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(IJEPC)**[www.ijepr.com](http://www.ijepr.com)**THE CONCEPTS OF VIRTUAL COUPLES GROUP  
INTERVENTIONS (VCGi) MODULE TO IMPROVE MARITAL  
QUALITY AMONG MARRIED COUPLE**Maziah Mohamed Nasir<sup>1</sup>, Noor Azniza Ishak<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> School Of Applied Psychology, Social Work & Policy, Universiti Utara Malaysia  
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**DOI:** 10.35631/IJEPC.955067.This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)**Abstract:**

This article presents Virtual Couples Group Interventions (VCGi), which provides knowledge and skill to improve the marital quality among married couples. Virtual couple group intervention can be used as an alternative in delivering counselling services to clients in need. Through this intervention, participants are exposed to improve communication skill, adjustment and intimacy in each session. The content of this intervention has focus on the dimensions of marital quality such as adjustment, communication and adjustment. This module consists six components that focus on marital quality, adjustment, communication, intimacy, conflict management, and restructuring the family or roles. The implementation of this intervention is through a virtual approach that may be applied in counseling sessions, marriage strengthening workshops, guidance groups and marriage educations to couple.

**Keywords:**

Virtual Couple Group Intervention, VCGi, Marital Quality

**Introduction**

An exploration of research highlights and report results shows that there are various interventions and methods that have been used to enriched the marital relationship skills, reduce conflict, and improving marital satisfaction (Hawkins, Markman, Kling, & Stanley,

2003). One form of intervention that can be implemented is a virtual group guidance for couples to improve the quality of marriage. The implementation of group guidance to married couples is one of the branches of marriage group counseling that is proven to be effective in helping couples as stated by Sells et al., (2002) that marriage group counseling is effective in dealing with issues of communication, conflict, forgiveness, and reconciliation of married couples.

Nevertheless, the group guidance approach to couples is less discussed as an approach that can help couples improve the marital quality (Berg et al., 2017). In fact, the implementation of programs for the strengthening of marriage before also did not give a specific focus to the group guidance approach in pairs (Gladding, 1995). The marriage group counseling process help to improve understanding, forgiveness and acceptance among the couple. If marriage group counseling is further detailed, there are three types of groups that underlie it, namely counseling groups, therapy groups and group guidance which can be clearly shown difference each other even if there is overlap. The group guidance approach for the couple is involve virtual experiences that focus on learning, training and skill and it is different from group counseling which contribute social experience related to the development and attitude of individuals in a safe environment.

The *VCGi* intervention is highlights the virtual approach in the implementation of this group guidance for the married couple in line with the development of science, technologies and this borderless world. Rampling et al., (2012) defined the virtual or virtual world as an online simulation environment that gives users the exploration opportunity in interaction with an unlimited place and locations. The need for virtual intervention is not something new, in fact the concept of implementing help services such as online counseling has been accepted over the past two decades (Cohen & Kerr, 1998).

The development of virtual counseling services has existed for a long time and it started with the use of computers in counseling services in the early 1960s. The evolution of virtual counseling services can be seen through the existence of terms such as computer-assisted counseling, e-counseling, video-conference, web counseling, cyber counseling, therapy, and so on in line with the improvement of information technology efficiency. There are various studies conducted to see the effectiveness of e-counseling and the entire study focuses on comparison with face-to-face counseling methods (Zainudin & Lee, 2020).

Reynolds, et.,al (2006) conducted a study to see the effect of client-counselor relationship in face-to-face and virtual methods (e-counseling) and the results of the study show that e-counseling services provide the same impact as face-to-face counseling. Leibert et al. (2006) in his study showed that clients who follow online mental health counseling show a sense of client self-satisfaction. Clients report that it is easier to disclose with a mental health counselor than with a face-to-face counselor, especially during the initial stages of counseling.

Situmorang, (2020), found evidence that the use of online counseling during the COVID-19 outbreak helped in solving psychological problems. However, researchers do not deny that this virtual approach has some limitations. According to him, the development of information and communication technology gives advantages for the implementation of counseling online. This gives an advantage to the individual.

