

# LONELINESS AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION AMONG MARRIED COUPLES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: RELATIONSHIP EFFICACY AS A MODERATOR

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## Abstract

**Background:** The significant changes in daily routines of the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted relationship satisfaction among marital couples worldwide. Married couples who experienced loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic may lead to low relationship satisfaction. However, relationship efficacy could buffer the direct association of loneliness with relationship satisfaction. **Objectives:** This study aimed to examine the relationship between loneliness and relationship satisfaction among married couples during the COVID-19 pandemic by using relationship efficacy as a moderator. **Methodology:** 150 married couples participated in the cross-sectional quantitative online survey. The self-administered questionnaires consisted of UCLA 3-item Loneliness Scale, Relationship Assessment Scale and Relationship Efficacy Measure. The present study employed Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software to analyse the data. **Results:** First, the findings revealed a negative association between loneliness and relationship satisfaction. Second, the moderation effect of relationship efficacy was significant in the association between loneliness and relationship satisfaction. **Conclusion:** The results supported the crucial role of relationship efficacy in a marital relationship. Ultimately, relationship efficacy can minimise the negative impact of loneliness on relationship satisfaction. In short, couples believing they can resolve conflict with their partners will likely promote better relationship satisfaction. This study also presents several practical and theoretical implications.

Keywords: Loneliness, Relationship efficacy, Relationship Satisfaction, Married Couples, COVID-19 pandemic.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

According to a study, individuals' relationships with their spouses in a marriage are significant aspects of their life (Nelson Coffey, 2018). Evidence suggests that married individuals are happier and have healthier physical and mental well-being (Perelli-Harris et al., 2019, Whisman et al., 2018) when they attain relationship satisfaction. Prominent past scholars, Rusbult and Buunk (1993) defined *relationship satisfaction* as an interpersonal assessment of one's connection to and favourable attitudes toward their spouse; it determines how much they feel their spouses meet their demands (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). The quality of relationships in marriage impacts numerous aspects of life. Consequently, intense relationship satisfaction toward one's marriage can be a valuable tool for coping with stress and challenging circumstances. It may also promote an individual's health and quality of life (Downward et al., 2022). Meanwhile, low relationship satisfaction toward marriage may lead to divorce (Abreu-Afonso et al., 2022) and remarriage with another individual to find a solid support system (Yazdani et al., 2021). Additionally, lower relationship satisfaction may contribute to an individual's mental health problems (Rasciute & Kumar, 2022).

However, the significant changes in daily routines of the COVID-19 Pandemic have impacted relationship satisfaction among marital couples worldwide. According to the statistic provided by the Courts and the Syariah Judiciary Department, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob reported that during the Covid-19 Pandemic, about 80,000 divorce petitions were submitted at courts nationwide from March 2020 to August 2021. Of the total divorce cases, 10,346 divorce cases involved non-Muslim spouses, compared to 66,440 divorce cases involving Muslim couples. A survey of married couples revealed that during the third wave of the Pandemic and the enforcement of Movement Control Order 2.0, 84.1% of respondents experienced psychological pressure or strain. (Povera & Yunus, 2021). Hence, it is crucial to understand factors influencing relationship satisfaction among marital couples.

Married couples who experienced loneliness during the COVID-19 Pandemic may lead to low relationship satisfaction. Past scholars defined *loneliness* as an unfavorable circumstance or condition (Ang, 2016; de Jong Gierveld et al., 2016) that occurs when the individual's social ties seem inadequate in quality or quantity (de Jong- Gierveld, 1987). Due to movement restrictions, such as Movement Control Order (MCO) during the COVID-19 Pandemic, many couples were forced to stay in a long-distance relationship. As a result, loneliness or a lack of companionship and connection in social relationships frequently

occurs (Hu et al., 2020) despite the universal need to bond. In addition, individuals are more inclined to experience loneliness when there is a rift in their support networks (Czaja et al., 2021). Thus, numerous studies showed that loneliness is negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. For example, individual who experiences a high level of loneliness is linked to lower relationship satisfaction, according to cross-sectional (Hsieh & Hawkey, 2018; Saba Aziz et al., 2021) and longitudinal (Mund & Johnson, 2021). research. For example, the research by Mund and Johnson (2021) revealed that a individual's loneliness level was a reliable predictor of lower levels of relationship satisfaction over eight years.

