



# Exploring gender differences and romantic passion in Thai married couples

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## Abstract

Romantic passion, proposed in Sternberg's triangular theory of love, is characterized by arousal, attraction, and desire and plays a pivotal role in marital conjugal adaptation influenced by family roles, personality characteristics and sociocultural norms. This work provides an empirical analysis of gender and attachment processes among Thai husbands and wives, based on emotional socialization, social roles, culture, and post-marital dynamics. Data were obtained from 208 Thai heterosexual married individuals who were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Participants completed an online survey that assessed their levels of romantic passion along with demographic characteristics. Reported gender differences in passion were subsequently examined using the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test. The result indicated that wives reported significantly higher romantic passion compared to husbands ( $Z = -4.296, p < .001$ ). This gender discrepancy might be explained by women being more emotionally expressive or by social standards which stress romantic intensity; however, men might be more affected by cultural expectations of emotional suppression. Gender differences culturally shaped family roles play a significant part in the development of romantic relationships within the Thai context. This factor offers deeper insights into emotional dynamics and marital satisfaction, while also underscoring the importance of promoting relationship practices that enhance emotional well-being in Thai families.

**Keywords:** Romantic passion, Triangular love scale, Gender differences, Married couples

## Introduction

In the beginning of a relationship, passionate love is often strongly intense, fueled by biological mechanisms such as the release of dopamine, which makes couples feel excited and energetic [1]. Passion can be sustained in long-term marriages if partners work to maintain it in their marriage—for example, by engaging in novel and shared activities and committing to ongoing mutual understanding [2]. In addition, research has suggested that doing something new and exciting together can contribute to long-term passion by promoting activation of the reward-related neural circuitry [3–4]. Furthermore, maintaining honest relationships and expressing affection have been associated with higher levels of marital fulfillment and long-term romantic desire [5].

These findings demonstrate that passion is more than just a transient stage of early romantic love; it is a dynamic aspect that can be purposefully nurtured throughout the course of a marriage. Partnership and matrimony are profound affirmations of love that shape social institutions, cultural repertoires, and everyday practices across diverse contexts. Love in

marriage is therefore not merely a personal matter, but a social phenomenon that can be studied accordingly. A well-known framework is Sternberg's triangular theory of love, which identifies three core components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Among them, passion is described as the emotional 'motor' of desire, excitement, and feelings of physical and emotional proximity [6]. The role of passion on marital satisfaction has been well-established especially in the early and middle phase of marriage [7–8]. Moreover, passion is not simply a transient element of romantic involvement, but is something that can be sustained over time through a variety of mechanisms including mutual investment, novelty and emotional responsiveness between partners [1–2]. Cross-cultural literature also suggests that the expression of romantic love within marriage reflects prevailing social values. These values assign certain roles to men and women, impose specific expectations, and facilitate the inter-generational transmission of relationship norms [8–9]. Collectively, these views highlight the centrality of passion in personal well-being and in the lasting social significance of marital relationships. Also, Vallerand's dualistic model of passion has two

distinct orientations: harmonious passion and obsessive passion. Harmonious passion, which is established on love and respect, contributes to marital satisfaction. On the other hand, obsessive passion can jeopardize couples' relationships by fostering conflicts or controlling attitudes [10,27].

Further evidence in subsequent research has also supported that this distinction is empirically valid, as harmonious passion has been positively associated with quality of the relationship, trust, and well-being, whereas obsessive passion has been associated with jealousy, dependence, and dissatisfaction [11,28]. Understanding this dualistic nature of passion is vital for enhancing marital relationships. This is true in cultural contexts where passion is influenced not only by personal feelings but also by cultural expectations regarding gender roles and family obligation [12–14]. In line with this perspective, cross-cultural works indicate that the nature of gender differences in the experience of passion is largely determined by cultural norms and values in that women are commonly encouraged to express emotional intimacy, while men are expected to focus on commitment and responsibility [8, 15]. Therefore, the overall aim of this study was to examine gendered images of passionate love among Thai married couples to provide a better understanding of post-marital relationships that take place in marriage. The following research question was formulated to accomplish the main goal of this study: Do husbands and wives differ in their attitudes toward romantic passion? Furthermore, we hypothesized that husbands have less passion than wives.

### The Passion-Driven Aspect of Love

According to Sternberg's [6] Triangular Theory of Love, passion constitutes one of the three fundamental components of romantic love, together with intimacy and commitment. Passion represents the emotional and motivational drive in romantic relationships, encompassing physical attraction, sexual desire, and emotional arousal. Individuals often experience heightened physiological stimulation and improved emotional states when in proximity to their romantic partners, which may lead to physical intimacy, sexual engagement, and related behaviors [16–17]. From a motivational perspective, passion has shown to exhibit patterns similar to addictive behaviors, potentially involving

neuropsychological and emotional mechanisms akin to those found in addiction [6, 18]. Carswell [19] further posits that passion may arise from multiple sources, including self-expansion, fluctuations in intimacy levels, and limerence—all of which contribute to the intensity and variability of passionate experiences in romantic relationships.

