

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Marital Wellbeing Indicators amongst Malay Muslim Couple in Malaysia: A Preliminary Study

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** There is a significant increase in the number of divorce cases among Malay Muslim couples over the past years which serves as a strong signal for the government to take initiatives to understand the current situation. A plethora of literature can be found on marriage satisfaction and the quality of the relationship within marriages. However, exploration on contributing factors to long lasting marriages amongst the Malay Muslim community are lacking. This paper aims to share the initial findings in an effort to explore of the strength of relationship in a lasting marriage amongst Malay Muslim couples in Malaysia. **Methods:** This paper adopted a quantitative approach utilizing the Eternal Love Instrument (c) 2016 which consisted of 171 items, distributed to 350 respondents based on simple random sampling technique. **Results:** The findings indicated that there are three main considerations in selecting a spouse which were (1) Religion (95.2%); (2) Character (responsible) (96.1%); well mannered (95.8%); and (3) Race (79.3%). Age, looks and type of jobs were the least considered factors amongst the respondents surveyed. The respondents perceived that the strongest element in their relationship was communication (69.6%), followed by tolerance (62.6%) and responsible towards family wellbeing (56.4%). **Conclusion:** The initial survey has indicated that a lasting marriage is a consequence of having a responsible partner with good religious background. Also, from all these five constructs, these respondents considered their spouses to be highly responsible.

**Keywords:** Marriage wellbeing, marriage counselling, love, lasting marriage

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## INTRODUCTION

For many people, marriage is the most intimate and enduring of all close relationships. Research on long-term marriage (1,2), lasting marriage (3); enduring marriage (4); described marriage as a very important bond between a husband and a wife, they need to work very hard in order to sustain their marriage. Malaysia has recently seen a significant increase in the rate of divorces among Malay Muslim couples which is a worrying trend. According to the recently revealed statistics by the Malaysian Syariah court, they were 20,916 divorce cases reported in 2004, 59,712 divorce cases in 2014, 63,363 divorce cases in 2015 and 48,077 divorce cases as of 10 July 2016. In recent years, the pattern of marriage and divorce has dramatically changed in various parts of Asia (5).

There are a range of factors that contribute to divorce rates such as financial issues, communication, misunderstanding, lack of intimacy, care, love, affection and others. There are ten factors that contribute to a successful long-term marriage which are lifetime commitment to marriage, loyalty to spouse, strong moral values, respect for spouse as a best friend, commitment to sexual fidelity, desire to be a good parent, faith in God and spiritual commitment, desire to please and support spouse, good companionship and willingness to forgive and be forgiven (6). Besides that, love, religion, spirituality and intimacy have also been said to be elements of a successful long-term marriage (7-10).

Hoesni (2012) in his study revealed that the Malay Muslims residing in the city believe that the concept of love in a marital relationship concentrates on the context of trust and traditional values in a relationship. Additionally, married individuals reported to be less stressed than single individuals (11). Studies have revealed that couples who view love within a marriage requires commitment ideals such as patience, tolerance, being able to compromise, these ideals are especially

important among couples facing difficulties while obtaining peace from God (12).

Another study suggested that the dimensions of religious experience and attendance has the greatest impact on the stability of marriage (13). Additionally, stability is positively related to frequency of attendance, the difference between spouses in church attendance increase the risk of dissolution. Furthermore, couples in long lasting marriages reported that prayer, worship services, sermons and religious rituals provided sacred meanings to their marriage and contributed to marriage longevity (14).

Numerous efforts have been taken by various sources including relevant government authorities especially in the form of offering pre-marital courses which has become compulsory for all Malay Muslim couples to attend a year before their marriage. Marriage counselling is also offered by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development of Malaysia for all couples regardless of religion who are at the brink of divorce. As the practice of marriage counselling is spreading across the country, it is essential for counsellors and psychologists to be aware of the current marital patterns and expand the knowledge beyond borders. Some of the most common marital problems among couples are sex, money, children and jealousy (15). In terms of differences in gender on factors contributing to marriage longevity, another prominent research revealed that men are concerned with the content of their marital relationship rather than their general wellbeing, while women are concerned with both the content and general well-being (16).

