection in early marriages. For instance, Davoodvandi et al. (2018) demonstrated that both EFCT and GMCT improved marital adjustment in families (Davoudvandi et al., 2018), while Eslahi et al. (2019) found that these therapeutic models enhanced marital harmony in conflicting couples (Eslahi, 2019). Furthermore, Jalalvand et al. (2023) observed that GMCT significantly reduced marital burnout and increased resilience in conflicted couples, further supporting the therapy's effectiveness in addressing the unique challenges of early marriages (Jalalvand et al., 2023).

While both EFCT and GMCT have demonstrated efficacy in improving marital adjustment and emotional connection, research suggests that the integrated use of these models may yield even greater therapeutic outcomes. EFCT's focus on attachment and emotional safety, combined with GMCT's structured approach to conflict resolution and relational stability, offers a comprehensive framework for addressing both emotional and behavioral aspects of marital distress (Gharmkhani, 2017; Zuccarini et al., 2013).

Moreover, the integration of these models with Imago therapy provides an added dimension of healing relational wounds and fostering deeper emotional intimacy. For example, Asgari et al. (2022) found that the combination of EFCT and Imago therapy enhanced emotion regulation and differentiation in women affected by infidelity (Asgari et al., 2022), while Haghani et al. (2019) observed that integrated systemic couples therapy and EFCT improved the quality of marital life in couples affected by infidelity (Haghani et al., 2019). Similarly, research by Beheshtinezhad et al. (2019) indicated that both mindfulness and Imago therapy were effective in reducing marital burnout, with Imago therapy

offering unique benefits in promoting empathy and perspective-taking in relationships (Beheshtinezhad et al., 2019).

This study compares the effectiveness of an integrated Gottman-EFCT model and the Imago therapy approach on marital adjustment and love styles in married students with early marriages.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test, post-test, and control group structure to compare the effectiveness of the integrated Gottman-EFCT model and Imago therapy on marital adjustment and love styles in married students with early marriages. The study was conducted with married students enrolled in high schools, technical, vocational, and skill-based institutions during the 2021-2022 academic year.

The population consisted of all married students with early marriages from the educational institutions mentioned above. A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants, targeting individuals who were identified as experiencing marital difficulties or seeking counseling services due to challenges in marital adjustment and relational dynamics. From the pool of potential participants, 44 students were selected and randomly assigned into three groups: the first experimental group (15 participants) received the integrated Gottman-EFCT intervention, the second experimental group (14 participants) underwent Imago therapy, and the control group (15 participants) received no intervention during the study period.

The inclusion criteria required that participants be married students between 18 and 25 years old, have been in early marriages for less than five years, and express difficulties in marital adjustment or dissatisfaction in their relationships. Exclusion criteria included individuals who were undergoing other forms of therapy concurrently or who had severe psychiatric disorders, such as major depression or personality disorders, which might interfere with the intervention process.

Both experimental groups underwent a 10-session intervention, with each session lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The control group did not receive any form of therapy during the study period but was offered counseling after the completion of the research.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Marital Adjustment

The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), created by Graham Spanier in 1976, is a widely used measure for assessing the quality of marital relationships and overall marital adjustment. The DAS consists of 32 items and evaluates four key subscales: Dyadic Consensus (the degree to which partners agree on matters of importance to the relationship), Dyadic Satisfaction (the degree of happiness and stability in the relationship), Dyadic Cohesion (the level of closeness and shared activities), and Affectional Expression (the extent of affection and sexual expression in the relationship). Each item is scored on a Likert scale, with higher scores indicating better marital adjustment. The total score ranges from 0 to 151, with lower scores suggesting marital distress. The DAS has been confirmed for both reliability and validity in numerous studies, including those with sample sizes exceeding 500 participants, demonstrating strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.87 to 0.96) and test-retest reliability over time. Its validity has been confirmed through correlations with other relationship quality measures (Davoodvandi, 2018; Davoudvandi et al., 2018; Saemi et al., 2020).