Meanwhile, relationship efficacy is essential in achieving relationship satisfaction among married couples. Past scholar defined *relationship efficacy* as an individual's view of their capacity to modify their behaviours within an intimate relationship (Riggio, 2012). Also, *relationship efficacy* is defined as a solid conviction that one can meet a partner's needs and accomplish the outcomes one wants in a relationship (Johnson & Anderson, 2015). According to a previous study, higher levels of relationship efficacy are positively linked to increased relationship satisfaction and positive attribution to one's partner (Johnson & Anderson, 2013). Higher commitment to their spouse, fewer relationship conflicts, and higher relationship satisfaction are all more likely to be reported by individuals with high relationship efficacy (Riggio et al., 2013). Similar to this, couples with greater faith in their capacity to maintain healthy relationships have fewer unfavorable encounters with each other. Individuals who believe they can maintain a healthy relationship with their spouse may practice constructive behaviours in their relationships, such as constructive dispute resolution and open communication (Richardson et al., 2019). Because they are confident, they can achieve the desired intimacy goals, individuals with high relationship efficacy may be genuine with their spouses and feel at ease communicating their thoughts and feelings. More vital relationship satisfaction has been linked to higher levels of relationship efficacy (Julal Cnossen et al., 2019).

### The present study

A past study suggests a negative association between loneliness and relationship satisfaction among marital couples (Fulop et al., 2020; Mund et al., 2020; Mund et al., 2022). On the other hand, some researchers mention a positive association between relationship efficacy and relationship satisfaction (Bahun & Huić, 2017; Julal Cnossen et al., 2019), whereby relationship efficacy acts as a protector factor. However, based on current knowledge, there is a lack of research on how relationship efficacy moderates the relationship between loneliness and relationship satisfaction among married couples in Malaysia. Therefore, the current study examines if relationship efficacy could buffer the direct association of loneliness with relationship satisfaction. Hence, the current study aims to study the moderation effect of relationship efficacy in the association between loneliness and relationship satisfaction among married individuals during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Malaysia.

### **The following are the research questions, hypotheses, and conceptual framework:**

*Research Question 1:* Is there an association between loneliness and relationship satisfaction among marital couples during Covid-19 Pandemics in Malaysia?

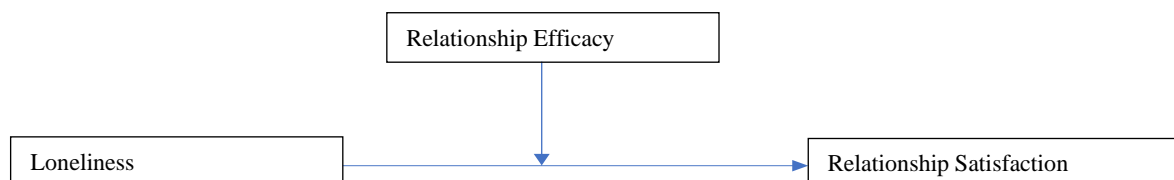
*Hypothesis 1:* There is a negative association between loneliness and relationship satisfaction among marital couples during Covid-19 Pandemics in Malaysia.

*Research Question 2:* Is there an association between relationship efficacy and relationship satisfaction among marital couples during Covid-19 Pandemics in Malaysia?

*Hypothesis 2:* There is a positive association between relationship efficacy and relationship satisfaction among marital couples during Covid-19 Pandemics in Malaysia.

*Research Question 3:* Whether relationship efficacy can moderate the association between loneliness and relationship satisfaction among marital couples during Covid-19 Pandemics in Malaysia ?

*Hypothesis 3:* Relationship efficacy moderated the association between loneliness and relationship satisfaction among marital couples during Covid-19 Pandemics in Malaysia.