At the present time, most Malaysian couples file for divorce during their first year of marriage or within the first five years of marriage (17). The first few years of marriage is a critical period as they need to adjust to the new and unfamiliar setting of a family unit which is when tempers start to flare and resentment kicks in. Divorce among young couples are usually due to external aspects that exert pressure on the marriage especially if the couple does not have strong moral values or religious upbringing (18).

Marital satisfaction is predicted by the person's mental health level (19). While some marriages are torn up by stresses, other marriages appear resilient and couples come out of the hardships stronger. As such, the objective of this study is to identify the main factors that influence in selecting a potential spouse, the strength of relationship in a long-lasting marriage among Malay Muslim couples in Malaysia and compare it with respect to their gender.

### Research question

This study is guided by two research questions. The researcher attempts to collect data with the intention of

answering the following questions:

- a. What are the main factors that influence the choice of selecting a potential spouse?
- b. What is the strength of relationship in a lasting marriage amongst Malay Muslim couples in Malaysia and compare it with respect to gender?

### METHODOLOGY

The current study employed a valid and reliable instrument, Eternal Love Instrument (ELI) for the data collection. It is a measure to assess the strength of a long-lasting marriage. Simple random sampling design was employed in this research. 360 participants who identified themselves as Malay married individuals between the ages of 21 to 66 years old were included in this study. Respondents consisted of male (34%) and female (66%) currently residing all over Malaysia, who have been married for more than 2 months up to 35 years. The minimal academic qualification of the respondents was Malaysian Certificate of Education, and their monthly household income ranged from RM1,000 to RM 15,000. The respondents have a range of having 1 to 7 children.

The questionnaire was developed based on the 2RTC Model developed by Mahdzir & Mohd Noor (2016) to assess the perceived strength of the marital relationship. Rasch Model analysis was conducted using Winsteps 4.0.1 software to assess the overall fit of the model.

In stage 1, a pool of items was developed and assessed by five experts in the areas of marriage counselling and instrument validation. In stage 2, Rasch Model analysis was performed with data collected from Malay Muslim married couples in Malaysia which resulted in a 5 construct 171-item version of the instrument. In stage 3, Rasch Model analysis was again conducted with a sample of Muslim Malay married couples (N=360).

In order to examine the strength of lasting marriages, the 171-item measure was completed by a sample of 350 Malay Muslim married couples in Malaysia. The 171 items were administered to the samples and rated using a 6-point Likert scale to indicate how much each statement was reflective of their views on the current state of their marriage. The Eternal Love Instrument (c) 2016 is a psychometrically valid and reliable instrument which consists of 171 items that are divided into 5 constructs which are (1) Trust; (2) Respect; (3) Responsibility; (4) Tolerance; (5) Communication. Based on these data, the validity and reliability of the scale were evaluated.

### RESULTS

The Malay Muslim community has a unique view relating to the choice of a partner. The belief of the importance of these choices is heavily influenced by the religious factors. Past researches have also supported this view

suggesting that lack of religious values is a contributing factor towards divorce (22).

It is interesting to note that the two most important criteria that were pursued by the respondents in the choice of a partner was responsibility (80.6%), as well as the strength of religious commitment and piety (80.4%) that is portrayed by the potential partner. Then, it was followed by race (58.95%), financial stability (59.8%) and respectable family status (58.8%). The least important aspects considered by the participants were physical appearance and beauty (53.2%) and age (52.1%). Table 1 displays the results of the factors of selecting a spouse.

