Akademika 96(3), October 2026
https://doi.org/10.17576/akad-2026-9603-03

Communication Breakdown Before Divorce: Post-Divorce Accounts of Malay Women in Terengganu, Malaysia

Keruntuhan Komunikasi Sebelum Perceraian: Pengalaman Pasca Perceraian dalam Kalangan Wanita Melayu di Terengganu, Malaysia

NURUASLIZAWATI AYOB, SITI HAJAR ABDUL RAUF*
& DALEELER KAUR RANDAWAR

Received: 21-8-2025/Accepted:9-9-2026

ABSTRACT

Communication breakdown is widely associated with marital dissatisfaction and divorce, yet little qualitative research has traced how it develops over time through the retrospective accounts of divorced Malay Muslim women. This study examined how communication deteriorated throughout marriage and contributed to marital dissolution among 32 divorced Malay women in Terengganu, Malaysia. An interpretive phenomenological design was used, with participants recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews were analysed thematically with the support of ATLAS.ti 23. Six interconnected patterns were identified: the erosion of reciprocal communication, passive and avoidant interaction, unresolved conflict, third-party interference, controlling and defensive exchanges, and communication increasingly confined to financial matters. These patterns did not operate independently. Repeated withdrawal, failed attempts at resolution, and narrowing forms of dialogue gradually weakened emotional intimacy, trust, and joint problem-solving. The analysis therefore positions communication breakdown as a cumulative relational process rather than a discrete cause of divorce. Drawing on Dynamic Systems Theory and Social Learning Theory, the study explains how dysfunctional interaction patterns became stabilised and reinforced over time. It also proposes a culturally grounded psychoeducational model centred on communication skills, emotional regulation, collaborative decision-making, and conflict resolution.

Keywords: communication breakdown, marital communication, divorce, interpretive phenomenology, psychoeducational model

ABSTRAK

Keruntuhan komunikasi sering dikaitkan dengan ketidakpuasan dalam perkahwinan dan perceraian, namun masih kurang kajian kualitatif yang meneliti perkembangannya dari semasa ke semasa melalui pengalaman retrospektif wanita Melayu Islam yang telah bercerai. Kajian ini meneliti bagaimana komunikasi merosot sepanjang perkahwinan dan menyumbang kepada pembubaran perkahwinan dalam kalangan 32 wanita Melayu yang bercerai di Terengganu, Malaysia. Reka bentuk fenomenologi interpretif digunakan, dengan peserta direkrut melalui persampelan bertujuan dan bola salji. Temu bual separa berstruktur dianalisis secara tematik dengan bantuan ATLAS.ti 23. Enam pola yang saling berkaitan dikenal pasti, iaitu kemerosotan komunikasi timbal balik, interaksi pasif dan mengelak, konflik yang tidak diselesaikan, campur tangan pihak ketiga, komunikasi mengawal dan defensif, serta komunikasi yang semakin terbatas kepada urusan kewangan. Pola-pola ini tidak berlaku secara terpisah. Pengunduran emosi yang berulang, kegagalan menyelesaikan pertikaian dan penyempitan ruang dialog secara beransur-ansur melemahkan keintiman emosi, kepercayaan dan penyelesaian masalah bersama. Analisis ini meletakkan keruntuhan komunikasi sebagai proses hubungan yang kumulatif, bukan penyebab perceraian yang bersifat tunggal. Berpandukan Teori Sistem Dinamik dan Teori Pembelajaran Sosial, kajian ini menjelaskan bagaimana pola interaksi disfungsional menjadi stabil dan diperkukuh dari semasa ke semasa. Kajian turut mencadangkan model psikoedukasi berasaskan budaya yang menekankan kemahiran komunikasi, regulasi emosi, pembuatan keputusan bersama dan penyelesaian konflik.

Kata kunci: keruntuhan komunikasi, komunikasi perkahwinan, perceraian, fenomenologi interpretif, model psikoedukasi

INTRODUCTION

Marriage entails sustained negotiation of commitment, emotional support, and shared responsibility. In the Islamic tradition, it is understood as both a legal and spiritual bond intended to foster companionship, well-being, and family stability (Al-Syatiri, 2020; Novitasari et al., 2024). These aims are not secured by the marital contract alone; they depend on how spouses adjust to changing expectations, responsibilities, and life circumstances. Communication is central to that adjustment because it enables partners to express needs, interpret one another's intentions, and address disagreement before it becomes entrenched.

Communication also shapes the emotional climate in which marital difficulties are interpreted. Trust, commitment, and openness support responsive interaction (Özad et al., 2020), whereas persistent negative sentiment can turn disagreement into avoidance, defensiveness, or withdrawal (Cole et al., 2025). Effective communication therefore involves more than exchanging information. It helps couples preserve emotional intimacy, coordinate decisions, and repair relational strain (Fatih et al., 2025; Khezri et al., 2020).

These processes change across the marital life course. Early relationship satisfaction may decline as financial pressure, parenthood, employment demands, and family responsibilities accumulate (Bühler et al., 2021; Williamson, 2021). Longitudinal scholarship further shows that couple communication is responsive to life transitions rather than fixed at the outset of marriage (Galovan et al., 2023). When interaction patterns fail to adapt, unresolved disagreements can become recurrent and emotional closeness may gradually diminish.

The issue is especially pertinent in Malaysia. The latest Department of Statistics Malaysia release reports 60,457 registered divorces in 2024, compared with 58,095 in 2023 (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2025). State-level patterns also reflect local social and cultural conditions (Sharkawi & Saili, 2022). In Terengganu, ineffective communication, financial difficulty, third-party involvement, unmet marital responsibilities, and personality conflict have been recorded among the principal factors associated with divorce (Jabatan Kehakiman Syariah Terengganu, 2023). Their co-occurrence suggests that communication problems are embedded in wider relational pressures rather than operating as an independent trigger.

The consequences extend beyond the marital dyad. Persistent conflict, financial strain, reduced intimacy, and emotional neglect can generate cumulative stress for spouses and family members (Ottakkam Thodukayil et al., 2025). They may also weaken emotional security and the family's capacity to support healthy interpersonal functioning (İnci et al., 2025; Tammelin, 2021). A process-oriented account of communication deterioration is therefore important for both explanation and prevention.

Existing research nevertheless leaves this process insufficiently understood. Much of the literature examines communication among couples who remain married or treats communication as a measurable predictor of satisfaction and stability (Sumari et al., 2024). Such work establishes association but offers less insight into how repeated interactions are remembered as accumulating towards divorce. Retrospective accounts from divorced women can reveal sequences of withdrawal, failed repair, and relational change that may be less visible in cross-sectional studies of ongoing marriages (Omoboye et al., 2024).

The gap is conceptual, methodological, and contextual. Conceptually, communication is often reduced to an individual skill or a static variable. Methodologically, limited attention has been paid to post-divorce reconstruction of communication trajectories. Contextually, the experiences of divorced Malay Muslim women remain underrepresented, although marital

interaction in Terengganu is shaped by religious values, gendered expectations, extended-family ties, and local norms concerning family continuity.

