

Factors of Childfree Choice: Insights from Malay Individuals in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The decision to remain childfree, defined as a deliberate choice to forgo having children, reflects a growing trend influenced by modern societal and economic dynamics. This qualitative study explores the multifaceted factors shaping childfree choices among Malay individuals in Malaysia, revealing a complex interplay of social and economic determinants. Through semi-structured and in-depth interviews with five informants, key themes emerged, including busy lifestyles, employer expectations, personal freedom, love-based marriages, shared values in marriage, a supportive social system, the absence of societal pressure, and concerns about financial instability. Findings indicate that demanding careers and economic uncertainties, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era, deter parenthood. At the same time, autonomy, mutual agreement, and supportive communities empower childfree choices, even in a traditionally pronatalist Malay cultural context. The study highlights a shift toward individualized definitions of marital fulfilment, challenging conventional family norms. Limitations include a small, non-representative sample and reliance on self-reported data, suggesting the need for mixed-methods and longitudinal research to enhance generalizability and explore evolving trends. Recommendations include developing family-friendly workplace policies, such as flexible work arrangements and affordable childcare, which could mitigate barriers to parenthood for those who desire it, as well as community interventions, while simultaneously studying their impact on childfree trends.

Keywords: Childfree, marriage, trend, Malaysia, factors

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the traditional linkage between marriage and parenthood has undergone a significant transformation. A childfree marriage is characterized by a couple's voluntary choice to remain without children, distinguishing it from involuntary childlessness due to circumstances like infertility (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016). Globally, more couples in countries such as South Korea, Japan, and the United States are opting out of parenthood due to economic uncertainty, changing gender dynamics, environmental concerns, and a growing emphasis on self-actualization (Lee & Zeman, 2024; Haneman, 2017; Carroll, 2018). In recent years, couples in Malaysia have increasingly followed the trend of childfree marriage (Ismail, 2025; Samsudi & Busro, 2023).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The increasing prevalence of childless marriages in Malaysia has raised growing concern due to its significant socio-demographic implications. This trend is influenced by both voluntary and involuntary factors, including

economic constraints, prioritization of personal autonomy, health issues, and delayed marriage resulting from urbanization and shifting gender roles (Samsudi & Busro, 2023; Abdullah et al., 2021). As a result, fertility rates have declined, and involuntary childlessness has become more visible. Beyond the demographic implications, childless individuals, particularly women, are often subjected to emotional distress such as anxiety, depression, guilt, and low self-esteem (Hamzah & Mulud, 2025). In a society where childbearing is seen as a cultural expectation, childless couples frequently face social stigma, isolation, and pressure from extended family and the wider community (Hamzah & Mulud, 2025; Abidin, 2019). Although this issue is receiving increasing attention in Malaysia, limited research has explored the experiences of childless couples in Malaysia, particularly in relation to the impacts of childless marriage among them. This gap highlights the need for a better understanding of the impact of childless marriage among Malaysian couples.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The study aims to achieve the following objective:

To explore the factors of the childfree trend among Malay individuals in Malaysia.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

This study will not only give significant value, especially to Malaysian individuals who are experiencing childfree marriages, but also to society and policymakers. By exploring individuals' lived experiences, this research provides a platform for them to voice their perspectives and opinions about the factors that influence the childfree trend. This study offers understanding about individuals and couples who may feel isolated or misunderstood and validates the marriage path that differs from the traditional path, which is often marginalized by society.

In addition, this study can help policymakers develop informed and inclusive strategies to address the growing trend of childfree marriages. The findings may lead to more supportive frameworks and interventions for individuals who prefer childfree marriages, including programs that may remedy the trend, such as access to psychological counselling, and redefinitions of family in law and policy. Offering incentives not only to couples who have children but also to couples who choose childfree for the marital well-being, regardless of parental status, could be one of the policies the government could provide.