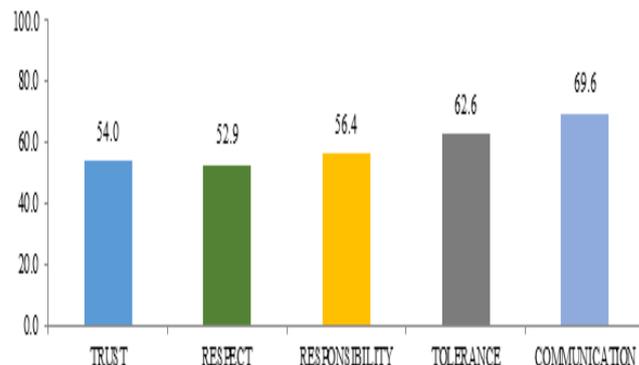
**Table 1:** Spouse selection criteria(N=350)

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MEASURE Person - MAP - Item
<more>||<frequent>
11 ##### ++
    ||
10      ++
9       ++
    ||
    ||
8       ++
    ||
    ||T
    || Responsible (80.6%)
7       ++ Religious background(80.4%)
    ||
    ||
    || Etiquette (69.8%)
6       .# ++S
    ||
    ||
    ||
    .## ||
5       ++ Race (58.9%)      Financial Stability (59.8%)
    ||M Family background (58.8%)
    .# T||
    ||
    .### || Family Status (57.2%)
4       ++ Shared values (56.4%)
    .### ||
    ##### S|| Job (54.6%)
    ||S Looks (53.2%)      Education level (54.25)
    .##### || Age (52.1%)
3       .##### ++
    .##### ||
    ||
    ##### M||
    .##### ||
2       .##### ++T
    ##### ||
    .##### ||
    .##### ||
    .#### S||
1       .##### ++
    .### ||
    .# ||
    # ||
    . ||
0       . T++
    # ||
    . ||
    . ||
    . ||
-1      .# ++
    <less>||<rare>
EACH "#" IS 3: EACH "." IS 1 TO 2

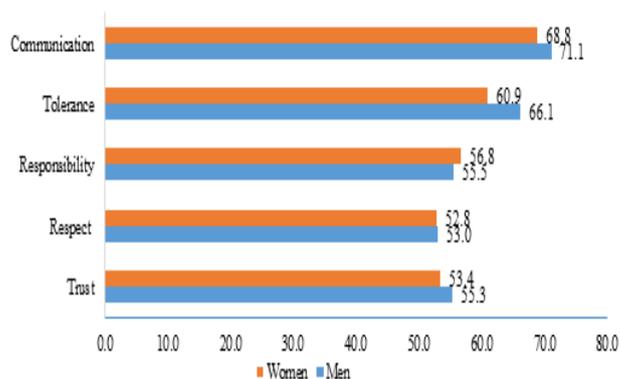
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In exploring the perceived factors that contributed towards a lasting marriage, the element in their relationship was communication (69.6%). This was followed by tolerance (62.6%) and responsibility towards the family wellbeing (56.4%). It is interesting to note that overall these respondents viewed that respect (52.9%) and trust (54%) were the areas that need to be improved further. Figure 1 displays the elements that the participants perceived to exist in their current marriages.



**Figure 1:** Elements that the participants perceived to exist in their current marriages. Trust, respect, responsibility, tolerance and communication are the five main elements perceived in contributing to a lasting marriage.

Further analysis revealed that female respondents (68.8%) perceived that their marriage strength lies in communication as compared to male respondents (71.1%). Males (66.1%) perceived tolerance, the second strongest construct more positively as compared to female respondents (60.9%). Interestingly, the third strongest construct; responsibility towards family wellbeing, was perceived more positively by female respondents (56.8%) as compared to male respondents (55.5%). Figure 2 displays the strongest elements in the marriage as perceived by the respondents according to their gender.



**Figure 2:** Elements in the marriage as perceived by the respondents. Communication, tolerance, responsibility, respect and trust are the main elements perceived of utmost importance and gender based.

## DISCUSSION

This research has concluded that individuals that exhibited responsible and religious commitments and

pious characteristics will be regarded highly and affects individual decisions in the choice of partners. These aspects are followed by race, financial stability, and respectable family status. Although many would assume that physical appearance, beauty and age are important, this study revealed that these elements are the least important.