This study addresses these gaps by examining communication breakdown before divorce through the post-divorce accounts of Malay women in Terengganu. Using interpretive phenomenology, it explores how participants made sense of changes in communication across the course of marriage and how those changes became linked to marital dissolution. The analysis treats breakdown as a cumulative relational process and uses Dynamic Systems Theory and Social Learning Theory to explain how interaction patterns changed, stabilised, and became resistant to repair. The findings are intended to inform culturally responsive work by counsellors, social workers, policymakers, and family-support agencies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

COMMUNICATION AND MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS

Communication is widely recognised as the foundation of healthy marital relationships because it enables spouses to express emotions, negotiate responsibilities, resolve disagreements, and develop shared understanding. Beyond the exchange of information, communication shapes how partners interpret each other's intentions and respond to changing relational needs, thereby influencing intimacy, trust, and emotional security throughout marriage (Yan, 2025).

Marital communication comprises both verbal and non-verbal interactions. Verbal communication allows spouses to express expectations, concerns, and emotional needs, whereas non-verbal cues, including facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and tone of voice, often convey meanings that words alone cannot communicate (Agnihotri, 2023). These forms of communication operate together and influence how messages are interpreted, making communication a multidimensional relational process rather than a simple interpersonal skill.

Previous studies consistently demonstrate that constructive communication promotes marital satisfaction, emotional intimacy, psychological well-being, and relationship stability. Couples who practise active listening, empathy, appreciation, and collaborative problem-solving generally report stronger emotional connections and greater relationship satisfaction (Sadeghian et al., 2025; Choudary et al., 2024). Conversely, ineffective communication, characterised by criticism, defensiveness, hostility, and emotional withdrawal, is associated with recurring conflict and declining relationship quality.

Communication patterns, however, are not static. As couples encounter financial pressures, parenthood, occupational demands, and changing family responsibilities, the focus of communication often shifts from emotional adjustment to practical decision-making and family management (Abreu-Afonso et al., 2022). The ability to adapt communication to these changing circumstances plays an important role in maintaining marital quality. When communication fails to evolve alongside these relational demands, emotional closeness and mutual understanding may gradually decline.

Although communication has been extensively studied, it is frequently conceptualised as an individual competency or a predictor of marital satisfaction (Abreu-Afonso et al., 2022). Such an approach offers limited insight into how communication changes through repeated interaction over time. A relational perspective instead views communication as an evolving process shaped by everyday experiences, enabling a deeper understanding of how interaction patterns gradually contribute to marital deterioration before divorce.

Communication breakdown before divorce seldom begins with a single decisive episode. It is more often produced through repeated misunderstandings, unresolved disagreement, withdrawal, and unsuccessful attempts at repair. Over time, relatively ordinary interactional difficulties can acquire greater relational significance as trust, emotional intimacy, and confidence in joint problem-solving decline. A process perspective therefore shifts attention from identifying one immediate cause of divorce to understanding how everyday exchanges progressively alter the relationship.

Research on destructive interaction consistently identifies criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling as markers of declining relationship quality (Gottman, 2018; Schwandt, 2021). Sarcasm, hostility, and emotional withdrawal likewise constrain dialogue and reduce opportunities for negotiated resolution (Allen et al., 2022). This literature identifies important behaviours but offers less explanation of how they become recurrent, mutually reinforcing, and embedded in the relationship before divorce.

Communication breakdown is therefore not reducible to a list of negative behaviours. Repeated failures to address interpersonal tension may weaken emotional responsiveness and commitment even when overt conflict becomes less frequent (Khezri et al., 2020; Williamson, 2021). Differences in expectations, values, and communication preferences become especially consequential when couples lack workable ways to negotiate them (İnci et al., 2025). Apparent calm may thus coexist with declining empathy, support, and relational investment (Abreu-Afonso et al., 2022; Paphitis et al., 2022).

Most evidence in this field remains quantitative and predictor-oriented (Galovan et al., 2023). Less is known about how individuals who have experienced divorce reconstruct the gradual deterioration of communication and distinguish early tension from later relational disengagement. Post-divorce accounts of Malay women offer a contextually specific basis for examining that progression within a setting where marital interaction is also influenced by religion, kinship, gender expectations, and family reputation.

DYNAMIC SYSTEMS THEORY AND SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Explaining communication breakdown requires attention to both relational change and behavioural reinforcement. Dynamic Systems Theory and Social Learning Theory are used here as complementary lenses. The first explains how interaction patterns emerge and stabilise within an adaptive marital system; the second explains how particular responses are learned, repeated, and maintained through their consequences.

From a dynamic-systems perspective, marriage is an interdependent system whose communication patterns shift in response to parenthood, employment, financial stress, and other transitions (Solomon et al., 2021; Worley et al., 2024). A difficulty becomes systemically important when repeated responses begin to organise subsequent interaction. Silence, criticism, or withdrawal may initially be situational, but recurrence can make these responses predictable and progressively narrow the couple's capacity to adapt (Wang et al., 2025).

Social Learning Theory clarifies how this narrowing occurs at the behavioural level. Responses followed by short-term relief may be repeated even when their longer-term effects are harmful. Avoiding a difficult conversation, for example, may temporarily reduce tension and thereby reinforce future avoidance. Conversely, empathy, active listening, and collaborative problem-solving are more likely to persist when they produce recognition, reassurance, or resolution (Allen et al., 2022).

Used together, the theories locate communication breakdown in a feedback process. Repeated behaviour changes the relational system, while the altered system changes the likely consequences of later behaviour. This integration directs attention to how silence, defensiveness, external involvement, and financially focused exchanges became self-reinforcing patterns rather than isolated failures of technique.

RESEARCH GAP AND THEORETICAL POSITIONING

Despite extensive scholarship on marital communication, three limitations remain. First, communication is commonly modelled as an individual competence or independent predictor, which obscures its reciprocal and developmental character. This makes it difficult to explain how everyday responses accumulate into a durable pattern of disengagement.

Second, the evidence base is dominated by quantitative measures of communication and marital satisfaction (Galovan et al., 2023). These designs are valuable for estimating associations but provide limited access to the meanings participants assign to changes across the marriage, particularly after dissolution. The trajectory through which attempted repair gives way to withdrawal therefore remains underexplored.

Third, much of the available literature is grounded in Western settings. Its assumptions about couple autonomy, gender roles, privacy, and family boundaries may not transfer directly to Malay Muslim marriages in Terengganu, where extended kin, religious expectations, and concerns about family continuity can shape both communication and help-seeking.

The present study responds by using interpretive phenomenology to reconstruct communication trajectories from divorced women's post-divorce accounts. Dynamic Systems Theory is used to examine relational adaptation and stabilisation, while Social Learning Theory is used to interpret the reinforcement of recurrent responses. The aim is not to claim a universal sequence of breakdown, but to identify how participants understood the accumulation of interactional changes within a particular sociocultural setting.

This positioning offers a process-based and context-sensitive account of marital communication. It also provides a basis for distinguishing communication difficulties that remain open to repair from patterns that have become normalised, emotionally costly, and resistant to change.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

An interpretive phenomenological design was adopted to examine how divorced Malay women made sense of communication breakdown before marital dissolution. Unlike descriptive phenomenology, which seeks primarily to describe the essential structure of experience, interpretive phenomenology treats experience as understood through personal history and social, cultural, and temporal context. This orientation was appropriate because participants were not merely recalling events; they were interpreting how earlier interactions acquired meaning in light of divorce (Aldea et al., 2022).