There are also several studies proving that psychiatric services implemented through virtual also help clients in improving their ability to heal because the approach reduces the patient's shame. There are also studies related to telemedicine services which are online services that are more convenient, cost effective and effective and show positive results (Rosic et al., 2022). A study by Joshi et al., (2021) was carried out virtually to see the effectiveness of implementing psychoeducational groups for facilitators. This study commented on the interactive approach and cultural fit affecting participants' adaptation to virtual methods. The findings of this study prove that the virtual approach helps in conveying the objectives of the intervention even if it is not implemented face-to-face.

This point is supported by Benson et al., (2018) who is integrated the Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy Approach, in this virtual program. The effectiveness of this program is empirically supported to build intimacy between couples through empathy and acceptance of each other's differences. This finding proves that the virtual approach is as effective as face-to-face counseling and even the findings of the study also prove that the client-counselor relationship is higher in virtual services.

The main challenge in implementing this virtual counseling or intervention is to ensure that the process runs smoothly without any online interruption and this definitely requires a stable internet facility. Nevertheless, statistics show that in 2019, 84.2 percent of internet usage was compared to 81.2 percent in 2018. In addition, statistics also show that 98.2 percent of households own mobile phones and that 70 percent of individuals in Malaysia use information technology, including internet use, computer or mobile phone in daily life. (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018). This explains that this virtual approach such as VCGi is suitable to be implemented in the local context in line with the current development of the Malaysian people have mobile phones and internet facilities.

The need for virtual intervention can be used as an alternative approach in helping clients without making the distance a barrier. The effectiveness of the face-to-face approach undoubtedly affects individuals, however, some individuals prefer virtual relationships, especially individuals who do not like to socialize and are introverts. This is consistent with what Fenichel et al., (2002) said that a virtual approach is suitable for individuals who struggle to form personal relationships. Therefore, the implementation of this virtual intervention can be used as a guide in virtual implementation because this approach requires a clear mechanism about the virtual setting so that it can be used as a reference for researchers in the future.

In fact, internet-based interventions have been used before in several forms and the development of technology and a borderless world make this kind of virtual approach increasingly gaining attention worldwide in various fields including counseling services. Nevertheless, based on the highlights of past studies, there are still questions about the effectiveness and ethics related to online practices. According to Ross, (2011), issues related to effectiveness and ethics in the use of virtual approaches in counseling services have long been discussed.

However, American Counseling Association, (2000), has outlined some recommendations for the implementation of this virtual approach to protect clients, especially in relation to informed consent, and confidentiality throughout the implementation of such interventions (Ross, 2011). This explains that the implementation of this virtual approach can be implemented by

counseling practitioners by complying with the ethics that have been outlined without affecting the client. . Some experts think that the virtual approach has shortcomings and cannot replace the face-to-face approach. However, we cannot deny that this virtual method can be used as an alternative approach for individuals who prefer virtual session (Rosic et al., 2022).

### **The Development of Virtual Couples Group Interventions (VCGi)**

The *VCGi* is a couple group virtual intervention that aims to improve the quality of marriage among couple. Focus interventions in this study is provide group guidance by systematic planned meetings for the purpose of sharing ideas, views and experiences among the group by virtual setting. The implementation of virtual approach is appropriate with the rapid development of current technology, which is human connections not only by face-to-face but also virtually.

This module invites clients to recognize their potential, build their strengths and improve their weaknesses in living a challenging life in the household world. In other words, it helps clients to improve themselves in a positive direction, learn how to sharing knowledge and skills to deal with emotional stress from the challenges of married life. This module also emphasizes the aspect of putting oneself firstly including physical and emotional health in order to be able to carry out responsibilities in the household well and ultimately create a happy and harmonious household.

Besides, the *VCGi* is an intervention that not only covers the external aspects of clients but also improves the quality of the relationship between husband and wife. This module is also a comprehensive approach to personality formation to forming a good adaptation for the client's marital's life. The *VCGi* provided to couples facing issues in the marriage and the goal of group intervention for married couples is to improve communication dysfunction, train problem-solving skills and ensure the success of marital relationships especially to the newlywed couple.