Significantly, these respondents understood the importance of religious commitment, and recognised the importance of these essential elements as a foundation of a strong moral footing and healthy marriage, which leads to an ideally blissful family. This is in line with a study that showed couples that share participations in religious activities are able to sustain a marriage because they considered this practice as a critical aspect of the marriage experiences (23). Religious beliefs and practices on the marriage, it was discovered that some couples did not found religion to be effective on their marriages while majority mentioned positive effects of religion on solving their marital problems (24).

The perceived factors that contributed towards a lasting marriage were explored in this study. These respondents appraised their marriage as having good communication, and understood the importance of this element in harnessing a healthy and happy relationship. Marriages involved the exchange of information that took place in a friendly, courteous and respectful manner. Intonation and the type of words used, facial expressions, body language, physical distance and communication styles were vital between couples. Therefor the relationship between criteria of the marriage and communication style along with gender differences between couples showed its significance role of these variables in emotional relation kind after marriage (25). Sometimes couples have unique, specific and personal communication codes that can be understood only by them. Intimacy, passion, commitment and criteria of post marriage have predictive effect on constructive communication styles of couples (25). Understanding and appraising these elements will further strengthen their marriage.

O'Neill (2016) finds that tolerance is very important in the maintenance of marital relationships. Couples who are always tolerant in their marriage find it easier to accept any changes that occur in their respective spouses. Tolerance also helps couples in reducing conflicts that strain their marriage and can provide harmony within their marriage (26). The findings for this study heightened the findings of O'Neills (2016) research as the respondents in this study were assessed highly in the tolerance aspect.

To ensure a happy relationship, marriages must ensure fundamental needs are met. Resources such as shelter, food and other financial capabilities in supporting a family is critical. Research revealed that in Britain,

Hong Kong, and China, sustaining a happy relationship between married couples can only exist with the cooperation between couples, support for one another and financial stability within the family (27). These are among the important factors that are required in maintaining a long-lasting marriage. Having partners that are responsible in ensuring the family well-being is taken care of both in terms of meeting physical needs, as well as the responsibility in developing the potentials of their spouses are also critical in developing a lasting marriage.

It is baffling to discover that trust and respect elements are evaluated the least in this study. The trust indicator or mutual trust between one another is a very critical element in binding a relationship. Past researches showed that couples will be able to maintain a long term marriage when they have an honest and trustworthy relationship. It is also stated that trust is absolutely important to each spouse (29) as feelings of trust is able to create behaviours of commitment, responsibility and respect for one another in a marital relationship. Respect is also an important element between couples as it would have a positive impact on their individual's self-worth (28). Couples who have a positive self-esteem will be able to increase their sense of happiness and can indirectly improve the quality and satisfaction of their marriage. The findings of this research highlighted the need for couples to further explore their relationships in terms of trust and respect for their spouses.

## CONCLUSION

Being responsible and having a strong religious foregrounding are the factors most believed by couples in Malaysia to be important in choosing a partner in a marriage. The respondents perceived that physical appearance, beauty and age are not considered as an important factor in the selection of couples. Therefore, this study illustrates that Muslim couples in Malaysia are aware that the choice of couples based on responsibilities and religion should be given priority in the selection of couples. Tolerance, responsible, trust, respect and effective communication are elements that can maintain love in the marital relationship. Fairness in fulfilling the responsibilities and roles inside and outside the home by spouses and family members are also essential elements in achieving a marital success. Couples who respect one another and maintain good values can establish a cooperative attitude. Committed married couples are able to make mutual decisions better and often cooperate in providing ideas that can help each other as well as create a sense of accountability in their marriage.

In the present study, there are five constructs that have been identified through the quantitative research which are tolerance, trust, respect, responsibility and effective communication. Further studies need to be carried

out to explore these five constructs in depth in order to provide a clearer picture in maintaining a long-term marital relationship amongst Malay Muslim couples in Malaysia.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research is funded by FRGS grant (FRGS2014/2/2014/SSI09/UKM/03/1).

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