RESEARCH SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

The study was conducted in Terengganu, Malaysia. The setting was analytically relevant because marital interaction in the state is situated within Malay cultural traditions, Islamic values, and close extended-family networks. These conditions provided a context for examining how interpersonal communication intersected with family involvement, gendered expectations, and local understandings of marital responsibility.

Participants were recruited through Yayasan Pembangunan Keluarga Terengganu and Persatuan Ibu-ibu dan Ibu Tunggal Kuala Nerus. Purposive sampling identified women with direct experience of divorce, while snowball referrals broadened access beyond the initial organisational networks.

Thirty-two divorced Malay Muslim women participated. Eligibility required legal divorce, residence in Terengganu, and willingness to discuss marital communication before divorce. Women currently undergoing divorce proceedings or experiencing distress that could compromise informed participation were excluded. Participants were aged 30–68 years; their marriages had lasted 1–36 years, and the time since divorce ranged from under five years to more than two decades. Recruitment ended when successive interviews no longer produced substantively new patterns relevant to the research question.

TABLE 1. Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Category	N	%
Age (years)	30–39	8	25.0
	40–49	10	31.3
	50–59	7	21.9
	60–68	7	21.9
Duration of Marriage (years)	1–5	11	34.4
	6–10	7	21.9
	11–20	10	31.3
	More than 20	4	12.5
Time Since Divorce	1–5	9	28.1
	6–10	8	25.0
	11–20	6	18.8
	More than 20	9	28.1

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected through individual semi-structured face-to-face interviews using broad open-ended questions exploring participants' marital communication experiences before divorce, including everyday interactions, conflict management, and changes in communication over time. Interviews were conducted in Malay at mutually agreed locations, lasted 45–60 minutes, and were audio-recorded with informed consent. Field notes were completed after each interview to capture contextual observations and non-verbal behaviours. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and preliminary coding was undertaken concurrently with data collection. This iterative process informed subsequent interviews and continued until thematic saturation was reached, with no new themes emerging.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical principles guided all stages of the study to protect participants' rights, privacy, and well-being. Before each interview, participants received information about the study and provided written informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to decline any question or withdraw at any time without consequence. Interviews were conducted in private locations to ensure confidentiality and minimise discomfort. Pseudonyms were used throughout the study, all identifying information was removed from the transcripts, and audio recordings and research data were securely stored and used exclusively for research purposes.

RESEARCHER REFLEXIVITY

Given the interpretive nature of this study, researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout data collection and analysis. Reflective journals were used to document emerging interpretations, methodological decisions, and potential assumptions following each interview (Buys et al., 2022). To minimise researcher bias, an audit trail was maintained to record coding decisions, theme development, and analytical reflections. Emerging interpretations were continually compared with the original interview transcripts to ensure that the findings remained grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than the researcher's preconceptions (Vella, 2024). These procedures strengthened analytical transparency and enhanced the credibility of the study.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analysed inductively with the support of ATLAS.ti 23. Each transcript was read several times before segments relevant to the research question were assigned initial codes. Codes were then compared across interviews, combined where meanings overlapped, and separated where important distinctions emerged. Provisional categories were reviewed against the full transcripts and refined into themes that captured both recurrent patterns and meaningful variation. ATLAS.ti supported organisation and retrieval; coding decisions, theme development, and interpretation remained the responsibility of the research team.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was strengthened through repeated engagement with the transcripts, comparison across participants, and review of themes against disconfirming as well as convergent accounts. An audit trail documented coding decisions and changes to the thematic structure. Reflexive notes were used to examine how prior assumptions about communication and divorce might shape interpretation, while claims were repeatedly checked against participants' words. Detailed reporting of the setting, sample, and analytical procedures supports readers in judging transferability to comparable contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis identified six interrelated patterns: (1) the progressive loss of mutual communication, (2) passive and avoidant communication, (3) the absence of collaborative conflict resolution, (4) third-party interference, (5) controlling and defensive communication, and (6) the transformation of communication through financial strain. The themes are presented separately for analytical clarity, although participants' accounts often showed overlap. Their combined effect was a narrowing of the relationship's communicative repertoire: fewer issues could be discussed safely, fewer disagreements reached resolution, and fewer interactions sustained emotional connection.

THEME 1: PROGRESSIVE LOSS OF MUTUAL COMMUNICATION

The first pattern reflects the progressive loss of mutual communication as an early manifestation of communication breakdown before divorce. Rather than simply becoming less frequent, communication gradually lost its reciprocal and relational functions. Participants described repeated experiences of silence, emotional detachment, and unfulfilled expectations that steadily undermined confidence in dialogue itself. As these experiences accumulated, conversations ceased to serve as opportunities to express concerns, strengthen mutual understanding, or negotiate disagreement. Instead, participants increasingly viewed communication as unlikely to influence their spouses' behaviour or improve the relationship, signalling the gradual erosion of the marital bond.

The experiences of Informants 1, 10, 11, and 15 illustrate this process. Informant 1 described repeated broken promises despite continuous efforts to communicate, explaining that *"out of ten promises, he may not promise me even one."* Beyond unmet promises, her account reflected a growing loss of trust that communication would lead to genuine commitment or behavioural change. Informant 10 similarly recalled that her husband routinely withdrew whenever disagreements arose, either by remaining silent or leaving the house, preventing conflict from developing into constructive discussion. Informant 11 described prolonged mutual silence during disagreements, observing that *"we both just stay silent."* Although silence reduced immediate confrontation, it also prevented emotional clarification and mutual understanding. Informant 15 likewise interpreted her husband's persistent self-centred behaviour as evidence of emotional disengagement. Across these narratives, communication remained present but progressively lost its capacity to sustain reciprocity, emotional accessibility, and shared problem-solving.

Taken as a whole, these narratives indicate that communication breakdown emerged through the cumulative failure of ordinary interactions rather than a single disruptive event. Repeated attempts to seek reassurance, clarification, or emotional acknowledgement were consistently met with indifference, withdrawal, or avoidance, gradually weakening participants' confidence that further discussion could repair the relationship. As unsuccessful interactions accumulated, initiating meaningful conversation became increasingly difficult because previous experiences had repeatedly demonstrated that dialogue no longer generated understanding, empathy, or behavioural change. What diminished over time was therefore not merely the frequency of communication, but participants' belief that communication still possessed the capacity to restore the relationship.

Earlier scholarship has consistently shown that responsive communication is fundamental to intimacy, trust, and marital stability (Abreu-Afonso et al., 2022; Siboni et al., 2022). The present findings, however, suggest that reciprocal responsiveness is equally important. Several participants continued making deliberate efforts to communicate, yet those efforts became

progressively ineffective when spouses repeatedly responded with silence, emotional detachment, or avoidance. These accounts indicate that openness cannot be sustained through the efforts of one partner alone. Instead, communication gradually lost its restorative capacity because reciprocal engagement steadily disappeared, leaving meaningful dialogue increasingly difficult to maintain despite continued attempts to preserve the marriage.