Furthermore, this study offers future directions for researchers. Its findings can inform comparative studies, cultural research, and interdisciplinary inquiries, offering a solid foundation for scholars exploring modern family dynamics. Theoretically, it enriches academic research in sociology, helping to deepen our understanding of how childfree marriage reflects broader societal changes and evolving definitions of family and fulfilment in society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Busy Lifestyle

The decision to remain childfree is increasingly influenced by busy lifestyles characterized by demanding careers and personal ambitions. Lutfiyah and Maksum (2023) found that career-oriented individuals often prioritize professional growth and personal freedom over parenthood due to time scarcity and financial pressures, with many perceiving the time demands of childrearing as incompatible with their fast-paced lives. Likewise, Rahmayanti (2022) observes that married women juggling careers and education often opt for a childfree lifestyle due to the significant time demands of work and studies. This choice allows them to allocate their limited time to nurturing their relationship with their husbands. Furthermore, they are concerned that taking on roles beyond homemaking might hinder their ability to care for children properly.

Employer Expectations

Employer expectations and workplace policies significantly shape the decision to remain childfree, as they often create environments perceived as unsupportive of parenthood, particularly for women. Gloor et al.'s (2022) study highlights how organizational biases against parenthood, particularly motherhood, may inadvertently create an

environment that favors child-free employees. Employers' risk-averse hiring practices and assumptions about family-work conflict can lead to preferential treatment for childfree individuals, who are perceived as more committed and reliable. This illustrates how organizational practices shape employment outcomes, potentially encouraging childfree lifestyles by reducing perceived risks associated with hiring and promoting childfree individuals.

Additionally, Jacobs (2017) found that a workplace culture that supports childfree employees, particularly through fair work expectations, increases their loyalty to the organization. Among the five aspects of a childfree-friendly culture, only equal work expectations hurt loyalty. Feeling supported by the organization strengthens the link between fair work expectations and commitment for childfree employees. This suggests that equitable workplace practices enhance loyalty among childfree workers. These studies illustrate how employer-driven pressures, including expectations of uninterrupted career commitment, contribute to the growing trend of childfree decisions, as individuals prioritize professional stability over family building.

Personal Freedom

The desire for personal freedom significantly drives the decision to remain childfree, as individuals and couples prioritize autonomy and flexibility over the responsibilities of parenthood. Pederson (2025) and Höglund and Hildingsson (2023) highlight the centrality of personal freedom as a key factor for childfree. Pederson's (2025) findings indicate that all of her participants emphasized freedom as their primary reason for remaining childfree, valuing the independence and autonomy in daily life that comes with not having children, driven by the belief that parenthood's constraints would diminish their happiness. Similarly, Höglund and Hildingsson (2023) found that their participants prioritized freedom and control over their time, underscoring the desire for self-governance as a significant factor in choosing a childfree lifestyle. These studies collectively suggest that the pursuit of personal autonomy and the avoidance of perceived limitations associated with parenting are critical drivers of childfree, reinforcing the importance of individual freedom in shaping life choices.

Love-Based Marriages

The prioritization of love as the foundation of marriage, independent of the societal expectation to have children, significantly influences the decision to remain childfree, as couples redefine marital fulfilment through emotional intimacy and mutual connection rather than parenthood. Research indicates that parenthood can impact marital satisfaction, often due to changes in spousal dynamics. Dew and Wilcox (2011) suggest that the transition to parenthood reduces the quality of time wives spend with their husbands, which can negatively affect the spousal relationship. This impact appears more pronounced among women than men, with dissatisfaction potentially intensifying as commitment and time devoted to additional children increase. Similarly, Kowal et al. (2021) found a negative correlation between the number of children and marital satisfaction, supporting the growing global trend toward child-free lifestyles as couples prioritize relational fulfilment over parenthood.

Shared Values in Marriages

Shared values and mutual agreement between spouses play a crucial role in validating the decision to remain childfree, as couples prioritize aligned goals and mutual understanding over societal expectations of parenthood. Research highlights the deliberate nature of childfree decisions among married couples, driven by shared values and relational priorities. Harahap et al. (2025) found that couples consciously choose to remain childfree to prioritize happiness and well-being in their partnership, while also avoiding the potential for a toxic family environment. Similarly, Komala and D. W. (2022) observed that childfree couples share common values and undergo a decision-making process that evolves from mutual agreement to acceptance, varying in duration. This decision is shaped by two key factors: the centrality of the spousal relationship and the strength of their conviction to remain childfree.

