

Secure relationship does not mean satisfying relationship during the pandemic: the role of mattering and life satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Relationship satisfaction (RS) is one of the major components of mental health that is often ignored due to cultural reasons. Moreover, numerous studies had indicated that when individuals have insecure attachment styles (insecurity in loving someone else), they would never develop any RS with anyone, including friends, spouses, parents, children, and relatives. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic had triggered different social patterns among individuals all over the world, and studies during the pandemic indicated the significance of some factors such as the sense of mattering and perceived life satisfaction (LS) to the mental health of the general adults. Our references led us to hypothesize that interpersonal mattering (IM) significantly predicted RS, mediated by LS, under the condition of low secure attachment style (SAS). Randomly selected 405 adults from Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, Malaysia, were financially compensated to complete the scales of IM, satisfaction with life, SAS section of measure of attachment style (MOAS), and RS index. The results indicated that the mediation of LS on the link between mattering and RS was only significant when the level of SAS is at the low and moderate levels. Further implications, limitations, and suggestions are discussed.

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1. INTRODUCTION

With the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic outbreak, there was an increase in the importance of identifying factors that can attenuate the potential adverse effects of the current pandemic on the functioning of couples' relationships [1], [2]. This was because pandemic related stressors and restrictions have not only increased relational conflicts [3], but also increased relational instability due to changes in couples' daily routines [4], and even negatively affected marriage intentions of couples [5]. The phenomenon also led to lower subjective well-being, especially with a decrease in relationship satisfaction (RS) [6] and life satisfaction (LS) [7].

This study aimed to explore the factors that would mitigate the potentially harmful effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on couples' well-being, namely RS and LS. A past study reported that LS was more associated with couple's dissimilarity in socioeconomic domains, while RS was more associated with couple's dissimilarity in personality characteristics and values domains [8]. This suggested that LS and RS

are two distinct measures of well-being and would be affected by different factors. Accordingly, LS was reported to be associated with financial satisfaction [9], work-life balance [10], and a sense of coherence amid stress [7]. On the other hand, couples' RS was reported to be associated with communication methods [11], similarities in texting behaviors [12], and ability to deal with stress collaboratively [13].

Having said that, though studies have examined LS and RS separately with different factors, one of the factors studied concerning both LS and RS in romantic relationships is attachment styles. Some studies agreed that secure attachment style (SAS) is a strong positive predictor of LS [14], [15] and RS [16], [17]. However, another study reported no significant relationship between SAS and marital satisfaction but reported that married couples with insecure attachment avoidant and insecure attachment anxious-ambivalent styles had lower marital satisfaction [18]. Moreover, greater attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance have been reported to reduce both LS and RS scores [19].

In the theory of attachment style, Bowlby [20] posited that individual differences in adult attachment styles and emotion control will affect their vulnerability and resilience in the face of life stressors. Besides that, when being in lockdown during the pandemic, a study has reported that preexisting vulnerabilities such as the partners' attachment insecurity will shape the couples' functioning within the relationship and the family environment [21]. That said, empirical study has demonstrated that romantic attachment is prototypical, or stable and has a trait-like factor while having temporary variations [22]. It also served a coregulatory function, whereby couples mutually shape and constrain each other's felt attachment security within the relationship [23]. Consequently, a study reported that after taking into account individuals' attachment security prototype, romantic couples experienced positively correlated changes in partner-specific attachment security across time [24]. In other words, at a given point of time, if one partner experienced an increase in sense of attachment security, the other partner was also likely to experience an increase in attachment security, regardless of their prototypical attachment style.

Kirton [25] further contended that people have the underlying need to form secure attachments as it increases the level of how one mattered to another individual or group. Therefore, couples with attachment insecurity would have higher RS when there is an increase in how they mattered to their partner, such as being respected, receiving care and support from their partner [26]. Thus, as couples experience a variety of changes during the pandemic [1], there might be an alteration in the temporal partner-specific attachment security, due to changes in coregulation of attachment security within couples, which might lead to a change in their sense of mattering, and in turn, affect their LS or RS.

That said, the sense of mattering was reported to be associated with higher RS among couples [27] and high levels of well-being [28]. People with low RS reported more unsolved conflicts which led to a higher risk of suicidal ideation, hopelessness, and depression [29] as well as greater stress levels [30]. They also experienced a lower sense of mattering, such as being phubbed by their partners [31] and perceiving lower levels of gratitude expressions from their partner [32]. It was also reported that women who felt underappreciated had a greater sense of unfairness in the division of house chores and responsibilities [33], while men felt a lower sense of mattering when there were relationship strains [34]. On the contrary, people reported having higher RS during stressful periods when they perceived a higher sense of mattering, such as partner being highly responsive [35], when couples practiced collaborative and supportive coping [36], and having less anxious attachment styles during cell phone conflicts [37].