Viewed through a Dynamic Systems perspective, these repeated interactions gradually evolved into stable relational routines rather than remaining isolated responses to conflict (Solomon et al., 2021). Patterns of silence and non-response progressively reshaped the communicative organisation of the relationship, reducing opportunities for emotional repair with each recurring interaction. A complementary explanation is provided by Social Learning Theory (Allen et al., 2022). When repeated attempts at discussion consistently resulted in rejection or emotional invalidation, withdrawal became associated with temporary emotional relief and was therefore more likely to recur. Behavioural reinforcement and relational adaptation consequently operated together, producing a cycle in which declining communication intensified emotional distance, while increasing emotional distance further reduced the likelihood of meaningful dialogue.

The experiences described in this theme therefore point to more than reduced conversation between spouses. They reveal the gradual disappearance of reciprocal responsiveness, the very condition that allows communication to function as a mechanism for trust, emotional connection, and relational repair. Once dialogue was no longer expected to produce acknowledgement, understanding, or change, communication itself ceased to represent a meaningful relational resource, marking the beginning of a broader trajectory towards marital dissolution.

THEME 2: PASSIVE AND AVOIDANT COMMUNICATION

Unlike the progressive loss of mutual communication described in the previous theme, the second pattern reflects a more subtle form of communication breakdown in which interaction continued but gradually lost its relational purpose. Participants did not describe marriages characterised by complete silence. Instead, communication remained part of everyday life but became increasingly passive, avoidant, and emotionally unproductive. Difficult conversations were postponed, sensitive issues were deliberately avoided, and responses became progressively superficial, leaving important concerns unresolved. Although spouses continued to communicate, these exchanges rarely fostered understanding, compromise, or emotional reconnection. Communication therefore shifted from sustaining intimacy to maintaining routine interaction without resolving underlying relational concerns.

The experiences of Informants 5, 17, and 23 illustrate this transition. Informant 5 recalled that communication had initially been open and constructive, explaining, *"Early on in our marriage we communicated successfully. But in a short time, we lost all communication."* Her account suggests that communication breakdown developed progressively as meaningful dialogue gave way to repetitive disagreement. Informant 17 similarly described choosing silence because previous discussions had rarely produced understanding or meaningful change. Silence became less a sign of harmony than a strategy for avoiding conversations perceived as emotionally exhausting and ultimately ineffective. Informant 23 described interactions in which her husband appeared to listen but remained emotionally detached and unwilling to engage with ongoing marital concerns. Across these narratives, communication was not absent. Rather, it became increasingly disconnected from its restorative role, allowing unresolved concerns to accumulate beneath the appearance of everyday interaction.

Taken as a whole, these accounts indicate that avoidance functioned primarily as a short-term strategy for managing emotional discomfort rather than resolving marital disagreement. Avoiding sensitive conversations reduced the immediate tension associated with confrontation, yet it also prevented problems from being openly acknowledged and jointly negotiated. Periods of apparent calm therefore masked continuing emotional dissatisfaction. The findings challenge the common assumption that fewer arguments necessarily signify healthier relationships. Instead, participants' experiences suggest that emotional distance may deepen precisely because difficult issues remain unspoken. The gradual absence of meaningful dialogue, rather than the absence of conflict itself, became the more significant indicator of communication breakdown.

Previous studies have consistently associated avoidant communication with ineffective conflict management and declining marital satisfaction (Fischer et al., 2022; Allen et al., 2022). The present findings refine this understanding by showing how avoidance gradually evolved from an occasional coping strategy into a stable relational pattern. Participants continued to communicate, yet conversations increasingly failed to generate emotional acknowledgement, validation, or behavioural change. This distinction suggests that communication breakdown is better understood through the declining quality and relational effectiveness of interaction than through communication frequency alone.

Dynamic Systems Theory helps explain how repeated avoidance gradually became incorporated into the communicative organisation of the marriage rather than remaining an isolated response to conflict (Solomon et al., 2021). Each postponed discussion increased the likelihood that subsequent concerns would also remain unaddressed, progressively narrowing opportunities for relational repair. Social Learning Theory offers a complementary behavioural explanation (Allen et al., 2022). Silence, vague responses, or changing the subject frequently reduced immediate emotional discomfort, making avoidance increasingly likely to recur despite its longer-term relational costs. Within the Malaysian sociocultural context, where preserving interpersonal harmony and avoiding direct confrontation are often viewed positively (Sharkawi & Saili, 2022), such responses may initially appear adaptive. Participants' experiences nevertheless indicate that maintaining surface harmony without addressing underlying concerns gradually weakened emotional reciprocity and diminished opportunities for reconciliation.

The accounts presented in this theme suggest that communication breakdown before divorce was characterised not by the disappearance of interaction but by the gradual normalisation of emotional avoidance. Conversations continued, yet they increasingly bypassed the very issues that sustained trust, intimacy, and collaborative problem-solving. As emotionally significant discussions became progressively more difficult to initiate, communication lost its capacity to repair relational strain and instead contributed to the accumulation of unresolved emotional distance preceding marital dissolution.

THEME 3: ABSENCE OF COLLABORATIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The third pattern reflects the progressive breakdown of communication as a collaborative process for resolving marital conflict. Unlike the passive and avoidant communication described in the previous theme, participants continued to discuss disagreements, yet these discussions rarely progressed towards shared understanding, compromise, or mutually acceptable decisions. Communication remained active during episodes of conflict, but it gradually lost its capacity to facilitate joint problem-solving. Recurrent disagreements increasingly reinforced the perception that important marital issues could be revisited repeatedly without ever producing meaningful

resolution. Consequently, conflict ceased to represent a temporary relational challenge and instead became an enduring feature of everyday married life.

The experiences of Informants 16, 25, and 29 illustrate how this process unfolded under different relational circumstances. Informant 16 described frequent and emotionally exhausting arguments throughout her pregnancy, explaining that *"in a week perhaps only two days were tranquil."* During a period marked by heightened emotional and physical vulnerability, disagreements became increasingly difficult to resolve despite repeated attempts at communication. Informant 25 similarly recounted that discussions concerning marital problems repeatedly ended with emotional indifference rather than constructive engagement, leaving significant concerns unresolved. Informant 29 described a different but equally challenging situation within a polygamous marriage, where competing relational commitments and divided emotional investment limited opportunities for meaningful negotiation. Despite these differing circumstances, participants consistently portrayed communication as incapable of generating compromise, mutual accountability, or a shared commitment to resolving conflict.

Despite their different circumstances, the participants described a remarkably similar process. Communication breakdown was not defined simply by the presence of disagreement. Rather, it reflected the gradual disappearance of communication as a collaborative resource for repairing the relationship. Participants continued expressing concerns, explaining their perspectives, and seeking discussion, yet these efforts repeatedly failed to generate reciprocal engagement or meaningful behavioural change. As unsuccessful negotiations accumulated, confidence in future discussions progressively declined. Conflict therefore became increasingly cyclical rather than restorative, leaving spouses emotionally fatigued and progressively less willing to invest in further collaborative dialogue. The critical issue was not that conflict occurred, but that conflict no longer created opportunities to rebuild mutual understanding.