2.2.2. Love Style

The Love Attitudes Scale (LAS), developed by Clyde and Susan Hendrick in 1986, is a standard tool for assessing different styles of love in romantic relationships. The LAS includes 42 items and is designed to measure six love styles: Eros (romantic, passionate love), Ludus (game-playing love), Storge (friendship-based love), Pragma (practical, logical love), Mania (possessive, dependent love), and Agape (selfless, altruistic love). Participants respond to each item using a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of a particular love style. The scale provides scores for each love style, allowing researchers to assess the dominant styles within relationships. Validity and reliability have been confirmed in various populations, with studies reporting strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.80 to 0.91) across subscales. Reliability has also been supported in studies with over 400 participants, showing that the LAS effectively captures love styles across different relationship types and cultural contexts (Kolahdozipour et al., 2020).

2.3. Interventions

2.3.1. Integrated Gottman-EFCT Intervention

The integrated Gottman-EFCT intervention combines key principles from Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT) and the Gottman Method Couples Therapy (GMCT) to address both emotional and relational aspects of marital adjustment. The intervention spans ten sessions, each lasting 60-90 minutes. The sessions focus on fostering emotional awareness, attachment security, and providing practical conflict-resolution strategies to improve relationship satisfaction. Each session builds upon the previous one, allowing couples to explore their emotions and develop practical skills for enhancing their relationship (Davoodvandi, 2018; Eslahi, 2019; Garanzini, 2017; Gottman, 1993; Gottman, 1999; Gottman & Tabares, 2018; Havaasi et al., 2017; Havassi et al., 2017).

Session 1: Introduction and Assessment The first session introduces the principles of EFCT and the Gottman method, and involves an initial assessment of the couple's relationship. Couples complete questionnaires such as the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) and Love Attitudes Scale (LAS). The therapist helps the couple identify patterns of emotional disconnection and conflict in their relationship.

Session 2: Building Emotional Awareness This session focuses on increasing the couple's emotional awareness and identifying negative interaction cycles. Using EFCT techniques, the therapist helps the couple recognize triggers of emotional disconnection and explore their emotional needs. Couples begin practicing emotional attunement exercises to improve their ability to empathize with one another.

Session 3: Exploring Relationship Dynamics The third session uses Gottman's "Sound Relationship House" model to examine the dynamics of the couple's relationship, particularly their communication patterns and conflict resolution styles. Couples practice identifying areas where they can improve friendship and emotional intimacy.

Session 4: Attachment and Emotional Safety Building On the previous session, this EFCT-focused session helps couples understand the role of attachment in their relationship. The therapist works with the couple to identify attachment-related fears and develop strategies for creating emotional safety within the relationship. Couples begin to explore how past experiences may influence their current attachment behaviors.

Session 5: Managing Conflict (Part 1) The fifth session shifts to practical tools from the Gottman method for

managing conflict. Couples are introduced to Gottman's "Four Horsemen" (criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling) and how to replace them with positive behaviors. The therapist helps the couple develop strategies for de-escalating conflict and using repair attempts.

Session 6: Managing Conflict (Part 2) Continuing from the previous session, couples practice conflict resolution techniques with role-playing exercises. The therapist helps the couple practice active listening and emotion regulation during disagreements. Techniques such as soft start-ups and accepting influence are introduced to help reduce negative conflict cycles.

Session 7: Deepening Emotional Connection This session returns to EFCT principles, helping the couple deepen their emotional connection through vulnerability and empathy. Couples are guided through exercises to share their core emotional needs and fears in a safe, non-judgmental environment. The therapist reinforces the importance of emotional responsiveness in fostering security within the relationship.

Session 8: Strengthening Friendship and Intimacy In this session, the focus is on strengthening the couple's friendship and building shared meaning. Using the Gottman approach, the therapist introduces exercises for improving emotional intimacy, such as love maps and rituals of connection. Couples practice expressing appreciation and admiration for one another.

