



## Intimacy in marital relationship: Effect of internet usage

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### Abstract

The internet and its usage into the everyday lives of a significantly large population has tremendously changed the way people communicate and interact. Since the advent of the internet, couples, families, and individuals of all ages are being impacted by the internet in many ways. This article takes a closer look at how the internet can affect the marital intimacy on married men and women. The purpose of this study is to examine any possible impact internet use may have on an intimate marital relationship. The present study sought to examine the time spent on the internet, as it relates to intimacy and relationships satisfaction experienced in marital relationships. This study analyzed data from a survey of 300 Malaysian married men and women in Selangor, Malaysia. Data was presented on the level of their awareness and knowledge concerning to the relationship between their marital intimacy and internet usage. The findings indicated that married men and women understand that controlling of internet usage is vital because this may affect the relationship in a marriage. This study showed that the majority married men and women remain faithful and trust each other. The results also found that they still can regulate their internet usage and time spent online. Hence, this shows that they give priority to their marriage. The result from this study may offer valuable information about the level of internet usage among married couples in Malaysia that also can be used as a baseline to guide treatment programme and assessment.

**Keywords:** impact, internet usage, intimacy, marital intimacy, marital relationship, married couple

### Introduction

The internet technology is growing rapidly and people are involved with it every day. They use it for work, education as well as for entertainment purposes. The number of internet users has been increasing significantly to more than 2 billion people (Brier, 2012) and Facebook has been said as a main contributing factor in this scenario (Fenichel, 2003). The internet has become a part of people's lives and seriously affects socialization, marriage, and marital intimacy.

The problem of the internet remains a harsh reality in our society today. The motivation to understand this phenomenon in totality and offer solutions has continued into the 21st century. Against this backdrop, this study sought to address the problem of the effect of the

internet usage on heterosexual married couples' relationships, and how these couples remained married, and recovered from the impact of the internet usage. The history of the internet pertaining to the growth of internet usage revealed the extent of this problem. For instance, from the inception of the internet in 1983, it negatively affected some couples' relationships, sometimes resulting in their separation or divorce (Parker & Wampler, 2003). Now in 2018, 25 years after the advent of the internet, the negative effect of the internet usage continues to reverberate.

The negative effect of the internet usage on a couple's relationship is a devastating problem for some couples especially for couples who embrace a traditional monogamous marriage. In a marriage, when discovery or disclosure of internet usage occurs, the injured party (i.e. the spouse who is not involved in the internet usage) might be affected by feelings of rage, abandonment, betrayal, depression, anger, humiliation and loneliness (Schneider, 2000). Some wives suffer alone because they feel they are to be blamed for their husbands' problems, while other wives suffer because they are unsure or ignorant of what steps to take to reconcile and save their marriage. Some couples may be uninformed about the nature of the internet, and the possibility of recovery when spouses' use of the internet becomes a problem for a couple.

Intimacy and marital satisfaction are good indicators of relationship strength. Intimacy is characterized by a feeling of closeness with another person (Reis & Shaver, 1988) as well as a tendency to self-disclose (Schaefer & Olson, 1981) to the other individual. Married couples who report a high level of marital intimacy are affectionate, validating and trusting of one another (Aron & Westbay, 1997). Much like relationship satisfaction, higher levels of intimacy are associated with positive benefits for the individual and the relationship. Intimacy can serve as a barrier against negativity that can be destructive in the relationship (Huston & Chorost, 1994) and researchers have found evidence for a positive relationship between intimacy and relationship satisfaction (Schreurs & Buunk, 1996; Hassebrauck & Fehr, 2002). The married couples with higher intimacy satisfaction tend to be more committed, and they also tend to be more invested in the relationship (Hendrick, 1998). A couple's level of intimacy satisfaction can reliably predict whether the couple will remain together or separate. Satisfying intimate relationships also are associated with positive benefits for the individual. Individuals who report being satisfied in a relationship tend to be physically healthier (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001) and generally more satisfied with life (House et al., 1988).