Existing scholarship consistently identifies emotional responsiveness, active listening, and mutual commitment as essential conditions for successful conflict resolution (Gottman, 2018; Williamson, 2021). Participants' experiences nevertheless suggest that these interpersonal competencies alone cannot fully explain why repeated discussions remained unsuccessful. Collaborative conflict resolution was shaped by broader relational conditions, including unequal emotional investment, differing levels of commitment, pregnancy-related vulnerability, and the structural complexities associated with polygamous family arrangements. These contextual influences affected the capacity of spouses to participate equally in negotiation, extending conventional explanations that primarily conceptualise conflict resolution as an interpersonal communication skill. Instead, the findings position collaborative problem-solving as a relational process that depends upon reciprocity, shared commitment, and relatively balanced opportunities for negotiation.

From the perspective of Dynamic Systems Theory, repeated failures to resolve disagreement gradually became incorporated into the interactional organisation of the marriage (Solomon et al., 2021). Each unsuccessful discussion reinforced expectations that subsequent conversations would produce similarly disappointing outcomes, reducing both motivation and emotional tolerance for continued engagement. Social Learning Theory provides a complementary behavioural explanation (Allen et al., 2022). When repeated attempts to negotiate consistently resulted in emotional indifference, renewed disagreement, or unresolved outcomes, disengagement increasingly required less emotional investment than continued negotiation. Over time, withdrawal became progressively reinforced, while collaborative problem-solving became correspondingly

less likely. The interactional cycle therefore sustained itself through repeated experiences of unsuccessful communication rather than through conflict alone.

The experiences described in this theme highlight the gradual erosion of confidence in collaborative repair. Once repeated discussions no longer generated compromise, accountability, or shared solutions, communication ceased to function as a mechanism for resolving disagreement. Instead, unresolved conflict became self-perpetuating, progressively weakening emotional commitment and reducing spouses' willingness to work towards relational recovery. In this sense, communication breakdown before divorce was characterised less by the existence of conflict than by the gradual loss of faith that communication itself could still repair the relationship.

THEME 4: THIRD-PARTY INTERFERENCE

The fourth pattern reflects a gradual shift in the location of marital communication, whereby the management of relationship difficulties increasingly moved beyond the couple and became influenced by external actors. Rather than relying primarily on one another for emotional reassurance, decision-making, and conflict resolution, participants increasingly turned to romantic partners, extended family members, and wider social networks. The central issue was therefore not the presence of third parties, which is relatively common within collectivist family systems, but the gradual erosion of communicative boundaries that had previously enabled spouses to negotiate disagreements, preserve privacy, and maintain mutual trust independently. As communication became dispersed across multiple interpersonal relationships, dialogue within the marriage progressively lost its central role in interpreting problems, expressing vulnerability, and rebuilding mutual understanding. Participants consequently described growing uncertainty regarding emotional loyalty, relational commitment, and the confidentiality of personal conversations.

Informant 26's account clearly illustrates this process. She explained that information shared privately with her husband was subsequently disclosed to members of the extended family and later circulated more broadly. For her, the central concern was not merely the disclosure of personal information but the violation of mutual confidentiality. Once private conversations could no longer be assumed to remain within the marriage, emotional openness became increasingly risky. Participants became more cautious about expressing vulnerability because personal disclosures carried the possibility of external exposure or judgement. Communication remained possible, yet confidence that intimate conversations would remain protected gradually diminished.

These narratives point to a common interactional process. Third-party interference altered the communicative organisation of the marriage before it intensified overt marital conflict. External relationships gradually assumed functions that had previously belonged to the couple, including emotional validation, practical guidance, and relational confirmation. As spouses increasingly relied on others to interpret marital difficulties, opportunities for reciprocal dialogue and collaborative problem-solving steadily declined. Communication therefore lost much of its integrative role long before the relationship formally dissolved. Rather than merely contributing to conflict, third-party involvement progressively redefined where emotional support, trust, and relational decision-making were located.

This pattern assumes particular significance within the Malaysian sociocultural context, where close kinship networks and collective family involvement are widely regarded as valuable sources of emotional and practical support. Participants' experiences do not suggest that family participation is inherently detrimental. Instead, they distinguish between external involvement that strengthened communication between spouses and involvement that gradually replaced direct

marital dialogue. Once outsiders increasingly assumed interpretive or decision-making roles, opportunities for mutual negotiation diminished, and emotional dependence shifted beyond the marriage despite shared cultural expectations regarding family interconnectedness.

Dynamic Systems Theory further illuminates how repeated reliance on external actors gradually became incorporated into the interactional organisation of the marriage rather than remaining peripheral to it (Solomon et al., 2021). Communication occurring outside the relationship increasingly shaped communication within it, creating new interactional patterns that reduced opportunities for direct relational repair. A complementary explanation is offered by Social Learning Theory (Allen et al., 2022). When conversations with third parties consistently generated empathy, reassurance, or affirmation, whereas communication with one's spouse repeatedly resulted in disappointment or conflict, seeking external validation became progressively reinforced. Over time, direct communication within the marriage became less rewarding, while reliance on external sources of emotional support became increasingly habitual.

Informant 26's experience further highlights the relevance of Communication Privacy Management Theory (Petronio, 2002). Once participants no longer trusted that intimate conversations would remain confidential, self-disclosure became increasingly constrained. Emotional openness gradually gave way to guarded communication, careful self-monitoring, and selective disclosure, limiting opportunities to rebuild trust and weakening relational intimacy even when communication itself continued.

The experiences presented in this theme reveal that communication breakdown before divorce involved more than declining interaction between spouses. They illustrate the gradual erosion of communicative boundaries through which emotional authority, relational trust, and collaborative problem-solving were progressively relocated beyond the marriage itself. Once spouses no longer regarded one another as their primary source of emotional security or trusted dialogue, communication lost one of its most important relational functions. In this sense, third-party interference did not merely accompany marital deterioration; it became part of the process through which the communicative boundaries of the marriage progressively dissolved.

THEME 5: CONTROLLING AND DEFENSIVE COMMUNICATION

The fifth pattern demonstrates how communication increasingly became a means of regulating power rather than facilitating mutual understanding. Unlike the preceding themes, where communication deteriorated through withdrawal, avoidance, or external interference, participants described interactions in which conversation itself became a site of control. Defensive responses, denial, blame-shifting, and evasive explanations did more than interrupt dialogue. They progressively shaped whose concerns were regarded as legitimate, whose interpretations prevailed, and whose voice carried influence within the relationship. Communication therefore became increasingly asymmetrical, reducing opportunities for open negotiation while narrowing the space within which spouses could safely express dissatisfaction or disagreement.

The experiences of Informants 20 and 21 illustrate this pattern. Informant 20 explained that attempts to discuss marital concerns were frequently met with evasive responses and an unwillingness to accept responsibility. Likewise, Informant 21 described repeated denial and blame-shifting whenever disagreements arose. Although their experiences differed, both participants portrayed communication as increasingly defensive rather than collaborative, leaving important concerns unresolved and reinforcing emotional disengagement over time.