Empirical research has consistently demonstrated that passion plays a significant role in marital relationships. Elevated levels of passion are positively associated with increased relationship satisfaction and deeper emotional intimacy [19–20]. Moreover, passion contributes to the motivation to maintain the relationship, particularly during the early stages of marriage, potentially reducing the risk of dissolution and enhancing relational balance [21–22]. Although love is a universal emotion central to romantic partnerships, the expression and intensity of passion vary across gender and time. Women tend to experience love more deeply and with greater emotional preoccupation, whereas men are more likely to fall in love quickly and exhibit intense passion during the initial phase of the relationship [23–24]. Notably, women's levels of passion often decline significantly within the first one to two years of marriage, while men's levels remain relatively stable. This gender-based dynamic reflects underlying differences shaped by social roles, expectations, and emotional experiences [16, 23–24].

Therefore, variations in the level and expression of passion within marital contexts serve not only as emotional drivers but also as critical mechanisms that foster stability and balance in the relationship between spouses. These differences, particularly across various stages of married life, hold significant implications for understanding the dynamics of romantic love, enhancing relationship satisfaction, and informing strategies to promote long-term relational equilibrium.

### Methods

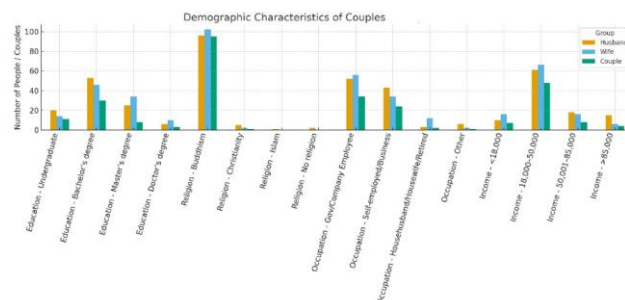
Four jewelry shops in Suriyawong subdistrict, which contains the highest concentration of jewelry shops in inner Bangkok, volunteered to distribute our online questionnaire to their wedding rings purchasers. We specifically targeted couples with direct experience in purchasing wedding rings to ensure the relevance and accuracy of the data in

relation to the research objective. As the precise population size could not be identified, the sample size of this study was determined using Cochran's formula (1953) for an infinite population, with a 95% confidence level or 0.05 margin of error. Consequently, the initial sample size of this study was 382. Snowball sampling technique was subsequently applied to attain our sample size target as close as possible. Ultimately, a total of 104 Thai married couples (208 individual participants) took part in this study. The online questionnaire was structured in two parts: first, demographic information including gender, age, education, religion, occupation, income, marital status, and length of marriage; and second, measures of passion attitude based on Sternberg's Triangular Love Scale (TLS). The latter part consisted of 15 items, using 9-point Likert-type response format.

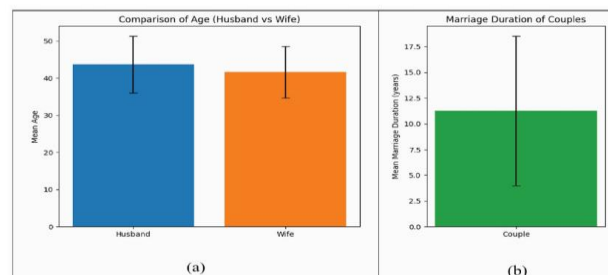
The inclusion criteria for participants were as follows: to begin with, heterosexual couples (male and female) who were either married or cohabiting as husband and wife; in addition, individuals who had purchased or custom-ordered wedding rings from participating jewelry stores; and finally, both partners were required to complete the questionnaire separately to ensure completeness and accuracy of the paired data. Responses missing either partner's input were considered incomplete. Particularly, to minimize mutual influence, husbands and wives completed the TLS separately, while the demographic section could be completed jointly.