Supportive Social System

The presence of a robust support system, comprising friends and family who validate and respect the choice to remain childfree, reinforces individuals' decisions to pursue this lifestyle by reducing stigma and fostering a sense

of belonging. Online childfree communities employ "choice" rhetoric to foster positive identities, framing members as autonomous decision-makers and mitigating criticism for diverging from societal expectations of parenthood (Morison et al., 2016). Additionally, Corbett (2018) highlights that childfree women pursue liberation from the prescribed meanings associated with motherhood, seeking alternative sources of purpose that promote personal growth and fulfilment. These findings indicate that supportive environments, such as online communities and evolving societal perspectives, play a crucial role in reinforcing childfree decisions by reducing stigma and cultivating a sense of community and belonging.

Absence of Societal Pressure

The absence of societal pressure significantly facilitates the decision to remain childfree, allowing couples to prioritize personal autonomy over conventional expectations of parenthood. Höglund and Hildingsson's (2023) study in Sweden revealed a gradual shift in societal attitudes, with a diminishing pressure on childfree individuals. A small subset of participants reported no external pressure to have children. Additionally, living in urban environments was perceived as more conducive to a childfree lifestyle due to reduced social control and greater opportunities for social connections with like-minded individuals. Most participants noted that their parents and siblings were supportive and treated them equitably, regardless of their childfree status. This acceptance was particularly pronounced among those with smaller families or those living geographically distant from their relatives.

Financial Instability

Financial instability is a pivotal economic factor influencing the decision to remain childfree, as the high costs of parenting and economic uncertainties in urban settings deter couples from taking on the financial burdens of raising children. Tori et al. (2023) identified economic challenges and the financial stability burden of raising children as key reasons people chose to remain childfree. They viewed having a child without adequate financial stability as a decision that could compromise their ability to fulfil their parental responsibilities. Factors such as unstable employment, lack of housing, insufficient income, or economic downturns led couples to perceive childbearing as a risky endeavor. Similarly, Nabila et al. (2024) noted that improving family finances is a primary goal for many young people today, driven by intense job market competition and a scarcity of employment opportunities relative to the population. Many young individuals expressed concerns about their ability to cover living expenses for themselves and their partners, with the added costs of raising children further exacerbating financial pressures.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

This study employs a qualitative approach and case study design aiming to explore the core motivations, lived experiences, and the construction of social perceptions faced by Malaysian married couples who choose to be childfree. A qualitative approach is well-suited for gaining an in-depth understanding of individuals' decision-making processes and subjective experiences within their socio-cultural contexts, thus aligning with this study's need for an interpretive understanding of a complex social phenomenon.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The study employed purposive sampling, specifically criterion and snowball sampling techniques, in selecting the sample. It enables the collection of rich, detailed data from informants who are most likely to provide valuable insights into the research question and meet the research criteria, specifically legally married individuals who have chosen to be childfree. The sample size comprised five Malay informants. They were recruited through social media platforms and referrals from friends. Efforts were made to ensure the sample represented a heterogeneous group covering different age cohorts (aged 24 to 46), occupational types (including law, manufacturing, architecture, services, and content creation), and a range of monthly income, to enhance the sample's social representativeness.

TABLE I Demographic Profile of the Informants

Informants' Demogra-phy	Azman	Bushra	Cempaka	Diana	Erina
Gender	Male	Female	Female	Female	Female
Age	24	38	30	46	28
State of origin	Johor	Selangor	Johor	Kuala Lumpur	Johor
State of residence	Johor	Kuala Lumpur	Selangor	Kuala Lumpur	Johor
Ethnic group	Malay	Malay	Malay	Malay	Malay
Religion	Islam	Islam	Islam	Islam	Islam
Level of education	Malaysian Certificate of Education	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Diploma
Field of expertise	Manufacturing	Law	Civil engineering	Content creation	Service
Current occupation	Production Leader	Lawyer	Engineering detailer	Content creator	Beautician
Years of service	2	9	1	11	1
Sector	Private	Private	Private	Self	Private
Range of income per month	MYR4,850 and below	MYR4,851-MYR10,970	MYR4,850 and below	MYR 10,971 and above	MYR4,850 and below