It was also reported that LS was positively associated with mattering [38]. This is in line with the finding that the decline in LS of married couples during the COVID-19 lockdowns would be mitigated by spending more time with one's spouse, whereas additional time spent alone decreases the LS among singles [39]. In other words, time spent with loved ones would increase a sense of mattering, thus leading to greater LS. Not only that, but a study also reported that as LS increased, people rated romantic partners as more helpful, perceived better relationship quality, and had greater RS [40]. This also established past finding that people with higher LS in general also perceived satisfactory romantic relationships and vice versa [41].

Hence, in this study, we hypothesized that LS mediated the relationship between mattering and RS, yet this mediation is moderated by their attachment security as shown in Figure 1. In other words, we hypothesized the more couples perceive that they matter to their partner, the more satisfied they are with their lives, which in turn, increases their satisfaction within the relationship, and this relationship is strengthened by the couples' attachment security. The motivation behind our study was to explore the role of mattering and attachment security in increasing LS and RS of couples and to highlight how these factors could attenuate potential adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental well-being of any romantic couple.

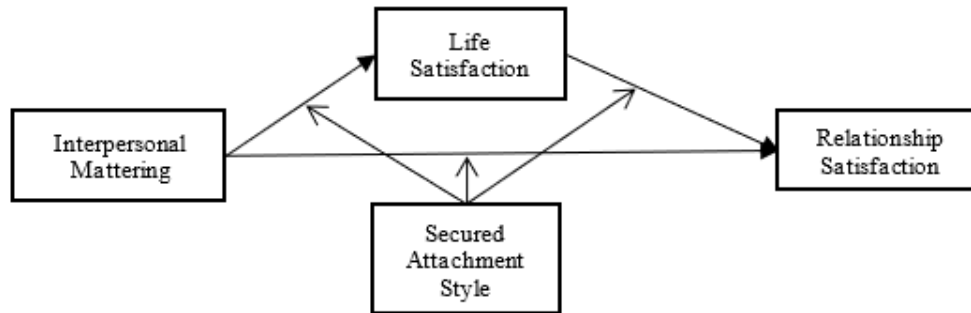


Figure 1. The hypothesized moderated mediation model

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Participants

There were 410 adults between 18-65 years old, who reside in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor states were randomly recruited by using social media (paid Facebook Ads). Based on the table of Krejcie and Morgan [42] a population as large as one million and above can be represented by 384 randomized participants. However, only 405 participants were eventually asked to provide their data, due to the inclusion criteria of having been in relationship for more than six months and in relationship for more than six months in the form of dating, cohabiting, marriage, or the combination of any of the form. Gender and sexual orientations were not questioned due to the inclusion issues, such as their relationship status and other demographic concerns.

2.2. Scales

Relationship satisfaction (RS) was measured by using participant's mean score on the relationship satisfaction scale-short version (RS5), where a higher mean score indicates a higher level of RS [43]. Based on our data, the internal reliability was $\alpha=.85$. SAS were represented by the participant's total score on the SAS subscale of measure of attachment style (MOAS), where a higher total score indicates the dominant attachment pattern[44]. The internal reliability with our data was $\alpha=.92$. LS was assessed by using life satisfaction inventory [45], the internal reliability was $\alpha=.87$. Interpersonal mattering (IM) was measured using the general mattering scale (GMS) [46] with the internal reliability of the scale being $\alpha=.98$. All scales were back-translated between English and Malay, and the participants of this study were given the bilingual version. A panel of expert, as some members of the communities were recruited to confirm the content validity of every scale.

2.3. Procedure

After the ethical clearance was given by our ethics review board, we distributed the link to the online form of our scales to our social network sites, with the request for them to distribute further. All participants gave their consent before getting into the demographic items and scales; once they had responded to all the items, they were given options to include their email address if they would like to be compensated by RM 5 (five Malaysian Ringgit) worth of eWallet vouchers. Three participants did not opt for being compensated.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data was analyzed with bias-free bootstrap analysis with 5,000 samplings and 95% confidence interval in process macro model 59 for moderated mediation. Bootstrapping analysis was chosen due to its robustness, it is able to conduct statistical analysis to data without normal distributions. As shown in Table 1, we analyzed each path of the mediation hypothesis by using the interaction of the moderator with the predictor and the mediator, instead of the pure score of the predictor and the mediator.

Table 1. Path analysis of the interaction of the moderator and the other variables

Interacting predictors	Outcome	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Mattering x secured AS	LS	-.01	.01	-1.13	.26	-.03	.001
LifeSat x secured AS	Relationship ideation	.01	.01	.98	.33	-.01	.02
Mattering x secured AS	RS	-.03	.01	-2.65	.01	-.06	-.01

Table 1 indicates that the moderated path a and path b were not significant. Which means that the interaction between IM and secured attachment style was not a significant predictor of LS. For the moderated path b, it was indicated that the interaction between LS and secured attachment style did not significantly predict the RS. Nevertheless, the moderated path c was significant; in other words, the interaction between IM and secured attachment style significantly predicts RS. The further analysis we did was the testing of the moderated-mediation hypothesis, which is depicted in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2. Conditional direct effect of X on Y

