

**SEXUAL COMPATIBILITY AND MARITAL SATISFACTION AMONG MARRIED  
COUPLES IN MALAYSIA: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SEXUAL SATISFACTION**

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## ABSTRACT

Marital satisfaction is a vital component in promoting individual and family well-being. Specifically, a satisfactory marital relationship would benefit the psychological and physical health of an individual and the family. Past research has suggested that sexual compatibility, which shared some connections in the behavioural, cognitive and elements of a sexual relationship (Apt et al., 1996), is vital in determining marital success for couples. In addition, the couple's sexual compatibility is associated with sexual satisfaction, the degree or level of satisfaction with one's sex life (Byers, 1999). Therefore, this study examined the underlying mechanism of sexual satisfaction in the association between sexual compatibility and marital satisfaction among couples in Malaysia.

The sample consisted of 255 married couples ( $M_{\text{age}}=31.17$ ;  $SD_{\text{age}}=11.07$ ; 56.5% females; 87.8% Chinese, 7.5% Indian, 3.5% Malays and 1.2% other ethnicities) recruited online through the convenience sampling method. The married couples completed a self-administered online questionnaire that included the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS; Fowers & Olson, 1993), the Index of Sexual Satisfaction (ISS; Hudson, 1998), and the Hurlbert Index of Sexual Compatibility (HISC; Hurlbert et al., 1993).

Significant positive relationships were found between marital satisfaction, sexual compatibility ( $r= .686$ ,  $p< .001$ ) and sexual satisfaction ( $r= .711$ ,  $p< .001$ ). Meanwhile, the findings of a mediation analysis showed that sexual satisfaction mediated the direct association between sexual compatibility and marital satisfaction. The results suggested that the married couples who were sexually compatible tended to be more satisfied with their sexual relationships which in turn led to greater marital satisfaction for them.

As a conclusion, the findings from this research highlighted the importance of the sexual aspects in determining a satisfactory married life among couples in Malaysia. The results also served as a vital input for designing couple counselling interventions among practitioners in health psychology.

*Keywords:* marital satisfaction, sexual compatibility, sexual satisfaction, married couples, Malaysia

## INTRODUCTION

Marriage has been described as the most significant and fundamental human relationship since it provides the primary foundation for establishing a family unit as well as for rearing the next generation. Studies have shown that people who are married are generally happier and healthier, - both mentally and physically - compared to single people (Kasapoğlu & Yabanigül, 2018; Larsen & Eid, 2008). A successful marriage offers people a sense of purpose and belonging in their lives that is related to the quality and stability of the marriage, including marital satisfaction. 'Marital satisfaction' refers to the emotional state of an individual who is placated with the experiences, interactions, and expectations towards married life (Ward et al., 2009).

Although marriage seems to provide a highly favourable relationship, national statistics have indicated that marital satisfaction is not easily achieved. For example, the increasing trend of divorces in Malaysia bears testimony to this fact. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2019), the number of divorces as of 2018 was 50,356, which was slightly higher than in 2017. Besides that, the National Population and Family Development Board (Lembaga Penduduk dan Pembangunan Keluarga Negara [LPPKN], 2014) highlighted that more than one-third of first marriages that were less than five years ended in divorce or separation. Divorces in Malaysia were found to be primarily caused by incompatibility and the list is followed by spousal infidelity, irresponsible spouse, in-law's interference, and so on (Sivanandam, 2018).

Existing literature have supported that marital dissatisfaction is a crucial determinant that contributes to marital separation, divorce, and physical or mental health problems (Carr et al., 2014; Fincham et al., 2018; Robles et al., 2014). Therefore, numerous attempts have been made to identify the components of marital satisfaction. For instance, married couples' sex life has been found to subsequently affect their marital satisfaction level and the quality of their marriage (Chao et al., 2011; Gadassi et al., 2015; McNulty et al., 2014; Schoenfeld et al., 2016; Stanik & Bryant, 2012). Past studies have been repeatedly examined the association with sexual and marital satisfaction such as communication (Lavner et al., 2016; Rogge et al., 2013; Woodin, 2011), emotional expression (Miller et al., 2003; Yedirir & Hamarta, 2015), spousal support (Boeding et al., 2014; Khan & Aftab, 2013; Yedirir & Hamarta, 2015), and couple similarity factors (George et al., 2015). However, very few research have attempted to examine the efficacy of sexual compatibility in its association with sexual and marital satisfaction.