Table I presents the demographic profile of the five informants in this study, revealing their backgrounds in terms of gender, age, state of origin and residence, ethnicity, religion, education level, field of expertise, occupation, years of service, occupational sector, and monthly income range. The sample consists of one male (Azman) and four females (Bushra, Cempaka, Diana, and Erina), all of whom are aged between 24 and 46 years. Geographically, Azman, Cempaka, and Erina are initially from Johor, while Bushra is from Selangor and Diana from Kuala Lumpur. Regarding current residence, Azman and Erina reside in Johor, Bushra and Diana in Kuala Lumpur, and Cempaka in Selangor. All five informants are Malay and Muslim. Their educational backgrounds vary; Azman holds a Malaysian Certificate of Education, Erina has a Diploma, while Bushra, Cempaka, and Diana hold Bachelor's Degrees. Professionally, they are engaged in various fields: Azman works in the manufacturing sector as a production leader, Bushra in law as a lawyer, Cempaka in civil engineering as a detailer for a multinational corporation, Diana as a content creator, and Erina as a beautician in the service sector. Their lengths of service also differ, with Cempaka and Erina having 1 year of experience, Azman 2 years, Bushra 9 years, and Diana 11 years. All informants (Azman, Bushra, Cempaka, Erina, and Diana) work in the private sector, except for Diana, who is self-employed. The monthly income range varies, i.e., Azman, Cempaka, and Erina earn RM4,850 and below (working class category), Bushra earns between RM4,851 and RM10,970 (middle class category), and Diana earns RM10,971 and above (upper class category).

Data Collection Procedures

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Research Ethics Committee. Given the sensitivity of childfree choices within Malay-Muslim society, trust-building was prioritised through strict anonymisation, informed consent, and the option for participants to choose the interview medium (phone, WhatsApp) and language. Female informants were primarily interviewed by female researchers to enhance comfort and openness. These steps helped mitigate social desirability bias and provided a safe environment for participants to share their experiences candidly.

This study collected data through semi-structured and in-depth interviews. It allowed informants to express their thoughts and experiences in an open-ended manner, thereby yielding more comprehensive and authentic data. The interview protocol covered core topics including personal values, marital interactions, societal expectations, economic considerations, and perspectives on the issue of childfree marriage. The researchers first sought permission from the informants and then arranged interviews with them via phone or the WhatsApp application.

Interviews were conducted in English and audio recorded with the participants' consent to ensure accuracy and maintain confidentiality. Additionally, field notes documenting nonverbal cues and contextual observations were maintained during sessions (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018).

Each interview session lasted approximately 50 minutes, and informants were provided with an information sheet, a consent form, and an interview protocol prior to the session. The interviews were flexible, allowing the researchers to adjust questions based on responses. The recorded data were transcribed and analyzed for relevant themes to address the research objective.

Data Analysis

All recordings were transcribed verbatim using audio processing software. Data analysis in this study involved systematically organizing and evaluating the transcripts from semi-structured, in-depth interviews using thematic analysis. Initially, the data were manually coded to label themes and sub-themes relevant to the research objective, ensuring precision in the process. These themes and sub-themes were then critically examined to assess their trustworthiness. This approach ensured that the analysis was thorough, robust, and aligned with the study's objective.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic Diagram: Factors Shaping Childfree Decisions



Fig. 1 Thematic diagram illustrating the interaction of social and economic factors, surrounded by the cultural-religious context, shaping childfree decisions among Malay individuals.

This thematic map visualizes how lifestyle demands, workplace pressures, personal freedom, and financial instability interact within a broader Malay–Muslim cultural framework. It underscores that childfree choices are

not outcomes of isolated variables but emerge from an interconnected web of individual, structural, and cultural factors. Based on Figure 1, this study found two major themes related to the factors influencing the informants' decision to opt for a childfree choice among Malay individuals in Malaysia, namely social and economic factors. Under social factors, the sub-themes include a busy lifestyle, employer expectations, personal freedom, love-based marriages, shared values in marriage, a supportive social system, and the absence of societal pressure. For the economic factor, the sub-theme includes financial instability. Together, these sub-themes offer a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence informants to opt for childfree choice.