A broader pattern becomes apparent across these narratives. Defensiveness altered not only the outcome of communication but also participants' expectations of future interaction. Rather than anticipating understanding or compromise, participants increasingly expected denial, justification, or personal criticism whenever sensitive issues were raised. Speaking openly therefore became emotionally costly. Discussions that might once have strengthened the relationship increasingly exposed participants to blame, invalidation, or renewed conflict. As these experiences accumulated, participants became progressively more cautious about initiating conversations, withholding personal feelings, or abandoning discussions before they escalated. Communication gradually shifted from collaborative engagement towards emotional self-protection.

More importantly, these accounts reveal that controlling communication operated less through overt domination than through the repeated regulation of communicative authority. Defensive responses redirected attention away from the original concern and towards the perceived shortcomings of the person raising it, limiting accountability while weakening confidence that honest dialogue could produce meaningful change. The significance of this pattern therefore extends beyond the accumulation of negative interactional behaviours. It reflects the gradual emergence of unequal communicative influence, whereby one partner increasingly determined the direction, legitimacy, and outcome of marital conversations. This interpretation broadens earlier work linking defensiveness, withdrawal, and blame to declining trust and relationship satisfaction (Schwandt, 2021; Allen et al., 2022).

This process appears particularly significant within the Malaysian sociocultural context, where preserving family harmony and fulfilling relational obligations are often strongly valued. Participants' accounts suggest that emotional restraint did not necessarily indicate acceptance or agreement. Instead, repeated unsuccessful attempts at communication gradually reduced confidence that further discussion would alter the relational dynamic. Under these circumstances, silence became a strategy for limiting psychological exhaustion rather than resolving disagreement, allowing unresolved concerns to persist beneath outward relational stability.

A Dynamic Systems interpretation suggests that repeated defensive responses gradually became embedded within the interactional organisation of the marriage rather than remaining isolated reactions to particular disagreements (Solomon et al., 2021). As denial, blame, and evasion became increasingly predictable, both spouses adapted their communication accordingly, reducing opportunities for reciprocal engagement and relational repair. Social Learning Theory provides a complementary explanation for the persistence of this pattern (Allen et al., 2022). When expressing concerns repeatedly resulted in criticism, invalidation, or conflict, whereas remaining silent temporarily reduced interpersonal tension, withdrawal became progressively reinforced despite its long-term relational costs. Over time, communication increasingly revolved around avoiding anticipated emotional consequences instead of addressing the marital issues that had originally prompted discussion.

The experiences described in this theme point to the gradual emergence of unequal communicative power within the marriage. Once defensive responses consistently determined whose concerns were acknowledged and whose perspectives carried legitimacy, communication could no longer function as a psychologically safe space for negotiation. Rather than supporting mutual accountability and collaborative problem-solving, conversations increasingly reinforced silence, self-protection, and asymmetrical influence. The result was not merely unresolved conflict but the progressive erosion of communication as a shared relational resource, further accelerating marital deterioration.

The final pattern illustrates how prolonged financial strain fundamentally transformed the purpose, content, and emotional quality of marital communication. Financial hardship was not simply another issue over which couples disagreed; it gradually reshaped the communicative environment of the relationship by redirecting conversations towards economic survival rather than emotional connection. Participants described exchanges increasingly dominated by household expenses, debt, financial obligations, and requests for money, leaving progressively less space for emotional support, companionship, affection, or shared aspirations. As financial pressures intensified, communication became increasingly transactional, with practical responsibilities gradually displacing the relational functions that had previously sustained intimacy and mutual understanding.

The experiences of Informants 4 and 31 illustrate this transformation. Informant 4 explained that discussions concerning financial matters repeatedly escalated into conflict despite relatively few disagreements in other aspects of the marriage. What initially began as conversations about household finances gradually became emotionally charged interactions that influenced broader patterns of communication. Informant 31 similarly described deliberately avoiding financial discussions because they almost always resulted in arguments, disappointment, or emotional tension. Although their experiences differed, both participants portrayed financial communication as increasingly characterised by avoidance rather than collaborative financial planning or shared decision-making. Consequently, unresolved financial concerns accumulated alongside unresolved emotional concerns, reinforcing both material insecurity and relational dissatisfaction.

Despite their different circumstances, the participants described a similar process. Financial strain reshaped communication by gradually redefining its relational purpose. Conversations that had once provided reassurance, encouragement, and opportunities for shared planning increasingly became confined to immediate financial demands and economic uncertainty. Emotional needs were progressively subordinated to practical concerns, reducing opportunities for reciprocal understanding and relational resilience. Financial hardship therefore changed not only the topics couples discussed but also what communication itself was expected to achieve within the marriage.

Existing research has consistently shown that financial disagreements often reflect broader issues of trust, responsibility, decision-making, and relational commitment rather than expenditure alone (Jackson et al., 2023; Peetz et al., 2023). Financial stress has likewise been associated with avoidant communication, declining marital satisfaction, and increasing relational instability (Khezri et al., 2020; Mishra et al., 2025). Participants' experiences, however, suggest a broader relational transformation. Rather than merely increasing the frequency of financial arguments, prolonged financial strain gradually reorganised everyday communication. Conversations about money increasingly occupied communicative space that had previously been devoted to emotional sharing, relational maintenance, and collaborative future planning, reducing the capacity of communication to provide emotional support or strengthen the marital relationship.

Within the Malaysian context, these findings suggest that financial hardship functioned not only as an economic challenge but also as a condition that narrowed the range of conversations couples considered meaningful or possible. Participants described communication becoming increasingly centred on immediate responsibilities and financial obligations, leaving fewer opportunities to express appreciation, affection, or emotional reassurance. Interaction gradually

shifted towards managing scarcity instead of sustaining partnership, contributing to the progressive weakening of trust, commitment, and interpersonal connection.

From a Dynamic Systems perspective, repeated discussions centred on financial pressure gradually reorganised the interactional patterns of the marriage until transactional communication became embedded in everyday relational life (Solomon et al., 2021). Opportunities for emotional reciprocity became increasingly constrained as financial concerns dominated routine interaction. Social Learning Theory offers a complementary explanation for the persistence of this pattern (Allen et al., 2022). When conversations about money repeatedly resulted in criticism, disappointment, or emotional exhaustion, avoiding those discussions temporarily reduced interpersonal tension and became increasingly reinforced. Although this response offered short-term emotional relief, it simultaneously prevented both financial and relational concerns from being addressed constructively, allowing material hardship and emotional distance to reinforce one another over time.