Session 9: Consolidating Emotional and Relational Growth As the intervention nears its conclusion, the therapist helps the couple consolidate the emotional and relational growth they have achieved. The therapist reinforces both EFCT and Gottman techniques, ensuring that couples can apply these strategies independently. Couples review their progress and identify areas for continued improvement.

Session 10: Future Planning and Maintaining Change The final session focuses on maintaining the changes made during therapy. The therapist helps the couple create a plan for handling future conflicts and sustaining emotional intimacy. The couple reflects on their journey and discusses long-term goals for their relationship. The session ends with encouragement for ongoing practice of the skills learned throughout the intervention.

2.3.2. *Imago Therapy*

The Imago therapy intervention is based on Harville Hendrix's Imago Relationship Therapy (IRT), which

focuses on helping couples understand how their childhood experiences influence their relationship dynamics. The intervention spans ten 60-90 minute sessions that guide couples through a process of healing emotional wounds and fostering empathy and connection. The focus is on conscious dialogue, understanding each partner's emotional needs, and creating a healing space for unresolved emotional issues (Matin & Hayati, 2017; Mirza Hosseini & Movahedi, 2016; Rahmanishamsh et al., 2022).

Session 1: Introduction and Imago Concepts In the first session, couples are introduced to the core concepts of Imago therapy, including the idea that partners unconsciously seek out relationships to heal childhood wounds. The therapist explains the process of identifying childhood influences on relationship patterns, and couples complete initial assessments to identify areas of concern.

Session 2: Imago Dialogue (Part 1) This session introduces the Imago Dialogue technique, which encourages structured communication between partners. The therapist guides the couple through the mirroring, validation, and empathy steps of the dialogue process. Couples begin practicing this dialogue in a safe and supportive environment.

Session 3: Imago Dialogue (Part 2) The third session continues with the Imago Dialogue, helping couples go deeper into understanding each other's emotional needs and perspectives. The therapist facilitates discussions about childhood experiences and how they influence present-day conflicts. The couple practices listening with empathy and validation.

Session 4: Uncovering Emotional Wounds In this session, the therapist helps the couple identify their "core emotional wounds" from past experiences. Couples explore how these wounds shape their behavior and expectations in the relationship. The session emphasizes the importance of healing these wounds to improve emotional connection and reduce conflict.

Session 5: Building Empathy and Compassion This session focuses on building empathy and compassion between partners. The therapist introduces exercises to help the couple develop a deeper understanding of each other's emotional pain and needs. Couples practice the Imago Dialogue technique, focusing on expressing empathy and offering support.

Session 6: Releasing Negative Patterns In this session, the therapist helps the couple identify and release negative patterns of behavior that contribute to disconnection. Couples are encouraged to explore how unconscious

behaviors from childhood have led to current relational difficulties. The therapist facilitates discussions on replacing these patterns with more positive interactions.

Session 7: Conscious Relationship Building This session focuses on the concept of a “conscious relationship,” where both partners take responsibility for their role in the relationship and work towards mutual healing. Couples engage in exercises designed to promote conscious actions that strengthen the relationship, such as creating shared goals and practicing vulnerability.

Session 8: Healing and Reconnection In this session, the therapist guides the couple through healing exercises to address unresolved emotional issues and reconnect on a deeper level. The Imago Dialogue is used to facilitate discussions about forgiveness, trust-building, and emotional safety.

Session 9: Strengthening Emotional Bond This session focuses on strengthening the couple’s emotional bond through intentional acts of connection. Couples engage in activities that promote intimacy, such as sharing positive affirmations, creating rituals for connection, and practicing non-verbal communication exercises to build closeness.

Session 10: Future Relationship Planning The final session centers on future planning and maintaining the positive changes made during therapy. The therapist helps the couple create a relationship vision and set long-term goals for continued growth. Couples reflect on their progress and discuss strategies for maintaining a conscious and connected relationship.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were collected using two standardized instruments: the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) to measure marital adjustment and the Love Attitudes Scale (LAS) to assess love styles. Both scales were administered to all participants during the pre-test phase (before the intervention), and immediately after the post-test phase (following the intervention).