Social Factors

Social factors, including a busy lifestyle, employer expectations, personal freedom, love-based marriages, shared values in marriage, supportive social system, and the absence of societal pressure play a vital role in influencing the decision of the informants to opt for childfree. These issues will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

1. Busy lifestyle: A busy lifestyle, characterized by demanding careers and personal ambitions, significantly influences many informants' decisions to remain childfree. Time constraints and competing priorities often make parenthood seem impractical or undesirable. This is reflected in the narratives of Erina (pseudonym), a 28-year-old beautician, as follows:

"Career is a big part of my husband's and my life now. We are both busy, and having a child would require major adjustments we are not ready for yet."

A busy lifestyle, characterized by demanding careers and personal ambitions, shapes the decision to remain childfree, as it introduces substantial time constraints and competing priorities that render parenthood less feasible or appealing. This sentiment highlights how modern professional demands and urban lifestyles contribute to the childfree trend. This finding aligns with Lutfiyah and Maksum's (2023) study, which found that career-oriented individuals often prioritize professional growth and personal freedom over family building due to time scarcity and financial pressures. Similarly, Rahmayanti (2022) note that married women who are working and pursuing education choose to be childfree because the demands of work and studies consume most of their time, leading them to opt out of having children so that the remaining time can be devoted to caring for their husbands. Additionally, there is a concern that children may not be adequately cared for if the mother has responsibilities beyond being a homemaker.

These findings can also be illuminated through gender role theory (Stanziani, Cox, MacNeil, & Carden, 2024), as Malay women face structural expectations to balance professional ambitions with maternal responsibilities. Choosing to be childfree can thus be seen as a form of resistance against restrictive gendered roles that equate womanhood with motherhood.

2. Employer expectations: Informants further implied that employers are also a reason that led them to opt for childfree status. This is reflected in how Cempaka (pseudonym), a 30-year-old engineering detailer, explained as follows:

"I opt to be childfree due to the expectation from my employer. Most companies do not tolerate mothers and pregnant women. Well, it does impact my husband and my decision to be childfree."

This demonstrates how organizational structures perpetuate unequal gender roles, reinforcing the dilemma captured by gender role theory (Stanziani, Cox, MacNeil, & Carden, 2024). Employment environments demanding uninterrupted career commitment make parenthood particularly costly for women, pushing couples toward childfree lifestyles. Employer expectations and workplace policies influence the decision to remain childfree, as they often create environments that are perceived as unsupportive or intolerant of parenthood, particularly for women. This perspective aligns with the studies conducted by Gloor et al. (2022) and Jacobs (2017), which demonstrate how organizational biases and workplace cultures can inadvertently encourage childfree lifestyles. Gloor et al. (2022) reveal that employers' risk-averse hiring practices and assumptions about family-work conflict often favor childfree employees, particularly women, who are perceived as more committed

and reliable, thus reducing perceived risks in hiring and promotion decisions. Similarly, Jacobs (2017) finds that a workplace culture emphasizing equitable work expectations fosters loyalty among childfree employees, with organizational support strengthening their commitment, though unequal expectations can undermine it. Together, these studies highlight how employer-driven expectations, such as the expectation of uninterrupted career dedication, shape employment outcomes and may contribute to the rising trend of childfree decisions, as individuals prioritize professional stability over parenthood.

3. Personal Freedom: Another factor that substantially led the informants to opt for a childfree life is freedom. They value their freedom more than having the responsibility of becoming parents. This can be seen in the narratives of Erina (pseudonym), a 28-year-old beautician, as follows:

“Nowadays, there is an increasing awareness about the challenges of parenting. Therefore, my husband and I opt to be childfree due to the freedom we enjoy without having any children.”

The opinion is further extended by Cempaka (pseudonym), a 30-year-old engineering detailer, by saying:

“For our generation that is concerned about freedom, in which you can do any activities without being interfered with by the child or having to think ahead before doing anything.”

This pursuit of personal freedom strongly reflects Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s individualization thesis (Dutra, 2022), where individuals increasingly prioritize self-realization, lifestyle autonomy, and subjective happiness over traditional familial obligations. This finding aligns with research conducted by Pederson (2025) and Höglund and Hildingsson (2023), which highlight that personal freedom is a central factor in choosing a childfree lifestyle. Pederson (2025) found that all participants cited freedom as their primary reason for remaining childfree, valuing the independence and autonomy in daily life that childlessness affords, driven by the perception that parenting would reduce their happiness. Likewise, Höglund and Hildingsson (2023) reported that their participants prioritized self-governance and control over their time as key factors in opting for a childfree lifestyle. Overall, these studies underscore that the desire for personal autonomy and the avoidance of parenthood’s perceived constraints significantly influence the decision to remain childfree, highlighting the critical role of individual freedom in shaping life choices.