Today, internet usage is a growing though unexplored problem among married couples. According to *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM)* January-June 2013 statistic, 22,162 reported divorced with average every three married couples will be divorced in every hour on various factors. Therefore, there is critical need to examine whether the internet usage among married couples as one of the contributing factors. A couple's involvement in internet does not always lead to separation or divorce even when such involvement is a problem for a couple. However, there is a subset of couples who experienced a negative impact of their spouses' involvement in internet. The purpose of this study is to examine any possible impacts internet usage may have on intimate marital relationship. Consequently, this present study addresses two objectives: (1) to investigate the internet usage among Malaysian married men and women and (2) to examine the effect of the internet usage on intimate marital relationship among married men and women.

## Literature review

The internet has become a part of everyday life for most people. The inability to control the internet use meets the criteria for an Internet Addiction (IA). Both China and South Korea

have identified IA as a significant public health threat (Cash et al., 2012). Adding to this, Kraut et al. (1998) found that IA may also affect social participation, integration as well as individual's personal well-being. There are internet users who cannot control the amount time spent interfacing with digital technology, start engaging in a game or having withdrawal symptoms when not getting online. All these symptoms may lead to family relationship conflict, a diminishing social life and adverse work or academic consequences (Beard, 2005).

The internet allows people to stay in connection with their family, friends or extend their social networks, however Nie and Erbring (2000) indicated that people who spend more time on the internet were reported to spend less time with family and friends. This supports the study by Mesch (2006) that the time spend online is positively related to family conflict, particularly when the internet is used for social purpose, for instance chatting with a friend online and playing online games with friends. Moreover, according to Van den Eijnden et al. (2008), huge number of people found it hard to control their time spent online. Internet use with addictive characteristic was one of the symptoms of problematic internet use developed by the users. These symptoms include withdrawal reaction happens when internet use is impossible, lack of control over the internet use (where the users may use the internet although they have the intention to stop or to decrease the use) and cognitive and behavioural anxiety with the internet. For any reason all the internet enticement is present when one were online. Therefore, he or she tends to do something different than what was planned before.

Compared to females, males are almost certainly to use the internet recreationally, to waste time and to play video games (Morahan-Martin, 1998). Similarly, recent studies show that the internet use can be beneficial or compassionate when users keep to the 'normal' levels. However, 'high' levels of internet use which interfere with a person's daily life have been correlated with a range of problems including decreased psychosocial well-being, relationship breakdown and neglect of domestic, academic and work responsibilities (Young, 1998; Weiser, 2001; Beard, 2002; Widyanto & McMurrin, 2004; Yao-Guo et al., 2006). Reis and Shaver (1988) found that support and caring are the basic requirements for maintaining the harmonious and long-lasting relationship in married couple. Adding to these findings, (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Murray, 1999) suggested that people in close relationship need to be certain of the cares showed by their spouses and that they will be approachable across time and different situation. According to Kraut et al. (1998), problematic internet use may cart off the attention, time and interest that users would invest in their spouse, thus decreasing not only the Internet user's relationship quality but also his or her spouse relationship quality as well. This may happen because the spouse feels neglected and not cared for when users choose to be online rather than spending time with him or her.

Research conducted by Stuart (2011) stated that about 6% of respondents indicated that the excessive internet use affect their relationships. While 84% of people aged 19 to 29 thought they would rather do without their spouse than give up the internet access. On top of that, according to American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers in a survey conducted in 2011, one in five failed marriages are demolished by social networking. Meanwhile, a study conducted by Lenhart et al. (2014) identified 10% of married internet users indicate that the internet has had a "major impact" on their relationship, 17% said that it has had a "minor impact" while 72% said the internet has "no real impact at all" on their spouseship. The study also indicated that 74% of the internet users agreed the internet had a positive impact on their marriage while 20% said the impact was mostly negative.

## Methods and study area

This study employed the quantitative research method. The questionnaires were distributed to 300 Malaysian married men and women between the ages of 21 to 56 residing in eight selected districts in Selangor of which all were required to have access to the internet. The districts selected for this survey were Rawang (38 respondents), Sabak Bernam (38 respondents), Cyberjaya (36 respondents), Sepang (38 respondents), Shah Alam (38 respondents), Hulu Langat (38 respondents), Klang (38 respondents), and Kuala Selangor (36 respondents). Respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary and the information they provided would be kept confidential. The questionnaire for this study has been segmented into three main parts in order to achieve the research objectives. Part A focused on respondents' profile where questions were related to demographical profiles such as gender, age, academic qualification, occupation and monthly household income. Part B consisted of two sections; in section A, respondents were asked questions related to their own internet use while in Section B, questions were focused on their spouse's Internet use. In the last section Part C, the respondents were asked about their marital intimacy. The data was collected and analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0.

