

# Gender and Age Differences in Marital Intimacy Levels among Iranian Married Couples in Malaysia

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## Abstract

This study aimed to establish the differences in marital Intimacy based on gender and age variables. Subjects for this study were 257 married couples (131 females and 126 males aged 25 to 50 years) from 4 public university in Malaysia. The collecting data for the study were through the use of quantitative method. The instrument used was Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) questionnaire to measure marital intimacy level and demographic form for collecting demographic data. The results illustrated the intimacy level of females was higher than men. Statistically, the male and female students significantly differed in their intimacy scores. Also, there is significant differences between Intimacy level and age among married couples. In addition, general age differences in intimacy demonstrated older couples has higher level of intimacy. Consequently, implications of the study give valuable insight to the future use of couple therapist in society. Family therapists can work with couples for nurturing their intimacy thereby control and handling couples conflicts by knowing about spouses differences based on Gender and age differences.

**Keywords:** marital intimacy, gender, age, intimacy level, couples

## 1. Introduction

Marriage has been well recognized as an important foundation all over the world. It is one of the most essential and strongest bond of affection human may develop since it provides a structure for establishing family ties and bringing up the coming generation (Larson & Holman, 1994). Hall (2006) demonstrated that these days couples are less happy with their marriages compared to many years ago. Furthermore, maintaining of a marital relationship is a difficult task for many couples in all cultures and societies (Tomic et al., 2006; Baker et al. 2009).

Currently researchers reminded that about 50% of couples resolves their own marital unhappiness over divorce. Although the separation and divorce rate has fairly dropped in the last decade (Wilcox et al., 2009).also statistics in Iran show that out of every one thousand marriages registered in Iran roughly 200 end up in divorce (Zarei and Younesi, 2009).Divorce as being a social occurrence leads to considerable problems among families which enable it to have a distressing impact including excessive sense of damage, anger, depressive signs, social isolation, and lack of time at their job function(Amato, 2004).Researchers agree that intimacy is an essential aspect of many interpersonal relationships such as marital relationships (Prager, 1995; Sullivan,1953 ; Waring, 1984; Sanderson & Cantor, 2001; Patrick, Sells, Giordano, & Tollerud, 2007; Jordan, 2010;McAllister, Thornock, Hammond, Holmes, & Hill, 2012;Dandurand, 2013).Moreover, a greater understanding of the process that underlies intimacy can assist in identifying what is going awry when couples complain of loss of intimate and loving feelings (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, and George, 2001). Therefore, The current study sought to investigate the influence of demographic traits such as gender and age on intimacy level among Iranian couples to increase understanding about the potential influence of intimacy role on marital stability. Finally, the research attempted to answer the question, does gender and age differences of spouses can effect on intimacy level?

Surprisingly researchers interested in to discover more about marital intimacy and the real effect of intimacy on marital life. For this aim of knowledge they conceptualized intimacy as a process which begins with self-disclosure Reis and Shaver, 1988 Mandy K. Maunt (2005); Dunham, 2008; Jordan, 2010; (Dandurand, 2013) . Several studies state intimacy as a interpersonal concept that involves spouses self-disclosure, love, and attention (Feldman Barrett ,e.g., Laurenceau, & Rovine, 2005; Mitchell et al., 2008).

Unfortunately, nowadays the number of the divorce applicants is rising at an alarming rate in the world (M. E. Young & Long, 1998; Mahmoodabadi. H, et all ; 2012 ). The termination of the marriage occurs either before the marriage ceremony or after it (Kalmjin and Unk, 2007). Statistics from Iran shows that out of thousand marriages in Iran, approximately 200 dissolve (Zarei and Younesi, 2009). With this large number of divorce applicants, knowledge of important aspects of the marital relationship, such as the experience of intimacy, can contribute to develop more successful marital enrichment programs and marital therapy, which in turn improve a family functioning and marriage satisfaction.

One reason for contradictory results is that intimacy is affected by different factors such as gender (Weinberger, Hofstein, Krauss, and Whitbourne, 2008), age (Toscano, 2007).

## 2. Material and methods

The total samples consisted of 423 respondents from Malaysia. Samples were collected from various states in the country through convenient sampling. Of the 423 respondents, there were 284 (67.1%) women and 139 (32.9%) men. Majority of the respondents fall in the age group between 21-30 years ( $n = 133$ , 31.4%), 31–40 years ( $n = 160$  or 37.8%), and 41–50 years ( $n=102$  or 24.1%). In terms of length of marriage, 226 respondents (53.4%) were married less than 10 years and 97 (46.6%) respondents were married 10 years of above. The respondents' income was categorized as low (below RM1500), middle (RM1501 to RM3500) and high (RM3501 and above). For this group, respondents' income for low income group ( $n=174$  or 41.1%), middle ( $n=201$  or 47.5%) and high ( $n=48$  or 11.3%). As for partners' income, low group comprised of 153 (36.2%), middle income 207 (48.9%) and high income 48 (11.3%).

Marital Intimacy level was measured by Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) which was originally used by Schaefer and Olson (1981). In fact, the PAIR inventory is a 36-item instrument that assesses five types of intimacy: emotional, social, sexual, recreational, and intellectual. Additionally, this measure contains a "conventionality" scale which measures the extent to which someone is "faking good". All subscales of the PAIR consist of 6-items asking participants to indicate their responses on a scale ranging from 0 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. Scores are summed for each subscale, with higher scores indicative of higher intimacy or "faking good". The alpha coefficients for the current study were 0.92 for the total scores of PAIR, all dimensions. Also the data on demographic variables such as age and gender were gathered in the demographic questionnaire section.

The sample of the study consisted of 257 students who were randomly selected from five public sector universities in Malaysia. Male students constitute 49% of the sample ( $N= 257$ ) and of female students constitute 51% of the sample. Their age range was consist of three groups (less than 30 years 22/6%, between 30 to 35 was 45% and more than 35 years old 35/4%).The data gathered from these respondents were analyzed for finding relationship between Gender and Age and Intimacy levels.

## 3. Results

In order to find reliable answers to Research Question 1, a questionnaire on Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships as well as a Questionnaire on Demographic Traits were distributed among 257 Iranian married couples. According to the Demographic Questionnaire, it was found that 131 participants were female constituting 51% of the population; on the other hand, 126 participants were male, 49% of the whole population of the participants. Table.1 represents the detailed information about the participants' gender.

Moreover, the participants were categorized into three groups regarding their ages. According to Table. 2, the largest portion of the participants was 42% ranging in age from 30 to 35 years old. The next large age category was for the participants who were above 35 years old (35.4%). The rest of the participants (22.6%) were between 25 and 30 years old.

### 3.1 Participants' Intimacy Levels

Prior to taking into account the results related to the intimacy levels, it was necessary to find out if the questionnaire was reliable or not. Using Cronbach's Alpha, we found that in our study, the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) was highly reliable as shown in Table .3 The Cronbach's Alpha estimated for this scale was 0.922 that is considered a very high reliability.

Moreover, the results of the analyses showed that the minimum score for intimacy reported by the participants who were studied in this research was 65 whereas the highest score was 156. At this point, it was observed that the surveyed couples did not have low intimacy rates at all as the lowest score was 65 (Belonging to the category of Middle level). Generally, the studied group had a mean of 115.14 which falls in the category of middle level for intimacy. Therefore, it is concluded that the couples being surveyed in this research had average levels of intimacy. Table.4 tabulates other related statistics for the intimacy level of the participants.

### 3.2 Intimacy and Gender

This study also attempted to find out whether the intimacy levels differed significantly over various genders. The assumption was that there was no significant difference between the males and females in terms of their intimacy levels. At first, the means of the intimacy related to male and female participants were obtained and presented in Table.5 .It is observed that the mean of intimacy for females was higher than that of their counterparts. While the women in this study obtained an intimacy mean of 118.63, the males achieved a mean of 110.90.

Nonetheless, for determining whether these means for male and female participants differed significantly, it was necessary to conduct an independent sample t-test. To fulfill this, the normality of the data distribution for the students' intimacy scores was determined through a One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test finding that the data were distributed normally. Having obtained this, a Levene test was run to investigate the assumption of equality of variances in the mentioned groups. It is observed that the p-value of the Levene test

was 0.002 while assuming equal variance Table .6 which is less than 0.05. Then, the assumption of equality of variances for these two groups is rejected. This implies that the variance of these two groups was not equal.

Mentioned tests, an independent sample t-test was run assuming that the variances in male and female groups were not equal. Table .7 tabulates the results associated with the independent samples t-test conducted for the male and female participant. It is observed that the p-value for this test was 0.008 (lower than 0.05); consequently, the assumption of mean equality for intimacy scores of the participants is rejected. To put it simply, it is concluded that the male and female students significantly differed in their intimacy scores. Table 4.11 ostensibly demonstrates that the mean of the scores of intimacy for females was higher than that of the males. In fact, this observed difference is statistically significant.