4. Love-Based Marriages: Some informants emphasized that their marriage is built on love. It is unconditional and does not require any external factors, such as having children, to make them feel complete. This is exemplified by the narratives of Cempaka (pseudonym), a 30-year-old engineering detailer, as follows:

“We believe a fulfilling marriage is built on love, not necessarily on having children. I believe every couple should define fulfilment in their terms.”

Similar opinion is also shared by Diana (pseudonym), a 46-year-old content creator:

“We talk honestly and remind each other why we chose this life. He often tells me that he did not marry me for children, he married me because of myself. That always reassures me.”

The prioritization of love as the cornerstone of marriage, independent of the expectation to have children, influences some informants’ decisions to remain childfree, as they view their relationship’s fulfilment as self-contained and not reliant on external factors, such as parenthood. This aligns with studies that suggest that parenthood can influence marital satisfaction, primarily due to shifts in spousal interactions. Dew and Wilcox (2011) argue that becoming parents often decreases the quality time wives share with their husbands, adversely affecting their relationship. This effect is generally more pronounced for women than men, with dissatisfaction potentially increasing as more time and commitment are devoted to additional children. Likewise, Kowal et al. (2021) identified a negative relationship between the number of children and marital satisfaction, which supports the growing global preference for child-free lifestyles as couples prioritize relational fulfilment over having children. This resonates with Giddens’ concept of the pure relationship, which highlights intimacy and emotional satisfaction as the primary basis of marriage, independent of external validation through children. This resonates

with Giddens' concept of the pure relationship, which highlights intimacy and emotional satisfaction as the primary basis of marriage, independent of external validation through children.

5. Shared values in marriage: Informants also viewed that childfree should not be an issue if both spouses agree to it. This is reflected in the narratives of Diana (pseudonym), a 46-year-old content creator, as follows:

“Childfree is just as valid as marriage with children. As long as both partners are on the same page and support each other, that is all that matters. A marriage does not need children to be meaningful. Fulfilment comes from love, respect, and shared purpose, not just children.”

Similar opinion is also expressed by Azman (pseudonym), a 24-year-old production leader, by saying:

“Yes, culturally and religiously, having children is encouraged. However, Islam also emphasizes the importance of intention and understanding between spouses. Fulfilment comes from understanding and shared purpose.”

Here, cultural and religious norms intersect. Informants reinterpret Islamic values (Alosaimi, Kadir, & Zaidan, 2024) to legitimate their choices, aligning with Mu'in, Miswanto, Edy, Santoso, and Fikri (2024) argument that Malay Muslims actively reconcile liberty and faith in making childfree decisions. Shared values and mutual agreement between spouses are pivotal in validating the choice to remain childfree, as informants emphasize that a marriage's meaning and fulfilment derive from mutual understanding and alignment rather than societal expectations of parenthood. This finding aligns with Harahap et al.'s (2025) study, which found that couples have similar shared values and deliberately opt for a childfree lifestyle to prioritize their happiness and well-being within the partnership, while also seeking to prevent a potentially unhealthy family dynamic. Similarly, Komala and D. W. (2022) noted that childfree couples share aligned values and engage in a decision-making process that progresses from mutual agreement to acceptance, with varying timelines. This choice is influenced by two primary factors: the importance of the marital bond and the firmness of their commitment to a childfree life.

6. Supportive social system: The findings revealed that the support system is another vital social factor influencing the childfree trend among the informants. This support system is often provided by close friends or those who share the same interests and understand their decision. This can be seen from Bushra (pseudonym), a 38-year-old lawyer, as follows:

“I have a tight group of girlfriends. Some are mothers, some are not, but we all respect each other. We joke about it too, like “You raise humans, I raise houseplants!” It is nice to have a support system that gets it.”

Her narrative illustrates the importance of peer validation, while her further reflection on joining an online community highlights how digital spaces provide moral and emotional reinforcement. Such stories contextualize informant's lived experiences and demonstrate how supportive environments mitigate stigma.