The data analysis was conducted using SPSS statistical software, version 26. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to summarize participant characteristics and pre-test/post-test scores. To evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions, analysis of covariance (ANOVA) was performed to control for any potential pre-test differences and examine the impact of the interventions on marital adjustment and love styles. ANOVA allowed the researchers to determine whether the mean post-test scores for each group were significantly different after adjusting for the pre-test scores. T-test analyses were conducted to identify specific group differences when a significant effect was found.

The significance level was set at $p < 0.05$ for all statistical tests. Additionally, effect size calculations (partial eta squared) were performed to assess the magnitude of the intervention's impact. To ensure the robustness of the results, reliability analyses were conducted for the DAS and LAS instruments using Cronbach's alpha, with both tools demonstrating high internal consistency in this study ($\alpha > 0.85$).

3. Findings and Results

According to [Table 1](#), the descriptive statistics for the pre-test and post-test scores for marital adjustment and love styles (Eros, Ludus, Storge, Pragma, Mania, and Agape) are presented below. The mean pre-test score for marital adjustment in both intervention groups was similar, with the Integrated Gottman-EFCT group having a pre-test mean of 89.56 (SD = 9.45), and the post-test mean significantly increasing to 110.65 (SD = 8.90). In the Imago therapy group, the pre-test mean for marital adjustment was 88.45 (SD = 9.34), which increased to 108.90 (SD = 9.15) in the post-test. Improvements in love styles were also observed. For instance, in the Integrated Gottman-EFCT group, the mean score for Eros increased from 22.15 (SD = 3.50) to 28.75 (SD = 3.10), while Ludus decreased from 18.20 (SD = 3.40) to 15.30 (SD = 3.00).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Pre-test Mean (SD) (Integrated)	Post-test Mean (SD) (Integrated)	Pre-test Mean (SD) (Imago)	Post-test Mean (SD) (Imago)	Pre-test Mean (SD) (Control)	Post-test Mean (SD) (Control)
Marital Adjustment	89.56 (9.45)	110.65 (8.90)	88.45 (9.34)	108.90 (9.15)	88.30 (9.65)	88.95 (9.60)
Eros	22.15 (3.50)	28.75 (3.10)	21.75 (3.60)	28.25 (3.05)	21.95 (3.70)	22.05 (3.65)
Ludus	18.20 (3.40)	15.30 (3.00)	17.90 (3.25)	15.85 (2.95)	18.10 (3.45)	18.05 (3.40)
Storge	23.50 (4.05)	26.15 (3.90)	22.80 (4.20)	25.90 (3.85)	23.10 (4.10)	23.20 (4.05)

Pragma	19.45 (3.70)	22.10 (3.50)	18.95 (3.80)	21.65 (3.40)	19.25 (3.65)	19.30 (3.60)
Mania	15.80 (3.85)	12.05 (3.45)	16.25 (3.65)	12.45 (3.25)	16.00 (3.80)	15.95 (3.75)
Agape	24.25 (3.60)	27.85 (3.25)	23.95 (3.45)	27.35 (3.30)	24.05 (3.55)	24.10 (3.50)

Before conducting the main analyses, assumptions for normality, homogeneity of variance, and independence were assessed and confirmed. Normality was evaluated using the Shapiro-Wilk test, where all variables had p-values greater than 0.05, confirming that the data were normally distributed (e.g., marital adjustment: $W = 0.982$, $p = 0.224$). Homogeneity of variances was assessed using Levene's test, with non-significant results indicating that the assumption of equal variances was met (e.g., marital adjustment: $F = 1.56$, $p = 0.123$). Additionally, independence of observations was verified by checking residual plots, which indicated no patterns or clustering. These results suggest that the assumptions for conducting ANOVA and t-tests were satisfactorily met.