## Findings

### *Demographic*

From the demographical profiles, out of the 300 respondents 48% were male and 52% were female. Based on these the highest percentage of the married respondents was 41%, aged between 29-33 years old. This is followed by 22% of the respondents of age between 34-38 years old. Seventeen percent of the respondents were from the group age of 21-28 years old, while the least were 10% (aged between 39-43), 6% (aged between 44-48) and 4% of the respondents aged between 50-56.

**Table 1.** Demographic information of sample

Items	Information	Total (N =300)	%
Gender	Male	143	48
	Female	157	52
Age	21-28	53	17
	29-33	122	41
	34-38	66	22
	39-43	30	10
	44-48	18	6
	50-56	11	4
Occupation	Undergraduate	1	.3
	Self-employed	18	6
	Unemployed	3	1
	Public sector	113	38
	Private sector	163	54
	Other	2	.7
Monthly household income	RM3,000 or less	17	6
	RM3,001-RM5000	97	32
	RM5,001-RM10,000	141	47
	RM10,001-RM15,000	32	11

	RM15,001 and above	13	4
Overall financial situation	Very Bad	3	1
	Bad	11	4
	Fair	185	62
	Good	98	32
	Very Good	3	1

In term of occupations, 54% of the respondents were private sector workers, followed by 38% from public sector workers. Six percent were self-employed while 1% was unemployed and undergraduate students and others both were 0.3% and 0.7%. It is noted that 47% of the respondents earned between RM5,001-RM10,000 in their monthly household income, 32% of the respondents earned RM3,001-RM5,000 per month, 11% earned RM10,001-RM15,000, while 6% earned RM3,000 or less and last but not least, 4% of the respondents earned RM15,0001 and above. Based on the monthly household income results, 62% of the respondents stated fair in their overall financial situation, while 32% of them thought their financial situation were good. However, about 4% of the respondents felt that their overall financial situation was bad and 1% of them stated both very bad and very good for their overall financial situation.

### *Internet use and gender*

An analysis was made on the effect of the internet usage among married men and women. Based on Table 2, most male and female gave their views as neutral to the time period used for surfing the internet (41.3% and 51%) respectively. However, there is a high percentage of male respondents who used more time than allotted (34.2%) compared to women (26.1%). The results revealed that 60.9% and 63.6% of male and female respondents did not receive complaint about their time spend to be online. The finding also showed that the respondents were able to limit the time of use of the internet. It also showed that 53.0% and 63.7% of the total male and female respondents never neglected their sleep for the reason of being active online, while 34.3% and 30.6% felt they are neutral. Most of the male and female respondents felt that the establishment of new relationships with online users is something that is not important. Almost half of male and female respondents felt there was no need to establish new relationships with other online users (43.3% and 52.8%). The result revealed that 36.3% and 37.6% of male and female respondents gave a neutral opinion in this case. This is probably due to respect and responsibility towards their spouses. The above findings are supported by another finding of which more than half of the male and female respondents (60.0% and 62.4%) prefer to spend more time with family members and friends rather than to be online.

**Table 2.** The difference in terms of respondents' Internet use between genders

Item	Gender	N	Disagree(n)	Neutral(n)	Agree(n)
Neglect household chores to spend more time online	Male	143	55.3% (79)	30.8% (44)	13.9% (20)
	Female	157	64.3% (101)	26.1% (41)	9.6% (15)
Prefer excitement of the Internet to intimacy with spouse	Male	143	53.9% (78)	35% (50)	11.2% (16)
	Female	157	54.1% (84)	38.2% (60)	7.6% (12)
Become defensive or secretive when anyone asks what to do online	Male	143	45.4% (65)	33.6% (48)	21% (30)
	Female	157	42.1% (66)	36.3% (57)	21.6% (34)

Fear that life without Internet would be boring, empty and joyless	Male	143	44% (63)	35.7% (51)	20.3% (29)
	Female	157	48.4% (76)	34.4% (54)	17.2% (27)
Lose sleep due to late-night log-ins	Male	143	53.8% (77)	34.3% (49)	11.9% (17)
	Female	157	63.7% (100)	30.6% (48)	5.7% (9)
Choose to spend more time online over going out with others	Male	143	60.8% (87)	30.8% (44)	8.4% (12)
	Female	157	62.5% (98)	31.8% (50)	5.7% (9)