The pattern identified in this theme represents the culmination of the broader communication breakdown described throughout this study. Earlier themes demonstrated how communication progressively lost its reciprocal, collaborative, and emotionally supportive functions through withdrawal, avoidance, unresolved conflict, third-party interference, and defensive interaction. Persistent financial strain accelerated this trajectory by transforming communication into a resource primarily directed towards practical survival rather than relational maintenance. By the later stages of the relationship, conversations no longer functioned as opportunities for intimacy, reassurance, or shared meaning-making. Instead, they reflected the cumulative consequences of prolonged relational deterioration. Taken together, the six themes suggest that communication breakdown before divorce is best understood as a cumulative relational process in which the multiple functions of communication are progressively diminished until meaningful dialogue is no longer capable of sustaining the marital relationship.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS: A CULTURALLY GROUNDED PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL MODEL

The findings support a psychoeducational model organised around four linked capacities: reciprocal communication, emotional regulation, collaborative decision-making, and conflict resolution. Reciprocal communication addresses the loss of responsiveness identified in the first two themes by developing active listening, clarification, and direct expression of needs. Emotional regulation targets the escalation, defensiveness, and withdrawal that made difficult conversations unsafe. Collaborative decision-making applies these skills to finances, family boundaries, and other recurring responsibilities, while conflict-resolution techniques provide a structured route from disagreement to negotiated action. The model is therefore grounded in the mechanisms identified in the data rather than in generic advice to communicate more frequently.

Dynamic Systems Theory and Social Learning Theory explain how the components are expected to work. Interventions should focus on recurrent interaction cycles rather than assign blame to one spouse. Couples can be guided to identify a trigger, map each partner's usual response, examine the immediate consequences, and practise an alternative exchange. Repeated use of responses that produce recognition, emotional safety, or workable agreement may alter the feedback pattern that previously reinforced silence, avoidance, or blame. Skills training should

therefore combine explanation, guided rehearsal, reflection, and follow-up practice rather than rely on one-off information sessions.

Implementation may occur through premarital courses, marriage-enrichment programmes, counselling services, and community or religious family-support agencies. Delivery should acknowledge Malay Muslim values concerning marital responsibility, privacy, extended-family relationships, and family continuity without treating those values as uniform or prescriptive. A staged format is recommended: early screening for recurrent communication cycles; four skills-based sessions aligned with the model's components; an applied session on financial and extended-family boundaries; and a follow-up review of whether new responses are being sustained. Future evaluation should assess changes in emotional safety, reciprocal participation, successful conflict repair, and confidence in joint decision-making, while referral procedures should remain available where coercion, violence, or severe psychological distress is identified.

CONCLUSION

Communication breakdown in these post-divorce accounts emerged as a cumulative relational process. Reciprocity declined, difficult issues were avoided or left unresolved, third parties altered the boundaries of marital dialogue, defensive exchanges constrained voice, and financial strain narrowed communication into transactional interaction. No single pattern adequately explains dissolution. Their significance lay in how they interacted and progressively weakened trust, emotional intimacy, and confidence in joint problem-solving.

The theoretical contribution lies in linking behavioural reinforcement to relational reorganisation. Dynamic Systems Theory shows how recurrent exchanges became stable features of the marital system; Social Learning Theory explains why spouses continued responses that reduced immediate tension despite worsening longer-term outcomes. Together, the theories clarify how silence, withdrawal, blame, and avoidance became self-sustaining. Communication breakdown was therefore neither a fixed personal deficit nor an isolated event, but a feedback process in which repeated responses altered the conditions of subsequent interaction.

The study also adds context-specific evidence from divorced Malay women in Terengganu. Participants' accounts show that communication was shaped by pregnancy, financial pressure, polygamous arrangements, extended-family involvement, and expectations concerning family harmony and privacy. These conditions did not determine divorce, but they influenced whose concerns could be voiced, how conflict was negotiated, and whether marital problems remained within the couple's communicative boundary.

For practice, the findings support intervention before avoidance and defensiveness become normalised. Premarital education, marriage-enrichment programmes, and counselling should move beyond generic advice to communicate more often. They should help couples recognise recurrent interaction cycles, regulate emotion during difficult exchanges, negotiate financial and family boundaries, and restore shared decision-making. The proposed psychoeducational model brings these elements together in a culturally responsive framework for Malaysian couples.

The study is limited by its reliance on retrospective accounts from divorced women in one Malaysian state. Recall is interpretive and may be shaped by later experiences, while the absence of former husbands' accounts prevents dyadic comparison. The findings are analytically transferable rather than statistically generalisable. Future research should combine longitudinal

and dyadic designs, examine variation across cultural and socioeconomic settings, and evaluate whether the proposed intervention components interrupt the feedback processes identified here.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors acknowledge the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia for funding this study through the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS/1/2023/SS10/UNISZA/02/3).

REFERENCES

Abreu-Afonso, J., Ramos, M. M., Queiroz-Garcia, I., & Leal, I. (2022). How couple's relationship lasts over time? A model for marital satisfaction. *Psychological Reports*, *125*(3), 1601-1627. https://doi.org/10.1177/00332941211000651

Agnihotri, N. (2023). Non-verbal communication. In *Promoting consumer engagement through emotional branding and sensory marketing* (pp. 220-225). IGI Global.

Aldea, A. S., Carr, D., & Heinämaa, S. (Eds.). (2022). *Phenomenology as critique: Why method matters*. Routledge.

Allen, S., Hawkins, A. J., Harris, S. M., Roberts, K., Hubbard, A., & Doman, M. (2022). Day-to-day changes and longer-term adjustments to divorce ideation: Marital commitment uncertainty processes over time. *Family Relations*, *71*(2), 611-629. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12599

Al-Syatiri, AU. (2020). al-Yaqut an-Nafis fi Mazhab Ibn Idris. *Sana'a: Maktabah al-Irsyad*.

Arianfar, N., Etemadi, O., & Hosseinian, S. (2022). Identifying marital interpersonal pathologies in men with avoidant attachment: A qualitative research. *The Family Journal*, 10664807221104124. https://doi.org/10.1177/10664807221104124

Bühler, J. L., Krauss, S., & Orth, U. (2021). Development of relationship satisfaction across the life span: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 147*(10), 1012–1053. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000342

Buys, T., Casteleijn, D., Heyns, T., & Untiedt, H. (2022). A reflexive lens on preparing and conducting semi-structured interviews with academic colleagues. *Qualitative Health Research*, *32*(13), 2030-2039. https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323221130832

Choudary, S. S., Khan, M. L., & Atta, N. (2024). Emotional distress, communication patterns and relationship dissatisfaction among married couples. *Research Journal for Societal Issues*, *6*(3), 01-22. https://doi.org/10.56976/rjsi.v6i3.2

Cole, T., Teboul, J. C. B., & Bishop-Royse, J. (2025). Loving conflict in marital relationships: An approach motivation perspective. *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice, 14*(3), 231–244. https://doi.org/10.1037/cfp0000258

Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM). (2026). *Marriage, divorce and rujuk statistics, Malaysia, 2025*. Retrieved July 16, 2026, from https://www.dosm.gov.my/portal-main/release-content/marriage-divorce-and-rujuk-

Dickson, K. S., Boateng, E. N., Adzrago, D., Addo, I. Y., Acquah, E., & Nyarko, S. H. (2023). Silent suffering: unveiling factors associated with women's inability to seek help for intimate partner violence in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). *Reproductive Health*, *20*(1), 110. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-023-01651-7

Eikrem, T., & Jevne, K. S. (2022). I do it for the children, and it's not a walk in the park: Parents' stories about how to maintain cooperative co-parenting during the divorce process. *Child & Family Social Work*, *27*(4), 815-824. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12928

Fatih, M., Fauzi, N., & Norman, E. (2025). Effective communication in building healthy and productive relationships. *MES Management Journal*, *4*(1), 662-671. https://doi.org/10.56709/mesman.v4i1.631

Galovan, A. M., Orbuch, T. L., Shrout, M. R., Drebit, E., & Rice, T. M. (2023). Taking stock of the longitudinal study of romantic couple relationships: The last 20 years. *Personal Relationships*, *30*(1), 174-216. https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12452

Gottman, J. (2018). *The seven principles for making marriage work*. Hachette UK.