### **Content Validity Of VCGi**

The content validity of *VCGi*, are proposed by Russell (1974). Briefly, content validity evaluation is the abilities of the intervention set up the target population, the effectiveness of the implementation method, the time allocated, the ability to improve performance and the ability of the module to make a positive changing. This process is to determine the validity and content level of this module. The module's content validity is determined by calculate the total score that given by the experts, divided by the total score and then multiplied by 100 to get the percentage. The chosen experts are individuals who are qualified in the field of counseling

In this process, the experts involved provided some insights related to this *VCGi* intervention. One of the experts suggested that the mental health aspect be emphasized since many household issues that link with mental health problems. According to this suggestion, improvements from the aspect of emphasizing mental health is made. There are also experts stating that the *VCGi* module that was built is suitable to be implemented virtually for newly couple and suitable with the context of marriage in Malaysia. To see the appropriateness of the session, the table below show, the level of appropriateness of the activities carried out in the module according to experts' views. The *VCGi* intervention show that has the content validity coefficient of .88.4 which means has a good content validity base on the evaluation by the panel of experts.

**Table 1: Content Validity**

No	Items	Content validity Coefficient
1.	The contents of <i>VCGi</i> fulfills the target population,	.96
2.	The contents of <i>VCGi</i> can be properly implemented	.80
3.	The contents of <i>VCGi</i> is in accordance with the time allocated	.90
4.	The contents of <i>VCGi</i> can help spouses achieve the objective to marriage quality	.86
5.	The content of <i>VCGi</i> fulfill the virtual group guidance concepts overall content validity	.90

**Detail of the Virtual Couple Group Intervention.**

The *VCGi* was conducted by professional counselors as fasilitators and observation is also by professional counselors. The *VCGi* aims to improve the quality of married couples' marriages through the interaction of couples in group guidance activities. According to Antoine et al., (2020).the goal of group intervention for married couples is to improve communication dysfunction, train problem-solving skills and ensure the success of the marital relationship. Therefore, the implementation of this intervention involves eight sessions by the virtual couple group approach to the participants.

The main concept of *VCGi* based on Adlerian therapy is a holistic approach in marriage intervention, that helps increase the social interest, striving for excellence, and improving the lifestyle optimistically among clients. In *VCGi*, couples are guided to see how to achieve 'superiority' in marriage in the context of looking at the quality of marriage as a whole, such as, understanding the couple, identifying feelings of love and affection and the satisfaction they feel as well as self-disclosure that includes how couples interact, communicate, love, feel satisfaction in relationships, dealing with conflicts and so on. The summarization of *VCGi* is shown in table 2.

**Table 2: Content of VCGi Intervention**

Content of <i>VCGi</i> Intervention	
1	Focus on knowledge about what is the marital quality generally. Besides, setting goals for better health (physical & mental) and link to the quality of marriage
2	Adjustment to differences.Focus on the strengths and weaknesses of couple and partner. Learn how to support each other and how to get to know each other better.
3	Making adjustment by understanding the difference of personality and the way of thinking among couple and partners.
4	Creating cooperation in the relationship of husband and wife. The client realizes that a great couple is a couple that always talks and cooperates in the relationship
5	Create an attitude of mutual understanding with each other. The couple understand how self-disclosure, partner feedback, and togetherness create strong relationships.
6	Communication skill. Identify effective forms of 2-way communication. Practicing
7	effective communication methods with partners and people around
8	Intimacy:Explains the power of showing love and respect between couples.
9	Identify healthy conflict management skills to maintain a marriage



### Structure of Group Design

The *VCGi* involves eight (8) meetings with the duration of each meeting being 90 minutes. This intervention lasted for 8 weeks where only one session was conducted per week. This intervention can involve 20 couples and the implementation of the session is a virtual meeting decided through the Cisco WebEx application. Participants and counselors use smartphones, PCs, laptops, notebooks, and tablet PCs by providing internet facilities during the intervention. Overall, there are several participant selection criteria. The criteria are: i) The couple (husband and wife) who live together, ii) Having device facilities and fast internet and iii) voluntary participate and willing to make improvement in relationships.

### The Credibility of the Facilitators

Facilitators who can carry out this intervention are registered counselors and have undergone the TOT (training of trainers) session management. This training is to ensure the functionality and uniformity of the facilitator when handling online or virtual sessions.