### *Marital intimacy and gender*

Based on Table 3, the results showed how internet usage affects the 300 respondents' marital intimacy. It showed that 86.6% of male and female respondents enjoyed being together with spouse and like to do things together, meanwhile only 2.2% did not enjoy being together with their spouse. Majority of the male and female respondents (33.3% and 37.4%) agreed to share each other's feelings and seek for advice if they have any problem (36.7% and 38%). Meanwhile, 21% of them are neutral and only 4.4% refused to share each other's feeling. Besides, 87.4% of male and female respondents agreed to remain faithful to each other compared to 3% disagreed to remain faithful to each other.

On top of that, both of male and female respondents agreed that they could not live without their spouse (27% and 27.9%). However, only 11.6% of the respondents could easily live without each other. Meanwhile, 35.7% of male respondents and 40% of female respondents could not leave their spouse to engage other relationship. The result also indicated that 4.8% would leave their spouse to engage with other relationship when they are too addicted being online.

**Table 3.** Differences in terms of marital intimacy between genders

Item	Gender	N	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Enjoy being together with spouse	Male	143	0.6% (2)	5.3% (16)	41.7% (125)
	Female	157	1.6% (5)	5.7% (17)	44.9% (135)
Remain faithful to each other	Male	143	1.0% (3)	5.0% (15)	41.7% (125)
	Female	157	2.0% (6)	4.7% (14)	45.7% (137)
If have a problem, we ask each other for advice	Male	143	1.4% (4)	9.7% (29)	36.7% (110)
	Female	157	3.0% (9)	11.3% (34)	38.0% (114)
Share each other's feelings	Male	143	1.3% (4)	13% (39)	33.3% (100)
	Female	157	2.0% (6)	13% (39)	37.4% (112)
Could easily live without each other	Male	143	27% (81)	16.0% (48)	4.6% (14)
	Female	157	27.9% (84)	17.3% (52)	7.0% (21)
Completely understand each other	Male	143	1.3% (4)	12.3% (37)	34% (102)
	Female	157	2.3% (7)	13% (39)	37% (111)

### **Discussion**

This study aimed to investigate the effect of internet usage on the intimate marital relationship among married men and women. This study revealed that the internet usage is still under control. According to the findings of this study, males are more likely to go online compared to females, and this supported the study conducted by Morahan-Martin (1998) and Block (2008). Moreover males will spend longer hours online compared to females so they have tendency to be addicted to internet through this opportunity. This may be affected by complacency when dealing with email for matters relating to official business which is

usually done via email as soon as they start surfing the internet. This may affect the time that initially allocated to surf the internet. However, it is believed that the excessive time was not too significant since the finding showed it did not affect their relationship with his/her family.

The purpose of this study is to examine any possible impacts the internet use may have on intimate marital relationships. The results showed that married men or women know how to limit their time spent in using the internet when they do not skip doing their household works. They also prefer to spend their time and find the real excitement with their own spouse. This proved that the enjoyment in using internet is not something that can surpass intimacy in marital relationship. Married men and women prefer to have a real time conversation with their spouse and utilize internet to communicate with their spouse when they are not together in a same place. These scenarios showed that although they enjoy using the internet, they will never neglect their marital relationship. They would remain faithful to each other which lead them to appreciate their spouse and relationship. They trust to each other and this can result to marital satisfaction.

In explaining the obtained results, it can be claimed that, the internet usage never lead to decrease in family communications as its consequence. The internet is a tool that can connect people with each other which will obviate the need of facing others and being in the real world. Therefore, one of the aspects of marital satisfaction, which is the satisfaction of marital relationship, will not necessarily decrease by the internet usage. The respondents also obtained less stress. This situation is contradict with the study conducted by Kevin et al. (2010) which showed that using the internet reduces communication between an individual and his/her family and increases feelings of depression. However, the internet usages maybe firstly affect the career, family and marital life (Stevens, 1996). The internet usage also has negative impacts on individuals such as problems in passing of life and marital relationship, changing the style of life, spending more time on the internet, lack of attention to family members and ignorance of family and friends (Block, 2008). These are among the consequences of the internet usage which can affect the reduction of marital satisfaction (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The result showed that married men and women do not feel that internet usage might change them to become a defensive or secretive person. They use the internet to communicate with the others to obviate the need of facing others and being in the real world. This situation would not interfere their intimacy in marital relationship.

