Investigating the Relationship Between the Virtual Education Activity of Female Teachers and Family Functioning, Conflict, and Couple Burnout During the COVID-19 Lockdown

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A R T I C L E I N F O

ABSTRACT

Investigating the psychological challenges female educators face is a fundamental endeavor that can yield a wide range of impacts on the well-being of women, families, and students. This study aimed to examine the correlation between the virtual education activity of female educators and their family functioning, conflict, and marital burnout during the COVID-19 lockdown. The utilized research methodology was descriptive-correlational in nature, with the target population consisting of female teachers residing within the Tabadakan district of Mashhad City. A convenience and voluntary sampling method was employed to select a sample of 390 individuals from a larger population, following the guidelines provided by Krejcie and Morgan's table. The data was gathered using The McMaster Family Assessment Device (FAD), the Marital Conflicts Questionnaire (MCQ) developed by Sanaei and Barati, and the Couple Burnout Measure created by Pines. The data was analyzed using SPSS 21 software, employing Pearson's correlation test and regression analysis. The results of the study indicate a statistically significant association between the virtual education activity of female teachers and family functioning, conflict, and marital burnout ($p < .05$). Furthermore, the virtual education activity of female teachers was found to be a predictor of family functioning, conflict, and marital burnout during the period of lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, given the anticipated integration of Virtual education into educational curricula in the future, it is recommended that particular emphasis be placed on empowering female educators in the Virtual education domain. Additionally, efforts should be made to devise Virtual education approaches that align with family functions, aiming to enhance family functioning and mitigate marital conflict and burnout experienced by female teachers.

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Introduction

Women face significant challenges in both their roles as mothers or wives within the family unit and as social and professional activists, such as teachers. It is crucial to acknowledge the personal and family challenges faced by female educators and to develop strategies to address these concerns. Existing research indicates that women's employment has been linked to positive outcomes, such as increased marital satisfaction (Farji Pak et al., 2020). However, the rise in help-seeking behaviors points to serious issues with family mental health, and according to Bodenmann (2016), 40% of referrals to mental health facilities are the result of conflict between spouses. According to Wilson et al (2017), marital conflict arises when two people believe their aims are irreconcilable. According to Flanagan and Flanagan (2015), conflict is an integral part of family interactions and the cause of marital dissatisfaction. Burnout in a marriage rarely happens overnight. Low energy, mental tiredness, weakness, and a variety of physical and psychological problems are characteristics of couple burnout, which is also known as chronic fatigue (Brummelhuis et al., 2012). According to Rahim (as cited in Mahmoudpour et al., 2020), five distinct styles are outlined in his conflict resolution model. These styles encompass the integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising styles. Yet an additional consequence of marital conflict is the deterioration of family functioning (Wagner et al., 2019). According to Shariatmadari (2015), a family that is dysfunctional is incapable of adequately fulfilling the needs of its members.

At the same time, an additional consequence of marital conflict is the deterioration of family functioning (Wagner et al., 2019). According to Shariatmadari (2015), a family that is dysfunctional is incapable of fulfilling the needs of its members. McMaster (1985; as cited in Karimi, 2017) presents a framework consisting of six functions, namely (1) roles, (2) behavior control, (3) problem-solving, (4) communication, (5) affective responsiveness and (6) affective involvement, which are associated with families that exhibit effective functioning. According to Goldenberg (2017), the effective execution of such tasks by families can significantly influence the overall functionality of the family unit. The various issues discussed related to conflicts, burnout, and family dynamics in the context of employed women

are particularly relevant to women in the teaching profession. Moreover, the addition of virtual education exacerbates these challenges, placing additional strain on the families of female teachers and necessitating extra attention. Temporal occurrences, such as widespread diseases, pandemics, or similar crises, pose a significant threat to the mental well-being of women and their families. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted various sectors, including the Ministry of Education, in addition to its well-documented effects on healthcare and treatment systems worldwide. The global outbreak of the Coronavirus has had a significant impact on face-to-face education programs worldwide, resulting in the closure of educational institutions and affecting the attendance of both students and teaching staff (Haji et al., 2021). As a result, the countries' educational systems encountered an unusual and unprecedented circumstance. Teachers were compelled to instruct students virtually, which increased interest in the technology (Arabi, 2017) and participation in social media activity and content creation (Mohammadi, 2020). Due to the time, energy, and mental strain that comes with having more female teachers in their social networks, teachers may experience issues in their marriages and families. Additionally, the increased presence of female teachers may alter the user's everyday interpersonal interactions and relationships and may even have an impact on their personal, family, and social health (Choliz, 2014).