She further added the support system she got from the members of an online community as follows:

“I joined a Facebook group called Caremongering Malaysia. It is a platform where volunteers can contribute to the community during the COVID-19 pandemic. I saw many mothers crying out for help, such as for milk and diapers. It hit me hard. I do not want to bring a child into this world just for them to suffer. When I shared my perspective about not wanting children, some mothers on the platform thanked me for being honest. I found the real sense of compassion, especially among women. It showed me we are all just trying to do our best.”

The presence of a supportive social network influences the decision to remain childfree, as it provides emotional validation and acceptance from close relationships, enabling informants to embrace their lifestyle choice confidently. This highlights how a supportive community, comprising both parents and non-parents, fosters an environment where childfree choices are normalized and respected. The findings are consistent with those of Morison et al. (2016), who observed that online childfree communities employ "choice" rhetoric to construct positive identities, presenting members as independent decision-makers and shielding them from judgment for deviating from traditional parenthood norms. Similarly, Corbett (2018) notes that childfree women seek freedom from the conventional expectations tied to motherhood, pursuing alternative avenues for meaning that foster

personal growth and fulfilment. These insights suggest that supportive settings, including online platforms and shifting societal attitudes, are vital in affirming childfree choices by reducing stigma and fostering a sense of belonging and community.

7. Absence of societal pressure: The findings further uncover one of the most interesting and unexpected social factors that is non-typical of Malay culture, namely the lack of societal pressure that typically encourages couples to have children after getting married. This is further reflected in the narratives of Cempaka (pseudonym), a 30-year-old engineering detailer, as follows:

“I am grateful that I do not experience any pressure. People expect us to have children in our early stages of marriage, but there is no pressure from our family. It might be because we live far from them. They do not frequently live up to some of the expectations.”

The absence of societal pressure in certain urban contexts suggests an ongoing cultural negotiation where Malay couples selectively embrace or resist pronatalist norms. This is consistent with individualization theory (Howard, 2019), whereby traditional social obligations weaken in the face of urbanization and shifting value systems. This lack of familial and societal pressure, potentially facilitated by physical distance, allows couples like Cempaka and her husband to defy cultural norms without major pushback. Therefore, the absence of social pressure can empower childfree choices. This finding aligns with a study conducted by Höglund and Hildingsson (2023), which found evidence of evolving societal attitudes, accompanied by reduced pressure on individuals who choose not to have children. A minority of participants experienced no societal expectations to have children. Urban settings were reported as more supportive of a childfree lifestyle, offering lower social scrutiny and more opportunities to connect with others sharing similar views. The majority of participants indicated that their parents and siblings were accepting and treated them fairly, irrespective of their childfree choice. This support was particularly notable among those with smaller families or those residing far from their relatives.

Economic Factors

Economic factor, such as financial instability, is found to be the most concerning issue that led the informants to opt for a childfree lifestyle. These issues will be discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

1. Financial instability: The most prominent economic factor influencing the informants’ decision not to have children is related to the issue of financial instability. Most of them revealed their concern about their inability to afford the costs of parenting. This is mirrored in the narratives of Bushra (pseudonym), a 38-year-old lawyer, as she said:

“One of the main reasons we decided not to have children is our financial instability. My husband was initially more traditional. He is the eldest son in his family, so there was that “carry the name” thing. However, after a few real talks and seeing what raising children costs, he got it. Especially after COVID-19 struck, it prompted us to rethink everything. One night, we just sat down and said, “What if we just... not have any children?” We both realized it is not just about us; it is about a whole new life. It is a lifelong commitment. It is not that we are selfish; it is that we know our limits. We cannot afford it. Imagine having children and not being able to provide for their basic needs, such as food. Moreover, what if you get laid off, or someone gets sick? That is a nightmare. It is not just about love; it is about being able to provide.”

Her narrative captures the anxieties of financial precarity intensified by post-COVID realities. This aligns with Honcharova and Kuryliak (2021) and highlights how economic risks underpin childfree decisions in Malaysia.