Sexual compatibility shared some similarities in cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects of sexual relationships (Apt et al., 1996). The emotional aspect involves the feeling of being sexually appreciated by a partner. Meanwhile, the cognitive component of sexual relationship comprises sexual beliefs, desires, and attitudes (Apt et al., 1996). Past research suggested that sexual-related variables, such as sexual compatibility and desirability are significantly related to intimate relationship satisfaction (Impett et al., 2008). Mark et al. (2013) found that sexual compatibility was a salient factor of relationship satisfaction. The same was true for sexual satisfaction, whereby sexual compatibility not only explained the level of sexual satisfaction but also linked with relationship satisfaction between partners. Moreover, researchers have identified a significant relationship between sexual desirability, compatibility and sexual satisfaction (Chao et al., 2011; Mark et al., 2013). Previous studies suggested that sexual compatibility can increase one's satisfaction with one's sexual relationships. In other words, although couples have sexual differences, they were able to manage such differences and enhance their similarities, reaching a high level of sexual compatibility that enhances the quality of their relationship (Nekoolaltak et al., 2017).

Moreover, sexual satisfaction was found to be an interactive experience contributing to positive evaluations of their marriage among married couples (Yeh et al., 2006). Some research

suggested that marital quality can be enhanced with higher levels of sexual satisfaction but the marital quality does not support the subsequent satisfaction in sex life (Fallis et al., 2016; Yeh et al., 2006). In contrast, McNulty et al. (2014) found a bi-directional and positive association between marital satisfaction and sexual satisfaction across time. Furthermore, a recent study has indicated that marital couples' sexual and marital satisfaction is beneficial in developing their sexual and marital well-being (Cao et al., 2018). Therefore, couples who are contented with their sex lives tended to be happier and pleased with the quality of their marriage, resulting in marital satisfaction.

Besides that, sexual satisfaction was found to mediate satisfaction in committed relationships (Kisler & Christopher, 2008; Meltzer & McNulty, 2010; Van den Brink et al., 2018). For example, Van den Brink et al. (2018) indicated that sexual satisfaction was found to be a mediator in the link between body image and perceived relationship quality. This explained that an individual's body image (i.e., body appreciation or sexual attractiveness) is significantly associated with relationship satisfaction through sexual satisfaction. For instance, an individual who feels sexually attractive tends to believe that they are a compatible sexual partner which increases their sexual satisfaction. Consequently, the feeling of sexual satisfaction improves the quality of their relationship. This idea is further supported by the Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction (IEMSS). The IEMSS provided a framework from which sexual satisfaction, sexual compatibility and marital satisfaction can be understood (Byers, 1999). This theoretical model posits that perceived marital satisfaction is predicted by the exchange of costs and rewards. Therefore, if a married couple has a high level of sexual compatibility and sexual satisfaction (costs and rewards), it will yield positive outcomes, resulting in a higher level of marital satisfaction (profit). Nonetheless, if they are sexually incompatible, they would experience inequity that translates into a dissatisfying sexual and married life.

Although the associations between sexual satisfaction, sexual compatibility and marital satisfaction have been addressed in the literature, such research have several limitations. Firstly, majority of the research in this field were from North America (Fincham et al., 2018; Gadassi et al., 2015; McNulty et al., 2014; Schoenfeld et al., 2016) and other parts of Asia, such as China (Cao et al., 2018) and Taiwan (Chao et al., 2011). The findings from these countries might be different from the Malaysian context as sex-related topics are seldom discussed in Malaysia. Secondly, very few studies (Mat Din & Minhat, 2019; Tam et al., 2011) have investigated the association between sex-related determinants and marital satisfaction even though it inversely contributes to the current divorce cases. In a study about sexual compatibility, Mark et al. (2013) reported that couples experience greater sexual satisfaction when they share similar interests in sexual activity, and this allows them to be more satisfied with their married relationship. Despite this finding, there's been limited research investigating the mediating role of sexual satisfaction, especially in marriage-related aspects. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the mediating role of sexual satisfaction in its association between sexual compatibility and marital satisfaction among married couples in Malaysia.