Salimi et al (2021) conducted a study that demonstrated a substantial association between reliance on social networks and marital problems, with stress induced by the COVID-19 pandemic being identified as one of the contributing factors. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on daily life and has disrupted family dynamics (Zhu et al., 2020). As individuals face various challenges related to work, finances, education, and social obligations, the family environment is disturbed, leading to heightened marital conflicts (Bo et al., 2020).

For female teachers, this problem created a dual psychological load: mental strain from the obligations and responsibilities of virtual education, on the one hand, and the regular concerns for themselves and their families, on the other. The investigation of issues related to female educators appears to be a notable research gap during the quarantine time and the era of virtual education. This

underscores the heightened need to undertake research in this area. The research conducted on women teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic and their utilization of virtual education methods has broader implications beyond the specific context of quarantine. These findings can also be applied to other medical and social circumstances that necessitate the use of virtual education (Firouzfar et al., 2016; Kazempour et al., 2016).

Coper (2004) defines virtual education as the implementation of educational activities through the utilization of electronic resources, including audio, video, computer, and network technologies (Najimi et al., 2017). Nevertheless, virtual education has not successfully attained fundamental objectives within the education system, such as fostering creativity and promoting a sense of responsibility (Kian, 2014; Zare, 2014). Virtual education programs may be deficient in quality due to teachers' limited familiarity with modern technologies (Vali Tabar Karamati, 2016).

In light of the aforementioned factors, including the quarantine restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the transition to online education, and the active engagement of female educators in virtual platforms to facilitate student learning, it is crucial to examine the implications of their increased presence in cyberspace on individual well-being, marital relationships, and family dynamics. This investigation is necessary to offer appropriate guidance and counselling services for individuals and families. Moreover, it is important to note the dearth of cohesive, integrated, and comprehensive research on this subject matter, which underscores the urgency to address this research gap and generate relevant data to inform policymakers and stakeholders. This study aims to answer this question: Is there a correlation between the virtual training of female educators and the dynamics of family functioning, and marital conflict and burnout during the period of COVID-19 isolation? The questions presented are structured as hypotheses in the following manner.

The initial hypothesis posits that "Virtual training activity of female teachers predicts family functioning, marital conflict and burnout and their components in virtual training during Corona quarantine".

The second hypothesis posits that "*There exists a correlation between the virtual training activity of female teachers, family functioning and its components, and virtual training during the Corona quarantine days.*"

The third hypothesis: "*There exists a correlation between the virtual training activity of female teachers with marital conflict and its components in virtual training during the Corona quarantine days*".

The fourth hypothesis: *"There exists a correlation between the virtual training activity of female teachers, marital burnout and its components, and virtual training during the Corona quarantine days".*

Methods

The present study is characterized as practical research due to its intended goal. The statistical population for this research consisted of all female instructors in the Tabadakan district of Mashhad city during the academic year of 2019-202. Given the unavailability of precise data on the demographics of female instructors, the selection criteria for our sample was determined by the population size of 10, 000 individuals. Following the guidelines provided by the Krejcie and Morgan table, a sample size of 390 individuals was deemed appropriate. Female teachers who met the criteria of having experience in virtual education during the COVID-19 pandemic were invited to participate in the research. Their participation was completely voluntary and required their full consent. Since direct access to the teachers was not possible, the online questionnaires were shared again on social media platforms that were relevant to teachers. The participants responded using an online platform, and once the sample size reached its predetermined limit, the collected data was subjected to analysis. The data analysis and hypothesis testing procedures were conducted utilizing Pearson's correlation test and univariate regression analysis, employing the SPSS version 21 software.

Measurements

The Couple Burnout Measure (CBM) is a questionnaire developed to assess the level of burnout experienced by couples in their relationship. It comprises 21 items that are categorized into three subscales: physical fatigue, emotional problems, and psychological problems (as cited in Becker, 2009). The internal consistency of the variables falls within the range of 84% to 90%.

The test-retest reliability coefficient showed a value of 89% within a one-month duration, 76% within a two-month duration, and 66% within a four-month duration. The internal consistency of the data was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, yielding values ranging from 91% to 93%. The present study utilized Cronbach's alpha method to establish a reliability coefficient of .846 for this scale.