Dependent variables: Relationship Satisfaction  
 Independent variables: Loneliness  
 Moderator: Relationship Efficacy

**Figure 1:** Conceptual Framework

## ■ 2.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Sample

Respondents of the study consist of 150 married individuals with a mean age of 40.47 (SD= 8.94). Majorities of the respondents were women (77.3%). 68.7% of the respondents were Chinese, followed by 27.3% Indian, 3.3% Malays and 0.7% from other ethnicities. Most of the respondents worked (68.7%) from home during the data collection period between May and July 2021.

### Procedure

This study employed a purposive online survey method to gather the data of the study. An online survey was created using Qualtrics, and an advertisement for the study was posted on social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn to recruit qualified individuals to participate in the survey. The respondents must be Malaysians who are currently still legally married. Interested participants clicked on the survey link from the social media post and were briefed about the study's objective, respondents' rights and potential benefits and risks, privacy, and confidentiality. They were asked to indicate their consent before proceeding to the survey question. The research procedure has been reviewed and approved by UTAR Scientific and Ethical Review Committee (SERC).

### Measure

Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988) was used to examine the general relationship satisfaction of the respondents. This scale consists of 7-item rated on the 5-point Likert scale of 1 (low satisfaction) to 5 (high satisfaction). There are two reverse-scored, which are Item 4 and 7. A mean score was calculated after reversing scores, with a higher score corresponding to higher satisfaction with their relationship. The Cronbach alpha was reported with .848 in this study.

Three-Item Loneliness Scale (Hughes et al., 2004) was used to measure the respondents' feelings of loneliness or social isolation. This scale assesses on a 3-point scale, which is 1 = hardly ever, 2 = Some of the Time, 3 = Often. A mean scale was computed, with a higher score indicating higher loneliness. The Cronbach alpha was reported at .807 in this study.

Relationship Efficacy Measure (REM; Fincham et al., 2000) was used to assess the relationship efficacy of the respondents. This scale consists of 7 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale that

ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A mean scale was computed after reversing the score of items 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7. A higher score indicates higher efficacy in a relationship. REM reported with .811, Cronbach alpha reliability value.

### Data Processing and Analysis Plan

The study's data was analysed using IBM SPSS 23 and Hayes' SPSS Macro Process Version 4.0. First, the data were subjected to descriptive analysis to describe the distribution of the variables. Next, the Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the variable. Lastly, the moderation analysis was tested using Macro Process Model1 by controlling the effect of age and gender. A significant moderating effect was observed when the CIs were not included a zero.

## 3.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Relationship between Loneliness, Relationship Efficacy and Relationship Satisfaction

Table 1 presents the results of Pearson correlation analyses. The results revealed negative relationships between loneliness with relationship efficacy ( $r(148) = -.46, p < .001$ ) and relationship satisfaction ( $r(148) = -.55, p < .001$ ). Besides, relationship efficacy was found to have a positive relationship with relationship satisfaction ( $r(148) = .66, p < .001$ ).

**Table 1:** Descriptive and Matric Correlation between Variables ( $n = 150$ )

	Mean	SD	1	2
1. Loneliness	1.72	.53	1	
2. Relationship Efficacy	4.68	1.04	-.46***	1
3. Relationship Satisfaction	3.77	.79	-.55***	.66***