Level of moderator	Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
20.00 (low)	.38	.11	3.52	.00	1.67	.59
25.00 (mod)	.21	.01	2.42	.02	.04	.38
30.00 (high)	.04	.11	.39	.69	-.17	.25

Table 3. Conditional indirect effect of X on Y through M

Levels of moderator	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
20.00 (low)	.03	.06	-.09	.14
25.00 (mod)	.06	.04	-.02	.13
30.00 (high)	.08	.04	.00	.17

As seen in Table 2, IM significantly predicted RS among individuals with low and moderate levels of secured attachment styles, and failed to do so among individuals with high level of secured attachment styles. Table 3 indicates that among individuals with higher levels of secured attachment styles, the LS significantly mediated the effect of IM on RS; furthermore, Table 2 also showed that it did not significantly mediate the link among individuals with low and moderate levels of secured attachment styles because as seen in Table 1, the contribution of IM to RS occurred without going through LS.

It can be concluded that when people have low to moderate SAS, their RS is significantly depending on their levels of IM. On the other hand, people who highly believe that their attachment is secured, their sense of mattering will give them higher LS that eventually improve their RS. Thus, individuals with insecure attachment styles, either avoidant or anxious might still enjoy satisfying relationship if they feel they matter to their significant others.

3.1. Discussion

Our findings suggested that the moderated mediation hypothesis was supported. In other words, LS partially mediated the association between IM and RS, only in the condition of individuals with high SAS, because IM was still a significant predictor of RS among individuals with low and moderate SAS. Our results have shown consistency with past study that reported significant association between IM and RS among couples [27]. This was evident even among couples with attachment insecurity [26] and contrary to some studies which reported that anxious or avoidant attachment style reduces RS among couples [18], [19]. Furthermore, our results suggested that the RS among individuals with low to moderate SAS depended significantly on their levels of IM. This showed that feelings of insecurity in the relationship can be reduced by increasing one's sense of mattering, and thus improving satisfaction in a romantic relationship. Besides that, while attachment styles influence our vulnerability when facing life's stressors [20], couples can also coregulate to positively shape each other's felt attachment security within the relationship [23], [24]. This can be done by increasing positive communication and interaction among couples [31], [32], [35], [36]. Therefore, by making each other feel mattered, couples can still enjoy a satisfying relationship, despite having insecure attachment styles.

LS mediated the relationship between IM and RS only under the condition of high SAS. This confirmed our hypothesis of LS mediating the relationship between IM and RS, but now we discovered that this mediation only applies to individuals with secured attachment style. The feeling of mattering to their loved ones predicts LS among people with high SAS. Moreover, individuals with secured attachment style needs good LS to feel satisfied with their relationship. In other words, both IM and LS are crucial for people with high SAS to feel satisfied with their relationship. This may be because people with a high SAS have a higher tendency in experiencing satisfactory relationship [24] and hence placed great importance in their LS, which focuses on themselves. In this case, people with high SAS need to be satisfied with their life first before feeling satisfied with their relationship, even when they feel mattered. This result added to the findings of Scott *et al.* [41].

3.2. Implications

Our study suggested two important findings. Firstly, that individuals with insecure attachment styles might still have a satisfying relationship if they feel they matter to their significant others. Secondly, that the sense of mattering of individuals with SAS will lead to higher LS and increased RS. These findings added to the literature of romantic relationships on how attachment styles interact IM to play important roles in the well-being of couples, namely a satisfying life and relationship.

The interesting findings on how couples can still have a satisfying relationship despite having insecure attachment styles if they feel that they mattered in the relationship also contributed to the protective factors that could increase the well-being of couples. Especially when facing life's stressors such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, to attenuate the harmful effects of life's stressors on relationship, such as having increased stress and relational conflicts, as well as decreased mental health, couples can learn to help each other feel that they matter to one another, by giving respect, attention, support, care, and love to one another.

Moreover, while LS and RS are two distinct indicators of well-being, our findings suggested that the sense of mattering in individuals with SAS will give them higher LS which in turn improves their RS. As past study suggested that romantic attachment styles have temporary variations [22] and serve a coregulatory function [23] in stressful times, individuals with SAS can mutually shape significant other's felt attachment security, which lead to a mutually more satisfying life, and subsequently mutually improve RS. An improved RS is predicted to lower depressive symptoms for both partners [31], thus leading to an improved mental health.

4. CONCLUSION

We discovered that, when the people were locked down amidst the pandemic, individuals with low level of SAS might still found their relationship satisfying as long as they believe that they matter to their partner, and satisfied with their life at the moment. It can be understood that during the lockdown situation, a life that considered satisfying and the sense that we matter to the loved ones might lead us to be more grateful and ignored the drive to think negatively about our loved ones.

As this study categorized SAS into high, moderate, and low; a result of moderate or low SAS does not necessarily represent other attachment styles. Hence, the findings only apply to people who have a high sense of security in their relationship and people with moderate or low sense of security in their relationship, not other attachment styles. We suggest that in future studies, researchers can seek to expand the literature by exploring the applicability of this proposed model with population of avoidant attachment styles and anxious attachment styles.

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