The McMaster Family Assessment Device (FAD). FAD is a scale consisting of 60 questions that was developed by Epstein et al (1983) and is grounded in the McMaster model. This paradigm encompasses seven dimensions of family functioning, namely problem-solving, communication, members' roles, emotional companionship, emotional integration, managing behavior, and overall performance. To evaluate the test, it is necessary to assign a score to each question ranging from 1 to 4, where 1 represents an entire agreement and 4 represents a complete disagreement (Sanaei, 2008). The internal consistency method was employed to determine the reliability of this test, yielding alpha coefficients ranging from .42 to .74 for the subscales. The study conducted by Saghi et al (2002) examined the validity of the Family Assessment Device in Iran. The findings of this investigation indicated that the scale yielded satisfactory results. Furthermore, this questionnaire possesses the capability to distinguish between individuals belonging to clinical families and those belonging to non-clinical families. Hence, it is widely acknowledged that the seven aspects of the aforementioned construct demonstrate strong validity among various populations (Sanaei, 2008). The present study utilized Cronbach's alpha method to acquire a reliability coefficient of .921 for this scale.

The Marital Conflict Scale, developed by Sanai et al. (2003), comprises 54 questions that are assessed using a Likert scale. The questionnaire yields a maximum total score of 270 and a minimum score of 54 (Sanaei, 2008). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the whole questionnaire administered to a sample of 270 individuals is reported to be .96, indicating a high level of internal consistency. Additionally, the questionnaire has favorable content validity (Sanaei's ,2000; Bakhshipour et al., 2012). The present study utilized Cronbach's alpha method for determining the reliability coefficient of this scale, yielding a value of .943.

The virtual education scale created by researchers: A 10-item questionnaire with questions regarding the duration of use of virtual spaces in relation to family life was used to collect data on the efforts made by teachers in cyberspace. Seven professionals in the fields of psychology and educational sciences attested to the scale's content validity, and Cronbach's alpha method yielded a reliability coefficient of .798.

Results

The demographic findings indicate that the participants had an average of 11.92 years of professional work experience, with a standard deviation of 8.4.

Table 1. Mean, and standard deviation of research variables

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Family functioning	86	185	173.30	19.20
Marital Conflict	66	200	121.30	6.50
Virtual education activity	17	43	31.70	5.40
Marital burnout	1	5.05	3.05	.90

A significant proportion of the participants (36.2 percent) reported a marriage history of fewer than 5 years. Additionally, the participants' educational background was examined in terms of the type of schools attended. The majority of individuals were employed in public schools, accounting for 94.1% of the total.

Based on the data shown in Table 1, it can be observed that the participants exhibited an average score of 31.7 in virtual education activities, with a standard deviation of 5.4. The mean score for marital burnout among the participants was found to be 3.5, with a standard deviation of .9. The analysis of the questionnaire suggests that there exists a potential for experiencing marital burnout.

Table 2. Relationships of variables and Pearson's correlation coefficient

Variable	Virtual Education Activity	Family Functioning	Marital Conflict	Marital Burnout
Virtual education activity	1.00	.291**	.265**	.583**
Family functioning		1.00	.504**	.530**
Marital Conflict	.265**	.504**	1.00	.354**
Marital burnout	.538**	.530**	.354**	1.00

** p<.01. *p< .05

Based on the findings shown in Table 2, the Pearson correlation coefficients between virtual education activity and family functioning, marital conflict, and marital burnout are .291, .265, and .538, respectively. Furthermore, the statistical significance levels associated with these correlations are all below .01. Hence, significant positive associations exist between the variable of virtual education activity and family functioning, conflict, and marital burnout. In order to examine the relationship between virtual education activities and family functioning, marital conflict, and burnout, it is necessary to conduct three separate univariate regression models. In order to assess the validity of the assumptions made for a linear model in this study, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was initially employed to ascertain the normality of the criterion variables.

Table 3. Regression coefficients of predicting family functioning, marital conflict and burnout based on virtual education

Model		Unstandardized coefficients	SE	Unstandardized coefficients	t	p
Prediction of family functioning based on virtual education activity	constant-coefficient	104.50	5.60	-	18.8	.00
	virtual education activity	1.034	.173	.291	8.99	.00

Prediction of marital conflict based on virtual education activity	constant-coefficient	73.90	8.90	-	.314	.000
	virtual education activity	1.494	.276	.265	.4085	.000
Prediction of marital burnout based on virtual education activity	constant-coefficient	.656	.229	-	2.87	.004
	virtual education activity	.089	.007	.538	12.6	.000

The analysis of the regression coefficients presented in Table 3 reveals that the significance level for all three models is below .05. Consequently, we can conclude that the presence of a constant coefficient and the coefficients associated with virtual education activities in all three models hold statistical significance. Given that the significance levels of all three tests exceed .05, it may be concluded that the hypothesis regarding the normality of the residuals for all three models is not rejected. Consequently, the confirmation of the assumption of constant variance in all three models is observed. Additionally, based on the aforementioned table, it can be inferred that the Watson camera statistics for all three models fall within the range of 1.5 to 2.5, indicating that the errors are uncorrelated. Lastly, the regression models are provided. The regression models that have been provided have been found to be valid. Consequently, the process of obtaining these regression models is as follows:

$$Y1 = (1.034)X + 104.5 \quad Y2 = (1.494)X + 73.9 \quad Y3 = (.089)X + .656$$

The variable Y1 represents the family function, Y2 represents marital conflict, and Y3 represents marital burnout. These variables are present in three virtual education activity models, denoted as X.

Discussion and Conclusion

The objective of the current study was to predict the levels of family functioning, marital conflict, and burnout among female instructors based on their participation in virtual training activities throughout the period of quarantine imposed due to the Coronavirus. The initial hypothesis positing a

connection between the virtual training activity of female teachers and family functioning, conflict, and marital burnout in the context of virtual education has been confirmed. In other words, a significant relationship has been established between the virtual training activity of female teachers and the aforementioned aspects, along with their respective components. These findings are consistent with the studies conducted by Qale Nou et al. (2015), Imani et al. (2015), Arabi (2017), Rezapour et al. (2017), Shujai-Joushaghani et al. (2018), Ghafouri et al. (2018), Jafarinderabadi (2018), Ebrahimpour et al. (2018), Mohajerin (2019), Zolfaqari (2019), Shafaatzadeh et al. (2020), Rezaei (2020), Salimi et al. (2021), Charis et al. (2019), Homai Mojaz et al. (2015), and Saleh et al. (2015).

In explaining this finding, it may be posited that the phenomenon of virtual schooling exhibits a multifaceted trajectory with regard to family dynamics, spousal discord, and ennui. Participating in virtual networks has been found to diminish human relationships and diminish interest in alternative activities. Social media platforms possess inherent characteristics that diminish genuine interpersonal connections, including those within families, while concurrently fostering individuality among individuals. The excessive use of social networks has led to a decrease in interpersonal connections among couples, resulting in a decline in relationship warmth and a lack of attentiveness towards each other's needs. Consequently, this has contributed to the emergence of emotional and sexual tensions within the relationship (Moradi et al., 2018).

The decline in interpersonal connections has the potential to impact the quantity of time that couples allocate to engaging with one another and cultivating face-to-face relationships. In this manner, both partners engage in the substitution of interpersonal interactions within the family with virtual networks. This substitution results in a reduction of cooperation in shared activities, leading to diminished interests and decreased communication between spouses. Consequently, this phenomenon contributes to diminished levels of intimacy, empathy, and cooperation, as well as lowered problem-solving abilities and goal planning. Simultaneously, it undermines the sense of shared enjoyment within the marital relationship, fosters emotional distance from one's spouse, generates conflicts, induces marital boredom, and ultimately diminishes overall family functioning.

Furthermore, based on the results obtained from the current study, the second hypothesis has been validated. This implies that a significant correlation exists between the virtual educational engagement of female teachers and family dynamics, with virtual education serving as a potential predictor of family functioning. This finding is consistent with the studies conducted by Shojaei-Joushaghani et al (2018), Jafari Nadrabadi (2018), and Imani et al (2015).

In the explanation of the current study, it can be stated that couples strive to establish and maintain balance in the family's functioning. Due to the lack of classroom attendance and instructors being required to use online education as a result of the Corona situation, the duration of family members' communication and emotional companionship has decreased. In addition, people spend less time visiting friends and family and conversing with family members, and when they are in the family environment, they follow their personal tasks and responsibilities in virtual education networks, resulting in a decline in family performance.

Based on the results obtained from the current study, it can be concluded that the third hypothesis has been validated. There exists a statistically significant correlation between the engagement of female instructors in virtual education activities and the occurrence of marital conflict. Moreover, virtual education activities can serve as a predictor of marital conflict. This finding is consistent with the studies conducted by Salimi et al (2021), Ebrahimpour et al (2018), and Rezapour et al (2017).

When partners encounter conflicts inside their marriage, these conflicts engender cognitive entrenchment, impeding the exploration of alternative perspectives and hindering the identification of viable resolutions. Hence, it is possible for couples to exhibit impulsive behaviour and opt to avoid conflict rather than actively resolve it. One potential strategy for mitigating confrontations and finding resolutions to problems and conflicts in life involves utilizing virtual platforms and seeking solace in online interactions within social networks. In essence, the abundance of options within the virtual realm overwhelms individuals, hindering their ability to focus on resolving real-life challenges. Consequently, this phenomenon diminishes the emotional

impact of conflicts, replacing negative sentiments with positive ones within this digital environment. Consequently, individuals are inclined to gravitate towards content within the virtual space. Consequently, the overutilization of virtual platforms and increased time allocation for online education result in a decline in everyday engagements and a transformation in the nature of communication and family responsibilities for couples, thereby diminishing individuals' sense of duty towards their families. Consequently, with time, couples may experience a decline in their mutual affection, leading to potential conflicts within the family unit.

Upon analysis of the research findings, it is evident that the fourth hypothesis of the study has been confirmed. In this context, a significant and positive association exists between the virtual educational engagement of female educators and marital burnout, with virtual education serving as a potential predictor of marital burnout. These findings align with the studies conducted by Rezaei (2020), Shafaatzadeh et al (2020), Mohajerin (2019), Zoulfaqari (2019), Ghafouri and Beigi (2018), Arabi (2017), Nouri Ghale Nou et al (2015), Charis et al (2019), Homai Mojaz et al (2015), and Saleh et al (2015).

Physical exhaustion encompasses a range of symptoms such as fatigue, numbness, and sleep difficulties. The experience of boredom can lead individuals to see the deterioration of their interpersonal connections. This emotional state is often accompanied by a decline in the enjoyment of formerly pleasurable activities. Without proactive efforts to address these concerns, the situation is likely to deteriorate further (Daghaghele et al., 2012). Meanwhile, those who are unable to fulfil their diverse demands within the context of their marital relationship tend to increasingly engage with virtual platforms and explore numerous media outlets in order to satisfy their wants. This phenomenon occurs in spite of the individual's growing reliance on the virtual realm and the fulfilment of various dimensions of their wants within it, leading to a gradual preference for dependency on the virtual space over their relationship with their spouse.

This incidence leads to a decrease in the efficacy of couples' relationships, resulting in alterations in communication patterns and family dynamics, as well as the onset of emotional burnout. In relation to the potential correlation

between engagement in virtual education and mental exhaustion, a component associated with burnout, it can be posited that mental exhaustion typically manifests as a decline in self-esteem and a negative disposition towards individuals in one's social circle, particularly one's partner. Hence, with the prolonged utilization of virtual space, individuals exhibit diminished presence in social settings and assume a diminished role in interpersonal connections. The phenomenon of virtual schooling has a notable impact on individuals' social development and interpersonal connections. Additionally, the individual's engagement in virtual environments reduces their inclination for social interaction and undermines their capacity to establish and cultivate interpersonal connections in everyday situations, including within family contexts.

The findings indicate that multiple factors contribute to the deterioration of family functioning and the escalation of marital conflict and burnout. One such factor is the prevalence of the coronavirus disease, which has led to the absence of in-person education and the reliance on virtual platforms for training purposes. The presence of interpersonal disputes and feelings of burnout, along with a decline in family functioning, induces individuals to experience stress and seek avenues of escapism from the challenges and quandaries of life. Currently, the most convenient and readily available method to alleviate intrusive thoughts is through the utilization of online media platforms.

These platforms offer a vast array of information, which is both broad and limitless, hence providing individuals with the means to be entertained for extended periods. The increasing reliance on online media has been observed to foster individual dependence, potentially resulting in shifts in familial roles and a decline in face-to-face interactions. Consequently, this can lead to a growing emotional distance between couples, ultimately impacting family dynamics, and giving rise to conflicts and disagreements. Consequently, virtual educational activities have the potential to predict marital conflict and hinder family performance.

The study also possesses several limitations, such as its focus solely on female teachers within the urban setting of Tabakan district. Consequently, it

is not feasible to generalize the findings to include the gender differences of individuals beyond those specifically specified. Furthermore, caution should be exercised when attempting to generalize the research outcomes to other regions within the country. In order to enhance the expertise of teachers in the realm of virtual education, it is imperative to organize courses that are both of high quality and efficient. Additionally, educational resources should be made available to teachers, families, and children, with the aim of fostering the development and improvement of various indicators of family functioning and promoting responsible utilization of virtual platforms.

Ethical considerations

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