### 3.3 Intimacy and Age

Another assumption here was whether there was difference between the intimacy scores of the participants having various age groups or there is a relationship between age and intimacy. As mentioned earlier, the participants were divided into three age groups. Table.8 details the intimacy scores according to their means, Standard deviations, etc. As seen, the largest mean belongs to the category of the participants who age above 35 (118.67). The next mean belongs to the participants ranging in age from 30 to 35 (114.91) while the lowest mean of intimacy belongs to the ones ranging in age between 25 and 30. Through a simple glance, it is observed that by getting older, the participants obtained rather higher means of intimacy.

Nonetheless, to better understand whether these means are significantly different, it was necessary to run an ANOVA test. Having found out that the intimacy scores in these groups had a normal distribution by using the One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test, then an ANOVA test was used as presented in Table.9.

As shown in Table.9, the p-value of ANOVA test is 0.03 which is lower than 0.05. This implies that the assumption of equality of means for intimacy scores in various age groups is rejected; to put it simply, there is a significant difference between couples age and their intimacy levels. For better understanding which pair of age groups have resulted in this significant difference, we made use of Tukey's test and the obtained results are given in Table.10

This table presents the test of equality of means for each pair of means of intimacy in different age groups. Having taken into account the p-value of the tests of equality of means, only the pairs of groups 1 and 3 (p-value=0.028) have p-values lower than 0.05. As it can be observed, the age group number 3 (30 years old above) is significantly different from the other two groups. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the mean of intimacy in the third age group is significantly different. In other words, the impact of the third age group on intimacy is more than the other age groups.

In summary, the couples being surveyed in this research had average levels of intimacy. Females was higher than that of their counterparts. Statistically, the male and female students significantly differed in their intimacy scores. In other words, it can be concluded that there is a difference between men and women in levels of intimacy.

Regarding the age and intimacy, it was found that by getting older, the participants obtained rather higher means of intimacy. In fact, there was a significant difference between students' age and their intimacy levels. In further details, it was found that it was concluded that there is a relationship between age and levels of intimacy. In fact, the older couples have got higher score in their levels of intimacy.

### 4. Discussion

In this respect, a key concern in this research was to find out the level of intimacy for the Iranian couples in Malaysia in terms of demographic traits. Three intimacy levels had been considered for the participants, namely low, middle (or average), and high levels. In a general perspective, the findings proved that all the Iranian couples participating in this study had average levels of intimacy (Mean= 115.14 out of 180). Considering the three levels, over half of the participants had middle levels of intimacy (52.5%), while 47.5% of the participants had high levels of intimacy. No one showed low levels of Intimacy, though. It should be noticed that a degree of experienced intimacy would be essential for normal human development and adaptation (Dandeneau & Johnson, 1994; Stewart, 1992; Waring, 1981); nevertheless, to accurately identify the ideal degree of intimacy for an individual will be impossible (Schaefer & Olson, 1981). In general, it is confirmed through the literature that a direct relationship exists between marital intimacy and marital satisfaction (Schaefer & Olson, 1981). As well, a rise in marital intimacy would have a positive effect on marital satisfaction over time (Dandeneau & Johnson, 1994).

In relation with the intimacy level was the gender difference observed in this study. Both males and females reported such a difference through the quantitative data (responding to the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) Scale) and the interviews. Many researchers have accentuated these facets of intimacy: gender, intention, involvement, emotion, and sexuality (Schaefer & Olson, 1981; Dandeneau & Johnson, 1994 ; Waring & Patton, 1984). To be laconic, it is observed that the mean of intimacy for females was

higher than that of their counterparts. While the women in this study obtained an intimacy mean of 118.63, the males achieved a mean of 110.90. The results of the independent sample T-test proved that the male and female students significantly differed in their intimacy scores, in favor of women as they had significantly higher intimacy rate than that of the males. In fact, the results obtained through the questionnaire given to 257 participants are consistent with the results of the qualitative interviews in which women were reported to be more concerned about their intimacy. Heller and wood (1998) asserted that investigating the ways in which aspects of intimacy interrelate would shed light on the nature and process of intimacy while providing further interpretations of how intimacy is wrought between men and women. Although the findings about gender difference in this study are consistent with the study reported by (Haj-Yahia, 1999) that highlights intimacy to be associated with female and femininity.

The difference found in the regard is reported by Khamseh (2009), discussing that gender is a contextual variable which is reflected in the broader culture within which the couples live.

To explain why the females reported higher levels of intimacy than the men, it can be said that because they were probably more attentive to intimacy than their spouses. Therefore, intimacy might be more noticeable for women (Heller and Wood, 1998). According to Gilligan (1982), women's cognitive and emotional experiences might be more directed towards intimacy and care, defining themselves within the context of relationships. On the other hand, men are claimed to define themselves in terms of autonomy while their identities are more tied up with their work (Gilligan, 1982).