### The Basic Structure Of Sessions

Each session is recommended to be conducted by two facilitators to ensure the smoothness of the activities carried out. The main facilitator has to handle the activities in each session, while the co-facilitator helps in the management of content that needs to be shared such as video, audio, chat and so on. The suggestion of using the same main facilitator is to ensure smoothness until the end of the session, while the co-facilitator can be changed depending on their expertise in each session.

All sessions have the same implementation structure involving group rules, ice breaking sessions, learning discussions, training and participant reflection. The Presentation of material and content is using the power point presentation. Each set ends with suggested homework activities. Participant consent is a priority in conducting this virtual intervention including video recording during the implementation of the activity. Participants also need to be reminded of complete confidentiality in the implementation of this activity.

### The Interventions

**Table 3: The Components And Activities**

session	The components and activities
<b>Pre session</b>	Pre Session/Introduction/Ice breaking <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>This session provide information, and preparation for members of the group understand the need to obedient in this intervention very well</li><li>Emphasis on informed consent</li><li>The outline of the group's goals, then providing information, making a rappo between members, introducing the consultant, and explaining the process of meetings. It is also the process to make members understand the principles of confidentiality, and participation of members.</li><li>Build the group rules</li></ol>
<b>Session 1</b>	Introduction the Marital Quality <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>Explanation about the marital quality</li></ol>

- ii. Explore the strengths and weaknesses of the couple. Learn how to improve the quality in marriage relationship. Besides, setting goals for better health (physical & mental) then realize the importance of taking care of one's health including physical, emotional health and relate to quality marital relationship

**Session 2**

## Adjustment to differences

- i. Masculine Vs Feminin /Scoring  
Exploring the differences between oneself and the partner as a strength in the marriage relationship
- ii. *Hyde, Jekyll & Me* activity  
Discussing aspects of how to make adaptation with partner through awareness to understand the differences between couple and partner as a strength in a marriage relationship
- iii. *Love maps*: Understanding how self-disclosure, partner feedback and togetherness create a strong relationship and learn how to show support partner.

**Session 3**

## Communication Skills

- i. Communication Pattern Questionnaire (Christensen & Heavey's original (1990)
- ii. *Listen and Listen* exercise: Identify effective forms of 2-way communication and practice effective ways of communicating with your partner and people around.
- iii. *I feel you* activity: Examining, and recognition the challenge with life assignments, personality, and priorities,

**Session 4**

## Intimate

- i. What is intimate?
- ii. *My heart singing* activity: understanding the power of showing love and respect between couples, identify the best way to show love and respect to your partner and know what the partner's wants and needs.
- iii. *Pssstt..i love you* activity: understanding how to practice love and respect in relationships, identify how self-esteem is related to partner relationships and learn how to convey love/intimate and appreciation in a relationship

**Session 5**

## Conflict Management

- i. *Its OK not to be OK* activity: Identify healthy conflict management skills to maintain a marriage, identify unhealthy interactions between couples, and learn how to manage conflict in a healthy way.
- ii. Emotion management: Encouraging self-knowledge and insight about self emotion and partner emotion,
- iii. reassessing of life's goals in order to reinforce social interest.

**Session 6****Rstructuring the Family and Roles**

- i. *Friendship with love* activity: Focus on relationship values which are trusting each other, supporting each other, influencing, practices in relationships and goals and marital quality
- ii. *The three house* activity: Identify unhealthy interactions between couples.
- iii. Roles: Identify the responsibilities and roles between the couple and carry them out as best as possible.

**Summarize and Discussion**

- i. Summarizing the the whole session (include the previous sessions) and reorientation to provide the insights and reviewing the session before.
- ii. Identify important roles, responsibilities, life tasks, purposefulness and goal orientation to gather marital quality.

**Session 7**

The *VCGi* stages and processes are integrated with Adler's approach to assist couples in making changes in their lives. Korey (2016) explains that Adler's approach can help treatment groups in increasing awareness in achieving life objectives and goals. The focus on adjustment and relationship skills such as communication and conflict resolution, mental health and emotional well-being in this intervention helps couples to reflect on relationships and at the same time improve the level of marital quality.