## **METHOD**

**Study sample.** A quantitative cross-sectional research design was used in the present study. The subjects were 255 married individuals aged 20 to 67 years old (Mean = 36.2; SD = 11.07) and they were selected using a purposive sampling method. The subjects consisted of 111 males (43.5%) and 144 (56.5%) females. A total of 87.8% identified themselves as Chinese, 7.5% as Indians, 3.5% as Malays and 1.2% as other ethnicities. The mean length of marriage was 10.09 years (SD= 9.8) with a minimum of one month and a maximum of 42 years. The participants

of the study were all legally married Malaysians whose respective marriage was registered with the Malaysian National Registration Department. The online self-administered questionnaire through Qualtrics was used in the present study.

**Procedure.** Before the data collection, the procedure of data collection was obtained and approved by the researchers' institutional ethical review committee. The participants were first briefed about the study, the risks and benefits of participation, and their rights as participants. They were then asked to give their personal consent for participating in this study. Once the participants had completed all the questions via an online survey link, they just needed to click 'submit' to confirm their responses.

**Measures.** The ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS; Fowers & Olson, 1993) was employed to examine marital satisfaction among these married participants in Malaysia. This scale consists of a 15-item questionnaire on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The total score was computed after reverse-scoring items 2, 5, 8, 9, 12 and 14. High scores on the EMS would indicate higher marital satisfaction. In this study, Cronbach's alpha of .903 indicated excellent reliability.

The Hurlbert Index of Sexual Compatibility (HISC; Hurlbert et al., 1993) was used to assess the degree of sexual compatibility among married couples. This scale comprises 25 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (all the time). The total score was calculated after reverse-scoring items 4, 5, 9, 11, 12, 13, 17, 18, 19, 20 and 23. High scores on the HISC indicated higher sexual compatibility. In this study, Cronbach's alpha of .924 indicated excellent reliability.

The Index of Sexual Satisfaction (ISS; Hudson, 1998) was used to determine sexual satisfaction among married couples. This scale consists of 25 items and required the respondents to rate on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (none of the time) to 7 (all of the time). The total score was obtained after reverse-scoring items 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, 18, 20, 24, and 25. High scores on the ISS indicated higher sexual satisfaction. In this study, Cronbach's alpha of .943 indicated excellent reliability.

## RESULTS

The association between marital satisfaction, sexual compatibility and sexual satisfaction was tested using the Pearson correlation analysis. The results of the study indicated a positive association between marital satisfaction, sexual compatibility,  $r(253) = .686, p < .001$  and sexual satisfaction,  $r(253) = .711, p < .001$ . Besides, sexual compatibility was also found to have a positive association with sexual satisfaction,  $r(253) = .870, p < .001$  (see Table 1).

**Table 1.**

*Pearson's Correlation Coefficients of Variables (N=255)*

Variables	Cronbach Alpha	1	2	3
1. Marital Satisfaction	.903	1		
2. Sexual Compatibility	.924	.686***	1	
3. Sexual Satisfaction	.943	.711***	.870***	1

Note. \*\*\* $p < .001$

Figure 1 (below) showed the results of the hypothesized indirect effect of sexual compatibility on marital satisfaction with the mediating effect of sexual satisfaction. Results showed that a mediation effect had happened in which sexual compatibility was positively linked to sexual satisfaction,  $\beta = 1.816$ ,  $t = 28.06$ ,  $p < .001$ , and in turn sexual satisfaction was significantly associated with marital satisfaction,  $\beta = .211$ ,  $t = 5.32$ ,  $p < .001$ . Besides, the results also showed that sexual compatibility was significantly associated with marital satisfaction after controlling the effect of sexual satisfaction,  $\beta = .261$ ,  $t = .08$ ,  $p = .002$ . In the total effect model, sexual compatibility was statistically associated with marital satisfaction,  $\beta = .644$ ,  $t = 14.99$ ,  $p < .001$ . With the 95% confidence interval and the standard error for the mean indirect effect of .05, and with 10,000 bootstrap samples of the mean indirect effect was reported with .23 (lower limit) and .54 (upper limit). Therefore, the mediating effect of sexual satisfaction was found to be significant,  $\beta = .383$ ,  $SE = .08$ , 95% CI [.23, .54].

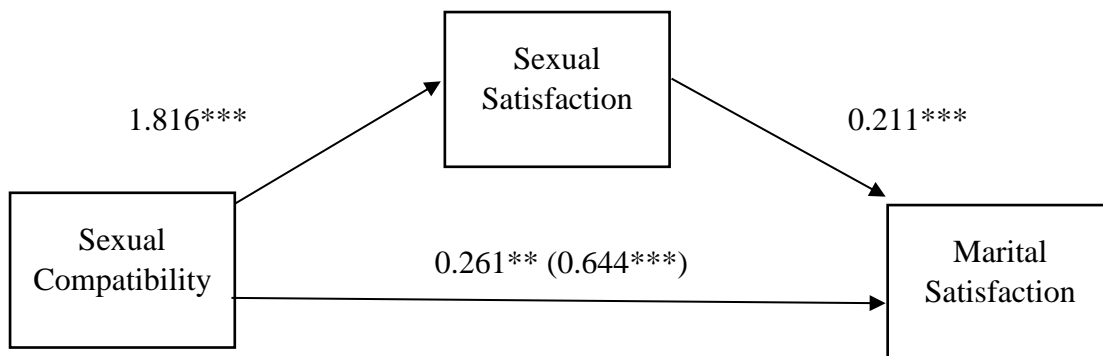


Figure 1 This Mediation Model shows the mediating effect of sexual satisfaction on sexual compatibility and marital satisfaction. The values shown above are the unstandardized coefficient. The total effect of sexual compatibility is shown in parenthesis.

Note. \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

## DISCUSSION

This study has sought to determine the association between sexual compatibility, marital satisfaction and the potential mediating effect of sexual satisfaction among married couples in Malaysia. The results of this study found that there were significant positive correlations among sexual compatibility, sexual satisfaction and marital satisfaction. These findings are consistent with the literature which suggested that a sexual compatibility is a form of intimacy between couples that enhances their sexual satisfaction (Mark et al., 2013; Offman & Matheson, 2005). Other earlier findings also suggested that vaginal orgasm consistency and penile-vaginal intercourse are significantly associated with sexual compatibility and sexual satisfaction (Klapilová, 2015). Vaginal orgasm consistency and penile-vaginal intercourse may share some characteristics of sexual compatibility within a relationship. Hence, it can also yield a greater level of sexual satisfaction among married couples. In short, when both partners' sexual needs, values, beliefs and abilities are compatible, they tended to have higher satisfaction in their sex life.

The results of this study also supported the positive correlation between sexual satisfaction and marital satisfaction. This finding is consistent with Yeh et al.'s (2006) longitudinal study that posited that couples with enjoyable sexual relations will be more satisfied with their marriage. Similarly, sexual satisfaction may be perceived as a reward and also as a positive experience in a relationship. This in turn contributes to a high-quality married life (Yeh et al., 2006).

Moreover, the association between sexual compatibility and marital satisfaction is also essential in a married relationship despite sexual compatibility not being a well-studied factor (Mark et al., 2013; Offman & Matheson, 2005). The result of this association adds to the current body of literature suggesting that couples with a greater sense of sexual compatibility are unlikely to experience sexual stress or depression in their marriage (Hurlbert et al., 2000) and that this results in higher marital satisfaction.

On the notion of whether sexual compatibility has an association with marital satisfaction, the results suggested that sexual compatibility can be indirectly associated with marital satisfaction through sexual satisfaction. The result obtained can be explained by the IEMSS whereby greater sexual satisfaction is related to greater perceived equality between the costs and rewards which one has received and this perception subsequently affects marital satisfaction (Byers, 1999). This explains why couples who think that they are sexually compatible with their partners perceive that they have found equality between costs and rewards in the sexual aspect. Consequently, they also tended to experience a greater sense of sexual satisfaction; and they positively associate this sexual satisfaction with marital satisfaction.

**Implication.** In short, the present study has theoretically and practically advanced the existing literature on marriage studies specifically in the association between sexual compatibility and marital satisfaction. Firstly, although past studies have examined marital satisfaction in the Malaysian context, many still did not explore sexual factors in determining marital satisfaction (Nasir, 2010; Ng et al., 2013). The novelty of the present study is that it has successfully unravelled the association between sexual compatibility and sexual satisfaction on marital satisfaction. The results of this study have extended our understanding of the positive relationship between these three variables and provided significant input for a satisfying marital relationship among married couples in Malaysia. Moreover, the results of this study also provided preliminary support to the hypothetical mediating role of sexual satisfaction in its association between sexual compatibility and marital satisfaction among married couples in Malaysia.

These findings can also serve as crucial inputs for healthcare providers especially counsellors in marriage counselling. As illustrated in the 'Results' section, sexual compatibility and sexual satisfaction are important in a meaningful romantic relationship. Therefore, counsellors are urged to pay attention to not only the non-sexual aspects of a fruitful marital relationship but also to address and integrate issues of sexual compatibility and sexual satisfaction. The results of the present study can also help to design and draft psychoeducational materials to educate couples on the crucial role of sexual satisfaction within a relationship. However, this psychoeducation does not have to be limited to only young, dating couples but can also benefit already married couples in maintaining a satisfying and harmonious marital relationship.

***Limitation and recommendation.*** The results of this study have provided essential information on marital satisfaction among married couples in Malaysia. However, there were several limitations and the results should be considered and interpreted after considering the context. For example, the present study only examined the association between the three variables based on individual reports which yielded the results of the study. It may not reflect the true marital satisfaction of both parties. Hence, future studies may consider examining the relationship of these variables from a dyadic report. This suggestion is also in line with Luo et al. (2008) who proposed that behaviours of one's partner should be examined using the dyadic approach to capture the actual interactions of a couple's relationship.

Moreover, research exploring sexual compatibility is still at the infant stage in Malaysia and the findings in the present study may provide only preliminary evidence on its significance in marital satisfaction among married couples in this context. However, it would be beneficial for future studies to explore sexual compatibility on both perceived and actual levels respectively. Mark et al. (2013) demonstrated that perceived sexual compatibility was found to be a better predictor of sexual satisfaction compared to actual sexual compatibility. Therefore, examining sexual compatibility in general may not be comprehensive enough in explaining sexual satisfaction. Hence, examining sexual compatibility, particularly perceived and actual sexual compatibility, could provide an in-depth understanding of sexual compatibility between couples and its association with sexual satisfaction and marital satisfaction.

Besides, the present study consisted of mainly Chinese married couples which may have limited its result representativeness in the Malaysian context. Future studies should consider examining the differences across ethnicities as Peninsula Malaysia consisted of three major ethnicities which are Malays, Chinese, and Indians (Mustafa et al., 2013; Ng et al., 2013). For instance, the ratio quota sampling method can be utilized in balancing and reaching a more representative composition of ethnicities in Malaysia.

Moreover, the nature of a cross-sectional research design also limits the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, the results of this study only provided preliminary evidence to support the proposed hypothetical mediation model. Future studies can and should utilize a longitudinal research design to confirm and verify the hypothetical mediation model of this study.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of the present study have contributed to a new understanding of sexual compatibility and sexual satisfaction towards marital satisfaction among married couples in Malaysia. Moreover, the present study has not only successfully contributed to new knowledge and filled in the research gap, but it has also provided significant input for pre- and post-marital education as well as providing essential information for designing a more appropriate intervention that promotes a satisfying and harmonious marital relationship. Healthcare providers, specifically marriage and family counsellors, may also gain much by crafting these ideas of psychoeducation for married couples in the Malaysian context.



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