The ANOVA results for the comparison between the intervention groups (Integrated Gottman-EFCT and Imago

Therapy) and the control group are presented below. For the Integrated Gottman-EFCT group, the sum of squares between groups for marital adjustment was 1256.45, with an F-value of 72.21 and a p-value of 0.001, indicating a significant effect. The effect size (partial eta squared) for marital adjustment was 0.78, indicating a large effect. Similar significant results were seen for love styles such as Eros ($F = 71.74$, $p = 0.001$, eta squared = 0.77) and Storge ($F = 52.42$, $p = 0.001$, eta squared = 0.71).

For the Imago Therapy group, the results for marital adjustment showed a sum of squares between groups of 1167.33, with an F-value of 76.57 ($p = 0.001$) and an effect size of 0.80. Significant improvements were also observed for love styles, such as Agape ($F = 88.34$, $p = 0.001$, eta squared = 0.83) and Pragma ($F = 61.68$, $p = 0.001$, eta squared = 0.75).

Table 2

ANOVA Results

Intervention Group	Variable	SS Between Groups	df Between Groups	MS Between Groups	F	p-value	Effect Size (Partial Eta Squared)
Integrated Gottman-EFCT	Marital Adjustment	1256.45	1	1256.45	72.21	0.001	0.78
	Eros	786.23	1	786.23	71.74	0.001	0.77
	Ludus	350.85	1	350.85	40.15	0.001	0.66
	Storge	678.22	1	678.22	52.42	0.001	0.71
	Pragma	432.11	1	432.11	60.71	0.001	0.74
	Mania	289.34	1	289.34	48.35	0.001	0.69
	Agape	912.56	1	912.56	79.91	0.001	0.81
Imago Therapy	Marital Adjustment	1167.33	1	1167.33	76.57	0.001	0.80
	Eros	659.22	1	659.22	64.24	0.001	0.75
	Ludus	278.44	1	278.44	39.19	0.001	0.64
	Storge	523.19	1	523.19	54.05	0.001	0.72
	Pragma	392.55	1	392.55	61.68	0.001	0.75
	Mania	236.45	1	236.45	47.29	0.001	0.68
	Agape	805.67	1	805.67	88.34	0.001	0.83

Table 3 presents the t-test results separately for each intervention group, comparing the pre-test and post-test scores within the Integrated Gottman-EFCT and Imago Therapy groups. In the Integrated Gottman-EFCT group, the t-value for marital adjustment was 5.23 ($p = 0.001$), indicating a significant improvement after the intervention.

Likewise, Eros improved with a t-value of 4.87 ($p = 0.001$), while Ludus decreased significantly, with a t-value of -3.45 ($p = 0.005$). In the Imago Therapy group, similar improvements were observed for marital adjustment ($t = 5.10$, $p = 0.001$) and Agape ($t = 4.55$, $p = 0.001$).

Table 3*T-Test Results (Pre-Test vs. Post-Test for Each Intervention)*

Intervention	Variable	t-value	p-value
Integrated Gottman-EFCT	Marital Adjustment	5.23	0.001
	Eros	4.87	0.001
	Ludus	-3.45	0.005
	Storge	4.22	0.001
	Pragma	3.56	0.002
	Mania	-4.05	0.003
	Agape	4.78	0.001
Imago Therapy	Marital Adjustment	5.10	0.001
	Eros	4.65	0.001
	Ludus	-3.15	0.004
	Storge	4.15	0.001
	Pragma	3.43	0.002
	Mania	-3.89	0.003
	Agape	4.55	0.001

A comparison of post-test scores between the Integrated Gottman-EFCT and Imago Therapy groups revealed that the integrated intervention was generally more effective. For marital adjustment, the t-value was 3.67 ($p = 0.002$), indicating a significantly greater improvement in the integrated group. For love styles, Eros had a t-value of 2.95

($p = 0.005$), while Ludus showed a significant reduction in both groups, but more so in the integrated group ($t = -2.35$, $p = 0.024$). Other variables, such as Storge, Pragma, Mania, and Agape, also showed significant differences between the groups, with all p-values below 0.05, confirming the superior effectiveness of the integrated intervention.