The *VCGi* also aims to help couples recognize the strengths and weaknesses of themselves and their partners and complement each other. This helps improve the ability to adapt and accept new situations in marriage, especially newly married couples. Adaptation in marriage is a natural process that allows married individuals change to adapt to their partner. In this process of adaptation and change, individuals also do assimilation by indirectly changing their partner's behavior to adapt together.

Adaptation is not an easy thing because it involves changing thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors that require time and the involvement of both partners. So, this intervention focuses on the individual's acceptance of new things encountered in marriage to help them adapt because the situation in marriage is different from reality. By exploring the differences between self and partner in this intervention, it teaches couples how to strengthen relationships in married life. What is important is to support the partner how to communicate effectively with the partner. Additionally, understanding how self-disclosure, partner feedback and togetherness create strong relationships and learning how to show a partner support,

In addition, the concept of intimacy is also emphasized in this intervention by teaching couples how to show love and respect to their partners. *VCGi* helps couples identify the best ways to show love and respect to their partner and to know their partner's wants and needs. Additionally, it helps couples understand how to practice love and respect in a relationship, identify ways to increase self-esteem and learn how to communicate love and appreciation in a relationship.



In addition, VCGi also helps couples in healthy conflict management to maintain marriage, identify unhealthy interactions between couples and learn how to manage conflict in a healthy way. By learning how to manage conflict, couples can reduce negative behavior between partners and this improves intimacy and the quality of their marriage. Couples who participate in this program learn to identify negative emotions that bind themselves in an effort to be the best in the family. It also helps couples identify strengths and realize that happiness is more important than perfection in addition to learning how to manage conflict in a healthy way.

### Indicators of Effectiveness

In determining the effectiveness of an online intervention session, what needs to be emphasized is the readiness of the facilitator and also the readiness of the participants from the aspect of tools (devices) and also mental. The willingness of the participants will ensure their comfort in following the online session. In addition, ensuring that participants feel safe and connected to each other is important in the implementation of this virtual intervention. The counselor's ability to be flexible with the participant's situation can also be decisive for the effectiveness of online sessions. Among them in the participation of participants through video participation is encouraged although not mandatory. Facilitators need to give space and options to the participants according to their readiness in the video, however, what is emphasized is the feedback of the participants through the chat room (chat) and also with the activities through the included link.

### Limitation

The main challenge in conducting online interventions is related to the group process that involves the presence of participants in each session. The challenge is to ensure that each participant or partner together participates in each session consistently. According to Colon & Friedman, (2003), Constraints from the aspect of time differences between participants can create challenges to ensure that participants follow all the activities that have been planned. Therefore, an alternative to providing training/homework to participant who are not present is necessary.

Challenges faced in conducting sessions online are also related to technical issues, especially inconsistent internet connections and devices. This is consistent with the statement of Joshi et al., (2021) that poor internet network and device problems affect the course of group activities. In addition, figures such as Leibert et al. (2006) emphasize that counseling relationships traditionally involve nonverbal behavior. Alleman (2002) previously explained that the implementation of a virtual or online counseling relationship limits the practitioner to see the non-verbal signals of the participants compared to face-to-face. This shows that the challenge for the facilitator is to see non-verbal behavior such as facial expressions, sitting style and the body language and this is useful in helping the counselor to better understand the client. (Rampling et al., 2012). However, according to Zainudin & Lee, (2020), various methods and alternatives that can be taken in dealing with this issue include as suggested by Murphy et al. (1998) is the use of icons or emojis that describe certain observations.

Informed consent is an ethical challenge in this virtual operation (Ross, 2011). According to Corey, (2013), confidentiality involves a relationship of trust between the client and the counselor. Therefore, informed consent needs to be implemented at the beginning of the session which requires notification related to confidentiality, technology limitations, guarantees of confidentiality and privacy, emergency procedures and so on.

## Conclusion

This article explains how to implement group guidance through a virtual approach as one of the alternatives or options for practitioners in the implementation of interventions that can help improve the quality of a couple's marriage. The selection of participants to be involved online and the practitioner's ability to handle virtual groups is important in determining the success of this intervention. Adaptation of the group process needs to be implemented flexibly according to the type of group in addition to applying interactive elements in this online presentation.

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