Furthermore, Heller and Wood (1998) ascribed gender differences to males and females' diverse socialization and psychological development, in addition to being attributed to potential biases in delineating and evaluating intimacy. All in all, the results related to gender difference and intimacy in this research are consistent with Montgomery's (2005) study reporting higher levels of intimacy across age groups for females from middle school through college. Also, the results are consistent with the findings reported by Hook, Gerstein, Detterich, and Gridley (2003) confirming that women had higher intimacy level and admitting that women are more intimate than men.

As for age, it was found that there was a significant difference between intimacy and age. The participants were divided into three age groups, those having ages between 25 and 30, between 30-35, and the ones above 35 years old. In fact, it was observed that by getting older, the participants obtained rather higher means of intimacy. In other words, the impact of the third age group on intimacy is more than the other age groups, concluding the older the couples are, the higher their levels of intimacy. The results related to age reported in this study are consistent with the ones reported by Ghalami, Saffarinia, and Shaghaghi (2013) about the Iranian couples, suggesting that there was a significant difference between the younger and older group in total intimacy scores and the older subjects got higher scores than younger group. As approved by Ghalami, Saffarinia, and Shaghaghi (2013) in Iran, through the process of aging, people tend towards more positive intimacy attitude and these changes could not be allocated to change in one specific component. Moreover, our results is consistent with Erikson theory (1982), in which love is regarded as the basic strength of youth resulting from the crisis of intimacy against isolation. He defined love as a mature attachment and sacrifice that take over basic differences between men and women.

## 5. Conclusion

It can be concluded from this study that some demographic characteristics have significant correlation with marital intimacy among couples. It implies that universities may provide some counseling programs for students regarding gender and age differences. Also, the current study suggests that college counselor centers be aware of the risks involved with low intimacy in newly married students and offer appropriate mental health services and teach the relevant strategies. Having a better understanding of gender differences in marital relationships can improve treatments of distressed marriage and influence the prevention and control of mental dysfunctions.

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Table1: Gender Pattern of the Research Participants

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Female	131	51.0	51.0	51.0
Male	126	49.0	49.0	100.0
Total	257	100.0	100.0	

Table 1. Age Pattern of the Research Participants

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Below 30	58	22.6	22.6	22.6
Between 31-35	108	42.0	42.0	64.6
More than 35	91	35.4	35.4	100.0
Total	257	100.0	100.0	

Table 3. Reliability score (Cronbach's Alpha) for the PAIR

	Cronbach's Alpha
Reliability of the Intimacy Scale	.922

Table 0. Participants' Total Score for Intimacy level.

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Error	SD
Total Scores	257	65	156	115.14	1.460	23.40

Table 5. Total Intimacy Score of Males and females

Gender	N	Mean	Min	Max	SD
Female	131	118.63	65	156	21.38
Male	126	110.90	66	144	24.50
Total	257	114.84	65	156	23.24

Table 6. Results of the Levene's test for equality of variances for male and female participants

Intimacy Total Scores	Levene's test for Equality of variances	
	F	Sig.
	10.099	.002

Table 7. Independent Samples t-Test for male and female participants' scores of Intimacy

		t-test for Equality of Means						
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
Intimacy Score	Equal variances assumed	2.697	55	.007	.729	2.866	.085	3.373
	Equal variances not assumed	2.690	47.505	.008	.729	2.873	.070	3.389

Table 8. Total Intimacy Score based on various age groups

Age	N	Mean	Min	Max	SD
Less than 30	58	108.69	65	140	24.302
between 30-35	108	114.91	70	156	21.304
more than 35	91	118.67	66	146	24.173
Total	257	114.84	65	156	23.247

Table 9. ANOVA results for relationship between participants' age and intimacy

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	3529.53	2	1764.763	3.325	.03
Within Groups	134819.59	254	530.78		
Total	138349.13	256			

Table 10. Tukey's test for the relationship between the age and intimacy

(I) Age	(J) Age	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Group 1	Group 2	-6.218	3.750	.224	-15.06	2.62
	Group 3	-9.981*	3.871	.028	-19.11	-.85
Group 2	Group 1	6.218	3.750	.224	-2.62	15.06
	Group 3	-3.763	3.278	.486	-11.49	3.97
Group 3	Group 1	9.981*	3.871	.028	.85	19.11
	Group 2	3.763	3.278	.486	-3.97	11.49
*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.						