Cempaka, a 30-year-old engineering detailer, further added similar opinion by saying:

“Financial instability issue was part of my husband’s and my decision not to have any children. Living in the city puts much pressure on a person, such as the need to send the children to kindergarten or a babysitter. Some of my friends pay MYR900 for babysitters. Even though we earn a satisfactory salary, we still have other commitments such as house rent and car loans. Life in the city is expensive. We do not have the privilege to cut some costs by asking for help from our parents to babysit the children because we are living far from them.”

Financial instability emerges as a critical economic factor influencing the decision to remain childfree, as informants express concerns about the high costs of parenting and the potential risks associated with economic instability, particularly in urban settings. Bushra, for instance, reflects the impact of post-COVID-19 economic uncertainties and the lifelong financial commitment of raising a child. Similarly, Cempaka points to urban living costs, such as childcare and housing, as barriers to parenthood. Recent literature supports these concerns, emphasizing the role of economic pressures in childfree decisions. For example, Tori et al. (2023) highlighted economic difficulties and the financial demands of parenting as primary factors influencing individuals' decisions to remain childfree. They considered raising a child without sufficient financial security as a choice that could undermine their parental duties. Unstable job situations, lack of housing, low or inconsistent income, and broader economic challenges led couples to view having children as a high-risk decision. Likewise, Nabila et al. (2024) observed that many young people prioritize improving their financial stability due to fierce competition in the job market and a shortage of jobs relative to the number of job seekers. Young individuals frequently expressed concerns about meeting their own and their partners' living costs, with the additional expenses of child-rearing intensifying their financial worries.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the decision to remain childfree among the informants is shaped by a complex interplay of social and economic factors, reflecting a deliberate choice to prioritize individual aspirations and practical realities over traditional expectations of parenthood. Busy lifestyles and demanding employer expectations highlight the time and career constraints that deter parenthood, while the pursuit of personal freedom and love-based marriages underscore the value placed on autonomy. Shared values and robust support systems further validate childfree choices by fostering mutual agreement and social acceptance, particularly in contexts where societal pressure is unexpectedly absent, as seen in urban Malay couples distanced from traditional norms. Financial stability emerges as a critical concern, with the high costs of urban living and economic uncertainties reinforcing the decision to forgo parenting. Collectively, these findings, supported by narratives from informants illustrate a growing trend toward childfree lifestyles driven by modern societal dynamics, personal priorities, and economic realities, challenging conventional notions of family and fulfilment.

Placing Malaysia within a broader Southeast Asian context reveals that similar demographic shifts are occurring in neighboring countries. In Indonesia, young Muslim couples increasingly delay or avoid childbearing due to comparable urban and economic pressures (Nisa, 2020). In Brunei, despite strong pronatalist state policies, younger generations show signs of prioritizing education and career over early parenthood. Thus, Malaysia's childfree trend is not isolated but forms part of a wider regional reconfiguration of family norms, mediated by distinct Malay-Muslim values and religious reinterpretations.

LIMITATION

This qualitative study on the factors influencing childfree choices among informants provides valuable insights. However, it is limited by its small sample size and reliance on purposive sampling, which may not fully represent the broader population's perspectives, particularly across diverse cultural or socioeconomic contexts in Malaysia. The reliance on self-reported narratives from informants introduces potential biases, as their accounts may reflect subjective interpretations or social desirability effects. Additionally, the study's focus on urban settings and specific demographic groups, such as Malay individuals or professionals, limits its generalizability to rural or non-professional populations. The absence of longitudinal data further restricts the ability to assess how these factors evolve, and the lack of quantitative measures hinders precise comparisons of the relative weight of each factor, such as financial stability or societal pressure, in shaping childfree decisions.

RECOMMENDATION

Future research on childfree choices should employ mixed-methods approaches, combining qualitative in-depth interviews with quantitative surveys to enhance generalizability and capture a broader range of perspectives across diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and geographic contexts, thereby addressing the limitations of small, purposive samples. Longitudinal studies are recommended to explore how factors such as financial stability,

employer expectations, and societal pressures evolve and influence childfree decisions at different life stages. Practically, researchers should collaborate with policymakers and employers to develop family-friendly workplace policies, such as flexible work arrangements and affordable childcare, which could mitigate barriers to parenthood for those who desire it, while simultaneously studying their impact on childfree trends.

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