## Results

Data were collected via an online survey between December 2023 and February 2024. The results revealed that among the sample of 208 Thai heterosexual individuals, 71.2% were legally married, while 28.8% were cohabiting with a partner without legal ties. Figure 2 presents the length of time the couples had been together ranging from less than one year to as long as 24 years. Participants' ages ranged from 24 to 65 years (Figure 2). Among the couples, 28.8% both held a bachelor's degree, and 91.3% shared the same religious affiliation of Buddhism. Regarding monthly income, 45.2% of couples earned a similar amount (between 18,000 and 50,000 THB), as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Demographic characteristics of the Couple respondents



**Figure 2.** Average Response Rates and SD by Age Group (a) and Mean with SD of Response Rates by Marital Duration (b).

In accordance with the main research question—Do husbands and wives differ in their attitudes toward romantic passion?—inferential statistical analyses were conducted to examine these gender-based disparities. However, the normality test revealed that the data were not normally distributed. Consequently, the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, a statistical method that is non-parametric and suitable for comparing the responses of two related groups) was used to test the responses of husbands and wives in the dimension of passion of romantic love.

We also found evidence of high internal consistency for the passion scale, with a Cronbach's alpha of .989. Husbands reported significantly

higher levels of romantic passion than their wives,  $Z = -4.30, p < .001$  (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Wilcoxon signed rank test results for passion dimension

Group	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Z	P	R
PW	48.89	3178.00			
PH	38.77	1008.00	-4.296	<.001	-.42

Note: PW = Passion scores for wives; PH = Passion scores for husbands.

## Discussion

The result revealed a statistically significant relationship between married couples and the level of passion, which lends support to the theory that evolutionary and personality perspectives, including Sexual Strategies Theory, suggest that men adapt their romantic behaviors to contextual opportunities [25]. Evolutionary and personality perspectives suggest that men's romantic behavior is externally focused and context-dependent, reflecting adaptive responses to relational opportunities [25–26]. Male passion, particularly mania, is less stable and more context-dependent than female passion, aligning with evidence that men sometimes rate partners higher in obsessive love, with mania and ludus varying across cultures [28]. However, women may experience or show romantic passion more profoundly in marriage relationships. Gender differences in emotional expression are well recognized in psychological research. These variations can affect how partners communicate their feelings and demand, lowering their level of marital satisfaction. Recognizing these dynamics is critical for developing good emotional relationships in marriage. For example, women tend to recognize and express emotions more readily than men and may demonstrate greater sensitivity when confronted with emotionally salient stimuli [29–31]. This increased emotional response may account for the higher passion levels found among female individuals [32–33]. According to Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love [6], passion, like closeness and commitment, is one of the three basic components of romantic love. Passion includes physical attraction, emotional thrill, and desire, all of which are influenced by gender-specific societal norms and expectations [33]. Validated the Triangular Theory of Love Scale in the South African context, confirming that love comprises three core dimensions: intimacy, passion, and commitment, with the scale demonstrating strong psychometric properties. Beyond this universal structure, however, research indicates that the expression of romantic love—particularly high levels of passion and specific love styles—can vary by gender in how individuals perceive their partners. Overall, gender differences in beliefs about love are culturally shaped and dynamic over time [34–35]. These results indicate that gender disparities in passion are not universal; rather, they are shaped by cultural norms, relationship dynamics, and psychological factors. This emphasizes the

significance of examining passion within specific socio-cultural contexts, such as Thailand, to achieve a deeper insight into how love evolves in relation to marital status across different cultural settings.

## Conclusion

This study contributes to the expanding body of knowledge regarding gender emotional dynamics in romantic passion relationships. The findings underline the need to recognize gender-specific variations in expressing feelings, particularly in Thai marital relationships shaped by gender differences, family roles, and cultural constraints. Prior research has demonstrated that cultural expectations in collectivist countries frequently support gender-based standards of emotion expression, with women socialized to demonstrate emotional intimacy and men instructed to place emphasis on restraint and accountability [9]. Similarly, it showed that efficient emotion regulation—specifically, the ability to lower negative emotions during conflict—was linked to higher marital satisfaction, both concurrently and longitudinally [36]. Moreover, mindfulness and positive communication have been identified as protective strategies that buffer against conflict and sustain long-term passion [36–37]. These findings underscore the importance of integrating culturally sensitive emotion regulation strategies into relationship support frameworks to enhance long-term relational health. Future research is encouraged to examine how emotion regulation strategies mediate the relationship between gender and romantic passion. A deeper understanding of these mechanisms may inform family-centered interventions that promote emotional literacy, relational harmony, and psychological well-being—particularly during transitional life stages.

## Availability of data and materials

Data analyzed during this study are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with participants but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Author contributions

NP: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. AB:



Conceptualization, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Supervision, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing, Project Administration, Resources.

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## Ethics statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Ethics Committee of King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang (Approval Number: EC-KMITL\_67\_015; Date: 6 December 2023).

## Generative AI statement

The authors declare that generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. Solely for the purpose of refining language expression, and all content remains the original work of the authors, who take full responsibility for its accuracy.

## Competing interests

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Consent for publication

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. All authors consent to the publication of this manuscript.

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