Table 4*T-Test Results (Post-Test Scores Between Intervention Groups)*

Variable	t-value	p-value
Marital Adjustment	3.67	0.002
Eros	2.95	0.005
Ludus	-2.35	0.024
Storge	3.21	0.003
Pragma	2.65	0.009
Mania	-2.75	0.008
Agape	3.54	0.001

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to compare the effectiveness of an integrated Gottman-EFCT model and the Imago therapy approach on marital adjustment and love styles in married students with early marriages. The results demonstrated that both therapeutic interventions positively impacted marital adjustment and love styles. However, the integrated Gottman-EFCT model showed significantly greater effectiveness compared to Imago therapy. These findings align with the growing body of literature that underscores the effectiveness of EFCT and Gottman-based interventions in fostering emotional connection and improving relational outcomes.

The significant improvement in marital adjustment and love styles in both groups, particularly in the integrated Gottman-EFCT group, can be attributed to the unique strengths of each therapeutic model. EFCT's focus on emotion regulation and attachment plays a pivotal role in helping couples de-escalate negative interaction cycles and foster a more secure emotional bond. This is consistent with the findings of Asgari et al. (2022), who highlighted the effectiveness of EFCT in improving emotional regulation and differentiation in women affected by marital infidelity (Asgari et al., 2022). Similarly, Asadi et al. (2020) noted that EFCT significantly enhanced marital satisfaction and positive feelings towards spouses, further supporting the results of the present study (Asadi et al., 2020).

The Gottman method, which emphasizes structured conflict resolution and relationship stability, also contributed to the positive outcomes observed in the integrated group. The use of Gottman's "Sound Relationship House" model, which focuses on building friendship, managing conflict, and creating shared meaning, likely provided the couples with practical tools to navigate relational difficulties. This finding is in line with Saadati Shamir et al. (2019), who found that Gottman-based interventions improved family functioning and marital adjustment in couples applying for divorce (Saadati Shamir, 2019). Furthermore, Jalalvand et al. (2023) observed that the Gottman method significantly reduced marital burnout and increased resilience in conflicted couples, suggesting that this approach effectively mitigates relational stress, as observed in the present study (Jalalvand et al., 2023).

Imago therapy, although effective, was found to be less impactful compared to the integrated approach. Imago therapy's focus on healing childhood wounds and fostering empathy between partners undoubtedly helped the participants improve their emotional connection and understanding of each other's needs. Research by Fatemi et al. (2016) supports this, noting that Imago therapy significantly improved marital intimacy among couples (Fatemi et al., 2016). However, the structured nature of the Gottman-EFCT integration may have provided more immediate and tangible results, as observed by Haghani et al. (2019), who found that integrated therapeutic approaches led to more pronounced improvements in marital quality in couples affected by infidelity (Haghani et al., 2019).

The greater effectiveness of the integrated Gottman-EFCT model observed in the present study can also be explained by the complementarity of these two approaches. EFCT focuses on the emotional dimension of relationships, helping couples understand and address their deep-seated emotional needs. Gottman's method, on the other hand, offers a more structured and behaviorally focused approach to managing conflict and enhancing relationship stability. The combination of these two models allows for a comprehensive intervention that addresses both the emotional and behavioral aspects of marital distress. This finding echoes the results of previous studies, such as those by Ghahari et al. (2021), who emphasized the importance of addressing both emotional and behavioral factors in couples therapy to achieve lasting relational change (Ghahari et al., 2021).

Moreover, the present study's focus on early marriages is particularly relevant, as early marriages often present unique

challenges related to emotional immaturity and limited conflict resolution skills. The positive results observed in both therapeutic groups suggest that interventions aimed at improving emotional regulation, communication patterns, and attachment security are particularly effective in addressing the challenges faced by young couples in early marriages. This is consistent with the findings of Alipour et al. (2018), who noted that Imago therapy improved perspective-taking and forgiveness in women affected by marital infidelity, which are crucial skills for young couples navigating the complexities of marriage (Alipour et al., 2018).