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

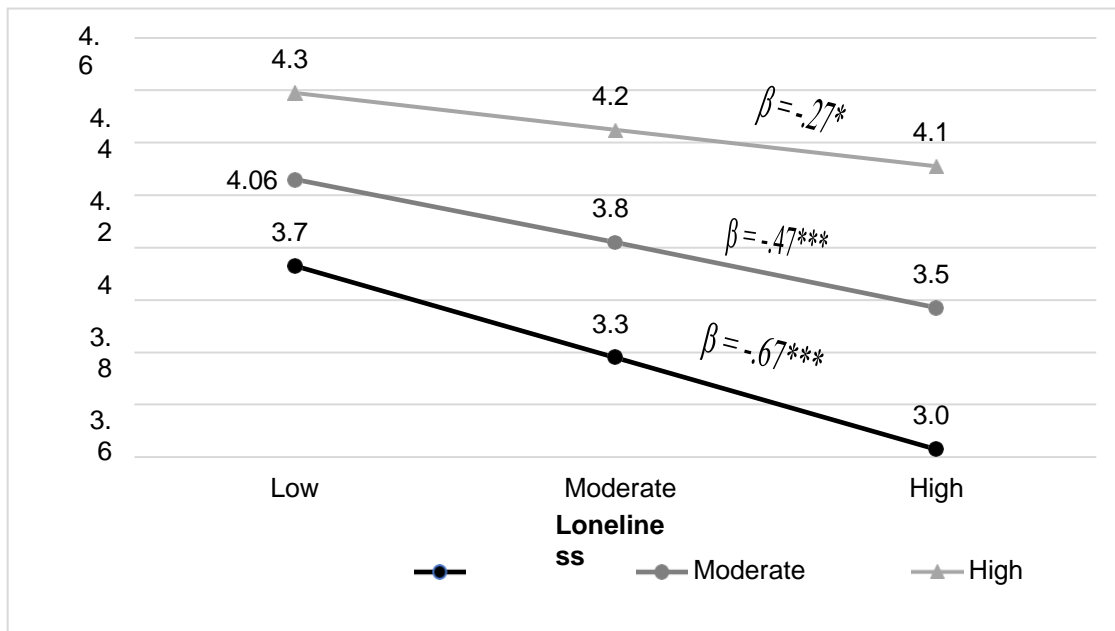
### Moderating Role of Relationship Efficacy

The overall model in relationship satisfaction was statistically significant,  $F(5, 145) = 34.98, p < .001, R^2 = .548$ . The  $R^2$  change of .018,  $p = .018$ , indicated that the addition of the interaction term of relationship efficacy in the model was significant. Loneliness was significantly negatively associated with relationship satisfaction,  $b = -1.37, t(145) = -3.54, p = .001, 95\% CI [-2.13, -.60]$ . Relationship efficacy was not significantly linked to relationship satisfaction,  $b = .09, t(145) = .64, p = .525, 95\% CI [-.18, .36]$ . The moderation effect of relationship efficacy was significant in the association between loneliness and relationship satisfaction,  $b = .19, S = .08, 95\% CI [.033, .349]$  (See Table 2). Age but not gender remained significant in its association with relationship satisfaction after controlling its effect.

**Table 2:** Results of Moderation Analysis ( $n=150$ )

	Relationship Satisfaction				
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% <i>CI</i>
Age	-.01	.01	-2.13	.035	[-.020, -.001]
Gender	.17	.11	1.62	.107	[-.038, .385]
Loneliness	-1.37	.39	-3.54	.001	[-2.127, -.604]
Relationship Efficacy	.087	.137	.64	.525	[-.183, .358]
Loneliness X Relationship Efficacy	.191	.08	2.40	.018	[.033, .349]

Figure 2 shows the interaction plot. The standardised slope for relationship satisfaction was significant for all three levels of relationship efficacy. However, married individuals with a lower level of relationship efficacy tend to be more affected by the association between loneliness and relationship satisfaction, followed by moderate and high levels of relationship efficacy. The negative effect of loneliness on relationship satisfaction becomes less for married individuals with a higher level of relationship efficacy.



Note: \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*  $p < .05$

Figure 2: Moderating Effect of the Relationship Efficacy in the Association between Loneliness and Relationship Satisfaction (n = 150)

#### 4.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Relationship satisfaction among married couples is essential since low relationship satisfaction may lead to divorce and mental health issues. As a result, it is critical to determine the factors contributing to relationship satisfaction among married couples so that mental health professionals such as counsellors can pinpoint effective interventions for marital couples. Previous research has established a relationship between (1) loneliness and (2) relationship efficacy and relationship satisfaction among married couples. Meanwhile, a lack of research examines how relationship efficacy can moderate the association between relationship efficacy and satisfaction. In the present study, we investigated whether relationship efficacy would moderate the association between loneliness and relationship satisfaction. Overall, the results of the present study draw a nuanced picture of the role of relationship efficacy in buffering the association between loneliness and relationship satisfaction in marital relationships during COVID-19 Pandemics.