According to Al-Cooper (1998), the internet usage may affect marital intimacy. In contrast, this study showed that the majority of the respondents were still loyal to their spouses. This shows that respondents realize the importance of putting priorities in their marriage. The married men and women agreed to remain faithful to each other to maintain a good intimate marital relationship. Besides, good listening and communication will make it convenient for them to share the feelings and thoughts, and may come up with good mutual understanding. They enjoyed being together and the internet usage would not affect their marital intimacy.

On top of that, the internet usage can adversely affect married men and women to make them divorced (Parker & Wampler, 2003). However, the results showed that they were not highly influenced of the internet usage. Most of the them know the limitations when being online. They felt there is no need to have online relationship. They enjoyed being together with their spouse, and loyal to each other. In short, they are not obsessed with internet. They aware that their internet usage can affect their marriage (Kandell, 1998). The married men and women who were surveyed in this study also agreed that their internet usage is still under control. Although they use the internet in their daily lives, the priority is still given to their marriage.

Intimacy and marital satisfaction were found to be significantly and positively related. This finding is not surprising, considering that the relationship between intimacy and marital

satisfaction has been well documented (Dandeneau & Johnson, 1994; Huston & Chorost, 1994; Hendrick, 1998; Greeff & Malherbe, 2001; Hassebrauck & Fehr, 2002). It was originally predicted that the internet usage would be a negative predictor of marital satisfaction. However, this study found that there is less negative impact on relationship between respondents and their spouses. The difference between respondent usage and perceived spouse usage may be linked to the tendency to attribute behaviour that is problematic in the relationship to the other spouse. The factors such as romantic jealousy may be connected with the respondent's tendency to respond differently when reporting their own internet usage versus the usage of their spouse. Further research is needed to explore whether attributions are related to the perception of a marital intimacy and usage of internet, and if so, which factors might influence these attributions. It was also predicted that the internet usage would negatively predict intimate and relationship satisfaction. This is consistent with previous findings that suggest that intimacy is beneficial to the relationship (Dandeneau & Johnson, 1994; Greeff & Malherbe, 2001; Hassebrauck & Fehr, 2002) and can serve as a barrier against negative forces (Huston & Chorost, 1994).

As a relationship matures, married men and women invest more time into the relationship. As the relationship becomes more important, it is not surprising that individuals would check their spouse's internet usage to ensure and protect their relationship stability. This means as couples get more intimate, they spend less time online. The use of the internet indicates how society is changing by utilizing new technologies to monitor relationships, with the goal to protect it. Due to the obtained results, it can be said that the more married men and women use the internet, the more they are online. The respondents also obtained less stress. This situation is contradicted with the study conducted by Kevin et al. (2000) which showed that using the internet reduces communication between an individual and his/her family and increases feelings of depression.

## **Conclusion**

In a nutshell, the internet usage is a growing though unexplored issue among married men and women in Selangor. Understanding the important to control the internet usage is vital because this may affect the relationship in a marriage. The married men and women in Selangor can still regulate their internet usage and time spent online. Both of them agreed to remain faithful to each other to maintain a good intimate marital satisfaction. Besides, good listening and communication among the married men and women will make it convenient to share the feeling and thoughts, and may come up with a good mutual understanding. Hence this shows that they give priority to their marriage and family. This finding contradicts to Van den Eijnden et al. (2008) where they found that it is difficult for the internet users to control their time spent online. The majority of the married men and women agreed that they will remain faithful to each other which lead them to appreciate their spouse and relationship.

Nevertheless, this study showed there was tendency to be addicted to internet among male users when they spent longer hours online compared to female users. Although the number of divorced couples keeps increasing, the internet usage is not a major contributing factor for this scenario. Financial problem, interference from other family members and health issue may lead to entire failure in a marriage relationship. In short, there is less negative impact on the marital intimacy and the internet usage among Malaysian married men and women in Selangor. The result from this study may offer valuable information about the level of internet usage among married couples in Malaysia that also can be used to serve as a baseline to guide treatment program and assessment in order to help any married couples who are at-risk and who are facing with their spouses' excessive use of internet.



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