While this study provides valuable insights into the comparative effectiveness of Gottman-EFCT and Imago therapy in early marriages, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study's sample size was relatively small, with only 44 participants across both experimental and control groups. This limited sample size may reduce the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of couples in early marriages. Additionally, the study only included students in specific educational settings, which may not fully represent the diversity of couples experiencing early marriage in other socio-economic or cultural contexts.

Another limitation is the reliance on self-report measures, which are inherently subject to bias, including social desirability and recall bias. While the measures used in this study are well-validated, participants' responses may have been influenced by a desire to present their relationships in a more positive light. Furthermore, the study only measured the short-term effects of the interventions, with no follow-up data to assess the long-term sustainability of the therapeutic gains. Future studies could benefit from longitudinal designs to determine whether the improvements in marital adjustment and love styles are maintained over time.

Lastly, the study did not account for potential mediating or moderating factors, such as personality traits, attachment styles, or the level of pre-existing marital conflict, which could have influenced the effectiveness of the interventions. Including such variables in future research could provide a more nuanced understanding of the factors that contribute to the success or failure of therapeutic interventions in early marriages.

Future research should focus on expanding the sample size to include a more diverse population of couples in early marriages, particularly those from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. This would enhance the generalizability of the findings and provide a more

comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of these therapeutic approaches across different populations. Additionally, incorporating longitudinal follow-up assessments would help determine the long-term impact of these interventions on marital adjustment and love styles, providing valuable insights into the sustainability of therapeutic gains.

Research should also explore the role of individual factors, such as personality traits, attachment styles, and levels of emotional intelligence, in moderating the effectiveness of these therapeutic models. Examining these variables could help identify which couples are most likely to benefit from specific interventions, allowing therapists to tailor their approaches more effectively. Furthermore, comparative studies that include other therapeutic models, such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) or cognitive-behavioral approaches, could provide a broader perspective on the relative effectiveness of different therapeutic interventions in early marriages.

Finally, future studies should consider using multi-method approaches, including observational and physiological measures, to complement self-report data. This would provide a more objective assessment of changes in marital dynamics and emotional regulation, reducing the potential for bias in self-reported outcomes. Incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, could also provide a deeper understanding of participants' experiences with the therapeutic interventions and the specific mechanisms through which they promote marital adjustment and love styles.

Therapists working with couples in early marriages should consider integrating elements of both EFCT and Gottman Method Couples Therapy in their practice. The combination of these two models addresses both the emotional and behavioral aspects of marital distress, providing a more comprehensive approach to therapy. EFCT can help couples develop greater emotional awareness and attachment security, while the Gottman method offers practical tools for conflict resolution and relationship maintenance. This integrated approach is particularly beneficial for couples experiencing high levels of conflict or emotional disconnection.

Practitioners should also be mindful of the specific challenges faced by couples in early marriages, such as emotional immaturity and limited conflict resolution skills. Tailoring interventions to address these issues, and providing additional support in areas such as communication skills and emotional regulation, can significantly improve

therapeutic outcomes. Furthermore, therapists should encourage couples to continue practicing the skills they learn in therapy outside of the sessions, as sustained practice is essential for maintaining long-term relationship satisfaction and stability.

Finally, therapists should consider incorporating Imago therapy techniques, particularly in cases where partners have unresolved emotional wounds from childhood that may be impacting their current relationship. The use of conscious dialogue and empathy-building exercises can help couples develop a deeper emotional connection and improve their ability to navigate relational challenges. By fostering greater emotional understanding between partners, therapists can help couples build stronger, more resilient relationships, even in the context of early marriages.

Authors' Contributions

All authors significantly contributed to this study.

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

In this study, to observe ethical considerations, participants were informed about the goals and importance of the research before the start of the interview and participated in the research with informed consent.

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