In line with previous research, the current finding revealed a negative association between loneliness and relationship satisfaction, supporting our H1. The results indicated that individuals who experience a high level of loneliness might have lower relationship satisfaction during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Such association has also been highlighted by Fulop et al. (2020), Mund et al., (2020), Mund and Johnson (2021) and Saba Aziz et al. (2021). Specifically, Mund and colleagues' (2021) findings suggested that loneliness was a credible indicator of lower levels of relationship satisfaction over eight years of a longitudinal study. Also, based on a correlational study conducted by Lawal and colleagues (2021) in Poland, the researchers indicated that loneliness is a strong contributing factor to relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, a cross-sectional study conducted by Zhan and colleagues (2022) in China also supports this notion, stating that there is a negative relationship between loneliness and relationship satisfaction. In addition, Saba Aziz and colleagues (2021), who conducted their cross-sectional study in India, also found that individuals with low romantic relationships experience a high degree of loneliness. Despite the studies conducted in different countries, the results are still consistent. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, individuals tend to experience loneliness when staying apart from their significant partners, which may lead to lower relationship satisfaction.

Regarding relationship efficacy and satisfaction, current findings show a positive association between them, supporting our H2. That means married individuals with a high sense of relationship efficacy will achieve high relationship satisfaction during the Covid-19 Pandemic. In addition, the results were aligned with past studies (Bahun, I., & Huić, 2017; Johnson & Anderson, 2015; Julal Cnossen et al., 2019). To illustrate, Bahun and Huić (2017) conducted a study with 390 men and women involved in romantic relationships in Croatia and indicated that there is a positive association between relationship efficacy and relationship satisfaction. Moreover, other researchers who conducted the study in the UK with 216 samples also indicated that there is a positive relationship between efficacy and relationship satisfaction. Specifically, married individuals with high relationship efficacy will commit more to marital responsibilities, which results in higher relationship satisfaction (Weiser & Weigel, 2016) during COVID-19 Pandemics.

Overall, current findings proved that the moderation effect of relationship efficacy was significant in the association between loneliness and relationship satisfaction, supporting our H3. The results explained that relationship efficacy could buffer the direct association of loneliness with relationship satisfaction during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Even though an individual in a marital relationship experience loneliness when staying apart from a spouse, he/she may experience a high level of relationship satisfaction if the individual has a high sense of relationship efficacy. Individuals who have a sense of relationship efficacy believe they can maintain a healthy relationship with their spouse may practice healthy behaviour such as open communication (Richardson et al., 2019). Hence, the

current findings provide evidence to justify that relationship efficacy is a moderator variable between loneliness and relationship satisfaction among married couples in Malaysia during COVID-19 Pandemic.

In terms of contribution, recent research contributes to both the literature and practical realms. This study examines the moderating effect of relationship efficacy in the association between loneliness and relationship satisfaction from a literature standpoint. As a result, the current study's findings will contribute to the literature and be cited by future scholars. On the other hand, this study intends to help mental health professionals, especially family and couple therapists, in preventative and intervention programmes in terms of practical contribution. After knowing the role of relationship efficacy in buffering the association between loneliness and relationship satisfaction among marital couples, family and couple therapists can take appropriate action to assist individuals with low relationship satisfaction in the marriage.

Our study consists of a few limitations. First, the current study design is cross-sectional. As a result, it is not easy to establish a causal relationship between variables. As a recommendation, future research should employ a longitudinal design to establish causal relationships between variables. Second, participants were married couples. Current findings encounter generalization issues as the finding cannot generalize to all romantic relationships involving individuals who are not married. Hence, future research could involve all participants who engage in a romantic relationship but not only limited to those who are married. Third, future research might gather both couples' data to analyse the relational effects of relationship efficacy, as the current study only evaluated individual reports.

In conclusion, the findings reveal that relationship efficacy could buffer the direct association of loneliness with relationship satisfaction during COVID-19 Pandemic. The results supported the crucial role of relationship efficacy in a marital relationship. Ultimately, relationship efficacy can minimize the negative impact of loneliness on relationship satisfaction. In short, couples believing they can resolve conflict with their partners will likely promote better relationship satisfaction.

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