İnci, R., Ayhan, F., & Eratilla, V. (2025). Family climate, marital satisfaction and life satisfaction in child brides in Southeast Turkey: A case control study. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2025.2511735

Jabatan Kehakiman Syariah Terengganu. (2023). *Statistik penceraian di Terengganu Tahun 2019-2022.* Malaysia.

Jackson, J. B., Carrese, D. H., & Willoughby, B. J. (2023). The indirect effects of financial conflict on economic strain and marital outcomes among remarried couples. *International Journal of Stress Management*, *30*(1), 69. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/str0000277

Jafari, H., Mahmoodabadi, H. Z., & Nobandegani, Z. N. (2022). A study of domestic violence against married women in Afghanistan: Grounded theory. *Journal of Social Behavior and Community Health, 6*(1), 810-818. https://doi.org/10.18502/jsbch.v6i1.9521

Khezri, Z., Hassan, S. A., & Nordin, M. H. M. (2020). Factors affecting marital satisfaction and marital communication among marital women: Literature of review. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, *10*(16), 220-236. http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v10-i16/8306

Lévesque, S., Bisson, V., Charton, L., & Fernet, M. (2020). Parenting and relational well-being during the transition to parenthood: Challenges for first-time parents. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *29*(7), 1938-1956. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-020-01727-z

Low, N., & Mounts, N. S. (2022). Economic stress, parenting, and adolescents' adjustment during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Family Relations*, *71*(1), 90-107. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12623

Mishra, N., Garbinsky, E. N., & Shu, S. B. (2025). Discussing money with the one you love: How financial stress influences couples' financial communication. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *35*(2), 288-296. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1430

Murphy, B. (2024). Strengthening identity: The impact of upward social comparisons on the leadership of women CCOs. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *36*(5), 388-406. https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2024.2338133

Novitasari, A. F., Luth, T., Djumikasih, D., & Chanifah, N. (2024). The importance of maturity in marriage from an Islamic legal perspective. *Journal of Legal Studies*, *33*(47), 99-108. https://doi.org/10.2478/jles-2024-0006

Olawe, O., & Olawe, O. E. (2024). The meme-ification of misogyny: Semiotic construction of gender stereotypes and stigma in Nigerian online forums discussing paternity fraud. *Journal of English Literature and Cultural Studies*, *5*(3), 35-52. https://doi.org/10.26655/JELCS.2024.02.7

Omoboye, M., Eneh, N. E., & Titor-Addingi, M. C. (2024). Communication patterns and marital satisfaction: A review of English language discourse in family counseling. *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews*, *21*(2), 1883-1891. https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2024.21.2.0634

Ottakkam Thodukayil, F. S., Palaniswamy, U., & Kunjumon, A. (2025). The causes of divorce and its effects on women: A systematic review. *Marriage & Family Review*, *62*(2), 59-94. https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2025.2484781

Oye, B. (2025). *Lessons on what not to do in marriage: building a love that lasts*. Faloye Oyewale.

Özad, B., Uygarer, G., Jamo, M. S., & Okaiyeto, S. (2020). Relationship failure and divorce among Nigerian couples: A case of poor conflict resolution. *Journal of Social and Political Sciences*, *3*(2), 305-312. https://doi.org/10.31014/aior.1991.03.02.170

Paphitis, S. A., Bentley, A., Asher, L., Osrin, D., & Oram, S. (2022). Improving the mental health of women intimate partner violence survivors: Findings from a realist review of psychosocial interventions. *PLoS One*, *17*(3), e0264845. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0264845

Peetz, J., Meloff, Z., & Royle, C. (2023). When couples fight about money, what do they fight about?. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *40*(11), 3723-3751. https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075231187897

Petronio, S. (2002). *Boundaries of privacy: Dialectics of disclosure*. SUNY Press.

Sadeghian, E., Ghasemi, S. A., & Maddineshat, M. (2025). Exploring marriage beliefs from the perspectives of married students. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *16*, 1481905. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1481905

Schwandt, J. (2021). Effects of the COVID-19 Global Pandemic on Marital Satisfaction. Master Dissertation. Saint Mary's College of California. Retreived April 10, 2025, from https://www.proquest.com/openview/8fcf884f0525581c4be82ef2ab33bd62/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y

Sharkawi, S. A., & Saili, J. (2022). Analisis isu perkahwinan dalam kalangan pasangan Melayu di Kuching, Sarawak sepanjang tahun 2018-2020. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, *7*(7), e001610-e001610. https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v7i7.1610

Siboni, L., Rucco, D., Prunas, A., & Anzani, A. (2022). "We faced every change together". Couple's intimacy and sexuality experiences from the perspectives of transgender and non-binary individuals' partners. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, *48*(1), 23-46. https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2021.1957733

Solomon, D. H., Brinberg, M., Bodie, G. D., Jones, S., & Ram, N. (2021). A dynamic dyadic systems approach to interpersonal communication. *Journal of Communication*, *71*(6), 1001-1026. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqab035

Sumari, M., Baharudin, D. F., Aman, N. S., & Razak, N. A. A. (2024). From divorce to remarriage: understanding the experience of remarried women in a collectivist society. *Family Transitions*, *65*(4), 323-353. https://doi.org/10.1080/28375300.2024.2362109

Tammelin, M. (2021). Couples' time management systems: your time, my time or our time?. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, *10*(1), 137-152. https://doi.org/10.1332/204674320X16059402201264

Vella, J. (2024). In pursuit of credibility: Evaluating the divergence between member-checking and hermeneutic phenomenology. *Research in Social and Administrative Pharmacy*, *20*(7), 665-669. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sapharm.2024.04.001

Wang, X., Li, Q., Chen, Z., & Fang, X. (2025). Stress perception and marital instability across the family life cycle: An actor-partner perspective. *Family Process*, *64*(1), e70018. https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.70018

Williamson, H. C. (2021). The development of communication behavior over the newlywed years. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *35*(1), 11-21. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/fam0000780

Worley, T., Scheinfeld, E., & Farris, K. L. (2024). Relational turbulence during family transitions: A lifespan perspective and roadmap for future research. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, *48*(4), 370-390. https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2024.2380298

Yan, Y. (2025). The private life approach to the rise of neo-familism in China. *The Sociological Review*, *73*(4), 753-770. https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261251347745

AUTHOR BIODATA:

NURUASLIZAWATI AYOB
Faculty of Applied Social Sciences,
Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA),
Terengganu, Malaysia

SITI HAJAR ABDUL RAUF (Corresponding Author)
Faculty of Applied Social Sciences,
Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA),
Terengganu, Malaysia
Email: hajarrauf@unisza.edu.my

DALEELER KAUR RANDAWAR
Faculty of Law,
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM),
Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia