



Love Knows No Boundaries: Exploring the Challenges in Interracial Marriages among Sarawakian Women

Effinie Anak Handi Wander* & Jamayah binti Sali

Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia.

ABSTRACT

Interracial marriages remain a taboo in Malaysian society, with couples facing distinct challenges compared to same-race couples, including discrimination, lack of support, and the adjustment to different cultural norms. This research aimed to explore the challenges faced by women in interracial marriages, their coping strategies, and their expectations for the future of such unions. A qualitative approach was employed, with interviews conducted with eight Sarawakian women. The data were analysed using Thematic Analysis. The challenges these women encountered included cultural differences, lack of marital support, religious differences, and the specific experiences of being a wife in an interracial marriage. Coping strategies identified included communication, distractions, and the integration of both spouses' cultures. These findings highlight the need for increased awareness of the challenges faced by women in interracial marriages, underscoring the importance of policymaking, enhanced counselling practices that account for cultural differences, and community-based programmes that address their needs.

Keywords: interracial marriages, cultural differences, married women, psychological well-being, cultural adaptation

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Email address: 77944@siswa.unimas.my (Effinie Anak Handi Wander)

*Corresponding author

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1 INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a unique country with a demographic composition of 70.4% Bumiputera, 22.4% ethnic Chinese, and 6.5% ethnic Indians as of July 2024 (Siddhartha, 2024). Sarawak, located in East Malaysia, is home to the Dayaks, Malays, and Chinese. Interracial marriages are not uncommon in Malaysia's multicultural society. As of 2019, approximately 11% of registered marriages in Malaysia were mixed marriages (Loh, 2021). According to Nagaraj (2009), the rate of interracial marriages is higher in East Malaysia. Recently, Dr. Jerip Susil, the Deputy Minister of Transport for Sarawak, awarded native status certificates to children of at least one native Sarawakian parent, noting, "There are many mixed marriages in Sarawak, which is our uniqueness. It is our law that children whose parents (either father or mother) are native can apply for Sarawak Bumiputera status" ("16 Padawan residents", 2024). This also grants these children the right to inherit native Sarawakian land (Ting et al., 2023). Additionally, intercultural marriages between Malaysians and non-Malaysians are also prevalent. The Registration Department of Malaysia recorded approximately 29,698 marriages between non-Muslim Malaysians and foreigners from 2018 to 2022 (Abd. Halim, 2023). However, despite this, interracial marriages are still considered taboo in Malaysian society (Reddy & Selvanathan, 2020).

1.1 Challenges of Couples in Interracial Marriages

Yeung (2017) highlighted that microaggressions and bias are forms of racism faced by interracial couples. Robinson (2019) argued that individuals often believe their own group is superior, leading them to view people from 'outside' groups with suspicion. He also emphasised the role of prejudice, where mostly negative stereotypes are imposed on the 'other'. For example, in Malki's (2021) study, one participant stated that he refused to have a Black brother-in-law, assuming that all Black people were untrustworthy based on his negative personal experiences with a few individuals. In Malaysia, racial discrimination is often manifest through microaggressions. Lino and Hashim (2019) found that microaggressions in Malaysia are shaped by an ingroup versus outgroup mindset, particularly when one marries non-White foreigners. In Anaelechi et al. (2022), African spouses reported facing negative comments and difficulty in securing employment. However, Nor Hafizam et al. (2023) found that Malaysians' acceptance of interracial marriages is relatively high.

Interracial couples often receive less support from their close ones (Midy, 2018). Henderson and Brantley (2019) recorded that low parental support can contribute to stress within marriages. Midy also argued that a lack of support can lead to reduced marital satisfaction and even feelings of resentment towards one's partner. In social or public situations, interracial couples frequently experience hostility and rejection from others (Midy, 2018). Interracial couples in public spaces report being stared at, which can be uncomfortable (Bauer, 2010). Consequently, interracial couples often refrain from displaying affection in public due to the increased scrutiny and perceptions from onlookers (Steinbugler, 2005). Another form of hostility involves unnecessary commentary. In a study on discrimination in Black-White couples, Black partners often reported receiving questions or comments from their own racial community, questioning how their identity as a Black person could be affected by marrying a White person (Walker, 2020).

Government institutions also provide limited support for transnational marriages. Jana Saim et al. (2023) noted that children of Malaysian women and foreign spouses are not granted citizenship, whereas the opposite applies to children of Malaysian men. This systemic discrimination reflects a lack of support for these marriages and creates additional challenges for the couple. A couple that acknowledges their distinct cultural backgrounds will spend less time adapting to each other's cultures (Romano, 1997). For a mixed marriage to succeed, "the acceptance of interracial relationships may require an individual to think beyond societal norms, as a low tolerance for ambiguity could be linked to a low acceptance of interracial relationships" (Robinson, 2019). The same applies to religious differences. In Malaysia, when a non-Muslim marries a Muslim, they are required to convert and practise the Islamic faith. Puah et al. (2021) stated that most Muslim converts choose to fully embrace the teachings of Islam in order to assimilate into the Muslim community.

Gender roles are also significant in marriage and may present challenges for couples. Men have traditionally been seen as the providers, while women are expected to care for the household and children, reflecting a patriarchal view of marriage (Choi et al., 2021). However, the emergence of new family norms, such as career women and stay-at-home dads, signifies a shift in traditional gender roles (Oláh et al., 2018). Gender roles can be influenced by culture. For example, in East Asian societies, women are often expected to "become dedicated mothers," which can also impact their happiness (Qian & Qian, 2015).

1.2 Coping Strategies Employed

One of the most common coping strategies for these challenges is seeking support. In the context of romantic relationships, parents play a crucial role in shaping their children's perceptions of relationships (Xia et al., 2018). Additionally, social support from the community is essential. Positive relationships with others offer the benefits of receiving assistance when needed (Jang & Danes, 2016). Furthermore, a supportive social circle helps to maintain the commitment between spouses (Dainton, 2015). Undoubtedly, support from one's spouse is the most vital element in a marriage. According to Sappor & Affum (2023), effective communication between partners, particularly when challenges arise, is a key resource in coping.

When challenges in marriage become overwhelming, mental health services may be sought. However, counsellors must consider multicultural perspectives (Daniel, 2023). Notice (2019) also emphasised that therapists should recognise that clients' issues may be influenced by their cultural backgrounds. Religion remains a fundamental aspect of human life, and Henderson and Brantley (2019) suggested that individuals who engage in religious practices tend to focus more on their personal, internal identities. Moreover, in a study by Vazquez et al. (2019), religion was found to provide mixed-race couples with a platform to enhance their resilience and adapt to negative societal perceptions.

1.3 PERMA Model

Psychological well-being is defined as the positive mental state of an individual. One widely used model to conceptualise this is the PERMA model, developed by positive psychologist Martin

Seligman (2011). The model consists of five components, represented by the acronym PERMA as shown in Figure 1 below.

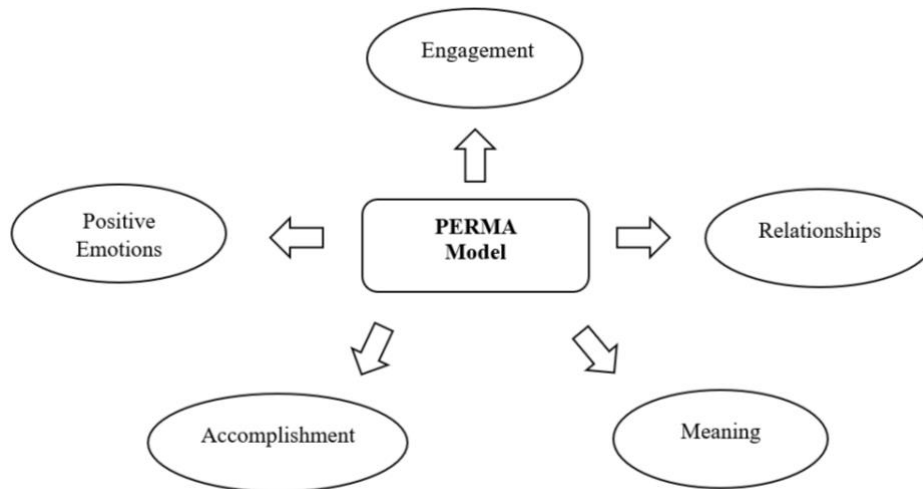


Figure 1. PERMA model (Seligman, 2011).

1.4 Problem Statement

A study conducted by Calderon et al. (2022) found that couples in interracial relationships tend to experience poorer psychological well-being. Stigma also contributes to lower relationship quality (Brooks & Morrison, 2022). It is essential to understand the reasons behind such findings and develop appropriate solutions. Furthermore, there is a noticeable lack of research on interracial marriages in Malaysia. The integration of various races in Malaysia has made interracial marriages increasingly common (Nagaraj, 2009; Reddy & Selvanathan, 2020), making it crucial to focus on the Malaysian context in this regard. The intersection of race and religion plays a significant role in the experiences of interracial couples in Malaysia, particularly for converts. Therefore, it is important to understand the unique experiences of individuals who undergo religious conversion. As noted by Greene and Stiefvater (2019), women are often pressured to marry well. Listening to their stories can provide valuable insights into how gender roles shape their experiences within marriage.

1.5 Research Objectives

1. To explore the challenges of interracial marriages experienced by Sarawakian women.
2. To understand the coping strategies employed by Sarawakian women in interracial marriages.
3. To understand the future expectations and hopes of Sarawakian women in interracial marriages.

1.6 Research Framework

Figure 2 illustrates the research framework for this study.

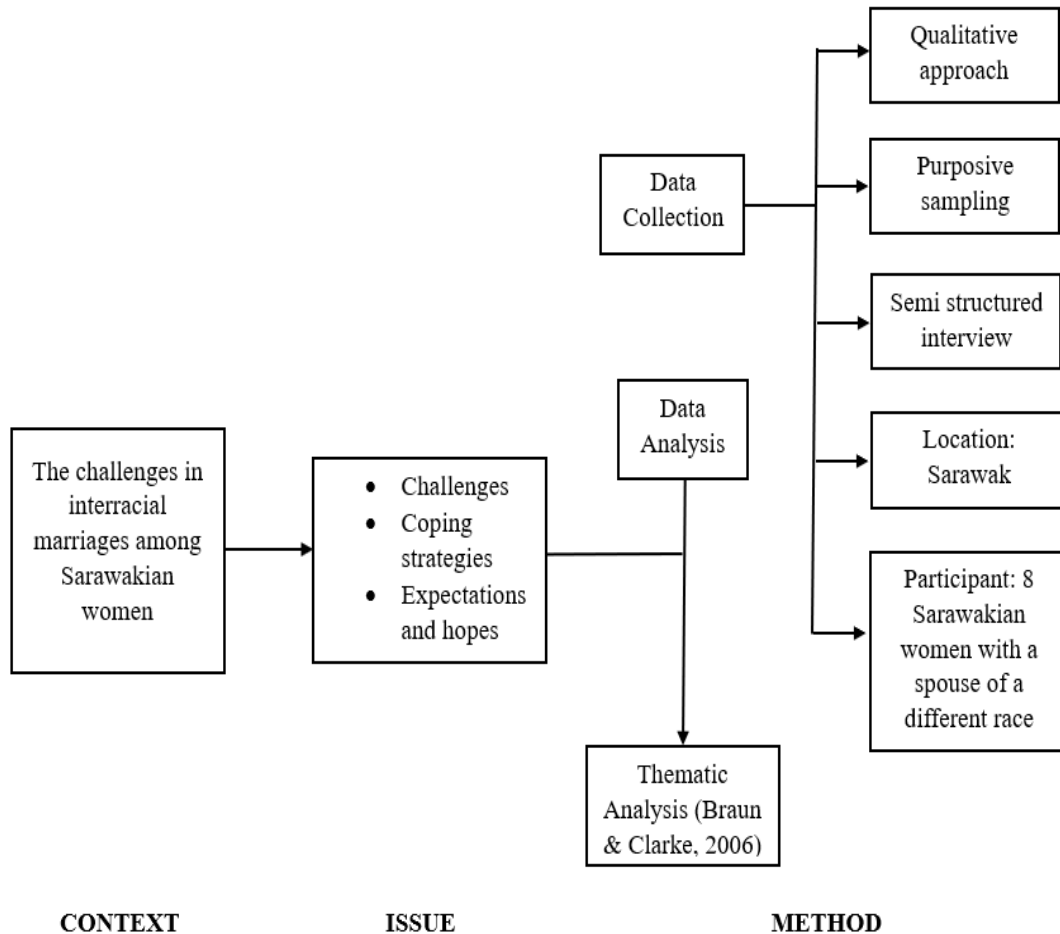


Figure 2. Research framework.

2 METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative approach. According to Tenny et al. (2017), qualitative research explores participants' views and experiences, while Leavy (2020) notes that it provides meaning to activities and behaviours. Therefore, this research design aligns well with the topic and objectives of the study. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with participants. A pilot study was conducted to test the procedures and methods (Arian et al., 2010). For this research, the pilot study involved one participant. To enhance the reliability of the study, a thorough review of recent literature related to the research topic was conducted, and comparisons were made between past findings and the results of this study to ensure greater reliability.

2.1 Participants

Four inclusion criteria were established for selecting participants, as shown in Table 1. Eight women who met all the criteria were chosen to participate voluntarily and were compensated with Grab or Zus Coffee gift vouchers. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were employed. Purposive sampling involves the "intentional selection of informants based on their ability to elucidate a specific theme, concept, or phenomenon" (Robinson, 2017), while snowball sampling occurs when participants recommend other potential participants (Parker et al., 2019). Participants were recruited through social media promotions and mutual contacts to facilitate the recruitment process.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria in selecting participants.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Sarawakian	Non-Sarawakian
Female	Male
Married	Single or unmarried
Married to a spouse of a different race	Married to a spouse of the same race

2.2 Data Collection

Social media facilitated a smoother and more efficient process for contacting participants, addressing their questions about the research, and ensuring the maintenance of their privacy. A semi-structured interview was conducted, consisting of "why" and "how" questions (Adams, 2015). This approach allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the women. The interview was divided into four parts (see Appendix A for the guided questions). The interviews were conducted either face-to-face in Kuching or online and were recorded using a recording device for transcription purposes.

2.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data." This process was carried out in six distinct phases.

Phase 1: Data Familiarisation: The data collected from the interviews were transcribed in full. The researcher then read and re-read the transcriptions to become thoroughly familiar with the content and immerse themselves in the rich information gathered. Initial thoughts and ideas were noted for future reference.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes: Relevant or significant excerpts from the data were assigned initial codes. Data extracts that could be categorised together were grouped under corresponding codes.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes: In this phase, the initial codes were reviewed and organised into potential themes. The researcher analysed the codes to identify meaningful connections and determine which codes could be grouped together under overarching themes.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes: The proposed themes were then revisited and refined. It was important to ensure that the themes remained relevant as new codes were added to the analysis. A thematic map was also created to visualise the relationships between the different themes.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming the Themes: The themes were further developed and refined, ensuring that each theme was distinct and appropriately named. The final themes were defined clearly, avoiding being either too broad or too complex.

Phase 6: Report Production: In the final phase, the data were synthesised to produce a comprehensive academic report. This report provided in-depth explanations and interpretations of the findings, offering insights into the research topic.

As highlighted by McKenna and Gray (2018), ethical considerations in research aim to protect the rights of participants. To ensure this, ethical measures such as the participant information sheet and informed consent form were employed. The participant information sheets explained the purpose of the study, participants' roles, and the confidentiality of their data. Informed consent forms were distributed to all participants, ensuring they understood their involvement and gave consent for their responses to be used in the research. These consent forms were read and signed before the interviews began.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three main themes emerged from the data analysis, which will be discussed in this section. Table 2 below provides the demographic data of the participants and their spouses, which offers important context for understanding the themes that follow. The participants' names are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality, and their spouses' data are presented in italics for clarity.

3.1 Theme 1: I Love You, Despite Our Differences

This theme, 'I Love You, Despite Our Differences,' examines the challenges interracial couples face, particularly in terms of adapting to cultural and religious differences, as well as the varying levels of support they receive from loved ones and outsiders. A summary of this theme is provided in Table 3 below.

Table 2. Demographic data of participants.

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Religion	Years of Marriage	Occupation	Children
Shania	31	Bidayuh-Chinese	Christian	3 years	Engineer	None
	31	<i>Chinese-Peranakan</i>			<i>Engineer</i>	
JoJoe	47	Bidayuh	Muslim (convert)	23 years	Housewife	5
	50	<i>Malay-Iban</i>			<i>Banker</i>	
Aina	37	Malay	Muslim	2 years	HR Executive	None
	40	<i>Caucasian (UK)</i>			<i>Chef</i>	
Rafidah	43	Malay	Muslim	26 years	Housewife	2
	62	<i>Bidayuh</i>			<i>MBKS worker</i>	
Ika	32	Malay	Muslim	6 years	Housewife	1
	33	<i>Turkish (Turkey)</i>			<i>Pilot</i>	
Edith	28	Iban-Chinese	Christian	7 months	Legal consultant	None
	34	<i>Black (Swaziland)</i>			<i>Graphic designer</i>	
Diana	51	Bidayuh	Christian	22 years	Security guard	3
	54	<i>Indian</i>			<i>Hindu</i>	
Lina	35	Chinese	Muslim (convert)	8 years	Housewife	3
	38	<i>Malay</i>			<i>Technician</i>	

Table 3. Theme 1.

Main Theme	Subthemes	Category
Theme 1: I Love You, Despite Our Differences	Cultural Differences	
	The 'Significant' Others	a. Loved Ones b. Outsiders
	Religious Differences	
	Being the Wife	

3.1.1 Cultural Differences

Most participants encountered difficulties adjusting to cultural differences in their relationships.

“...I'm so used to eating rice and I have to eat rice every day but he has to eat bread and I have to make like 2 meals all the time...” (Ika)

“...If let's say in KL, totally, he refuse to dine in or to eat any street food in hawker centres...” (Aina)

“...They [Westerners] don't call daddy or uh, dad. They just call by name. So, until now I feel awkward to call my parents-in-law by their name...” (Aina)

These experiences highlight how cultural differences present a significant challenge for interracial couples. This can be explained by the phenomenon of culture shock, where individuals unfamiliar with certain traditions may feel discomfort or awkwardness upon encountering them. While culture shock is typically temporary, couples may continue to struggle with adjusting. This difficulty can be attributed to Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, which suggests that cultural differences—such as the higher collectivism in Turkey (46) compared to Malaysia (26)—can affect relationship dynamics. Despite these challenges, all participants expressed that they learned to compromise and adapt to their spouse's cultural background. As Robinson (2019) points out, tolerance for cultural differences is essential in mixed marriages, a sentiment supported by Anaelechi et al. (2022), who emphasised that such tolerance fosters harmony in interracial relationships.

3.1.2 The 'Significant' Others

Many of the research participants also recalled having less support for their marriage from their closed ones and even from outsiders.

3.1.2.1 Loved Ones

“...My own parents is disagree with this uh, marriage actually. But not so bad. Yeah. It's, it's my own parents, because different religion of course...” (Jojo)

“...She really didn't want my husband to marry someone of a difference race. Of a different religion...” (Rafidah)

“...My friend really concerned about my relationship. Like, 'oh you know that mostly Caucasian, they are not sincere to convert, convert Muslim, if you convert just to get married, you better don't get married with this guy' ...” (Aina)

3.1.2.2 Outsiders

“...And then she [Edith’s therapist] would be like, Africans are like that, you know? Do you really wanna marry and then go to Swaziland?” (Edith)

“...When women marries an outsider, oh, these people will bash. But when a man marries a White person, they would worship him...” (Aina)

“...It's all nerve wracking every time he flies off, I worry. Is immigration going to stop him?” (Edith)

Support and encouragement, or the lack thereof, from significant people in an interracial couple’s life are crucial factors that can either make or break the marriage. Based on the findings, most women initially faced rejection of their marriage, consistent with Midy (2018), who noted that interracial couples often receive less support than same-race couples. There are various reasons for this rejection, such as religious conversion, relocation, and more. Prejudice, as highlighted by Robinson (2019), is also a major factor contributing to the rejection of their marriage. For example, Lina’s parents disagreed with her marriage because they feared her Malay husband might marry other women. A lack of support can deplete psychological resources (Bratter & Eschbach, 2006). Furthermore, the limited support from the Malaysian government for international marriages creates additional challenges, such as difficulties in registering marriages or securing employment.

3.1.3 Religious Differences

Most participants who converted religions found that they faced issues in adapting to it.

“...Really difficult [converting to Islam]. Yeah, so I'm, I'm...even now, I'm still learning...” (Jojoe)

Religious differences also present a significant challenge. Jojoe, for example, continues to struggle with fully practising Islam. However, it is beneficial for converts to immerse themselves in their faith, as this can contribute to maintaining their overall well-being. Garsen et al. (2020) found that religion positively impacts mental health, with studies also showing that religious involvement is linked to lower levels of depressive symptoms (Braam & Koenig, 2019). Furthermore, Vazquez et al. (2019) highlighted that religion can serve as a valuable resource for building resilience, helping individuals navigate social stigmas and negativity surrounding their interracial partnerships.

3.1.4 Being the Wife

A woman’s responsibilities as the wife and mother may pose challenges too.

“...I think I do feel the pressure of having to, you know, keep up with my A game and like maintain this house...” (Shania)

“...There's a small voice in the back of your head saying, hey, you're a wife now. You have to make sure everyone's fed and it's stupid...” (Edith)

“...I have a baby, right? Most of the time of course I'm the one to take care of her. And I don't have a helper. So that kind of stressed me out...” (Ika)

The experience of being a wife presented significant challenges for these women. Shania, for instance, acknowledged the difficulty of balancing both her roles as a wife and a career woman. This reflects a shift in traditional gender stereotypes, in line with findings by Oláh et al. (2018). Additionally, some participants expressed feeling pressured when it came to caring for their children. This aligns with the study by Hori and Kamo (2017), which found that Asian wives are often expected to fulfil the role of both mother and caregiver.

3.2 Theme 2: Navigating the Storm

Theme 2, 'Navigating the Storm,' explores how interracial couples manage the complexities of their relationship through effective communication, seeking support from others, and finding ways to incorporate both cultures into their lives, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Theme 2.

Main Theme	Subthemes	Category
Theme 2: Navigating the Storm	Talking it Out	a. Communication with Spouse b. Talking to Loved Ones c. Professional Help
	Taking a Breather	
	A Shared Culture	a. Assimilation & Adaptation b. Incorporation of Both Cultures

3.2.1 Talking it Out

3.2.1.1 Communication with Spouse

For many of them, communicating what's wrong with their spouse is the most effective way as well as compromising with each other.

“...I explain. I cannot be like Turkish people, so if you have to accept me, you have to accept me as Malaysian...” (Ika)

“...I need to put it in front of him that, ‘hey, this is the situation that I’m in. This is important to me...” (Shania)

“...That was something that I had to compromise on because he did explain to me that it’s more so of a respectful gesture towards my in laws...” (Edith)

3.2.1.2 Talking to Loved Ones

Aside from talking it out with their spouses, many participants also turn to people they trust.

“...From my male best friend also, he said that ‘different people, different challenges, it doesn’t mean that the uh, Malaysians they married Caucasian people will divorced, you will encounter the same problem’...” (Aina)

“...She’s a Peranakan and like we are close friends. So sometimes if my husband say something I’ll be like ‘true or not ah’? So she will verify...” (Shania)

“...I also talked with a few people that have married with Turkish, how is it at first...” (Ika)

3.2.1.3 Professional Help

A few of the participants have also mentioned that they seek out assistance through therapy.

“...I met with psychiatrist, from Malaysia...” (Ika)

Communication with spouses, as supported by Sappor and Affum (2023), is considered the most effective way to cope with relationship issues. Initiating discussions with their spouses demonstrates a willingness to address problems, thereby reinforcing their commitment to one another, as also noted by Grether and Jones (2020). Additionally, seeking advice from others plays a crucial role. For instance, Aina's close friends often validated her feelings, while Ika frequently sought guidance on adjusting to life in Turkey. Venting concerns allows individuals to feel heard and provides valuable perspectives that help them reassess situations, ultimately alleviating their worries and shifting their mindset.

3.2.2 Taking a Breather

When things get too much, half of the interviewees cited taking time to relax or engage in hobbies as a way to cope.

“...So eventually when you start to slow down, there's a lot of changes that happen within that 5 minutes when you're sitting down alone and thinking about things...” (Edith)

“...Go fishing lah. Fishing, release all the pain in the heart, throw away the feeling of tiredness from thinking too much...” (Diana)

It can be concluded that engaging in distractions, such as immersing oneself in hobbies or taking time to relax, is one of the primary strategies used to cope with marital issues. Waugh et al. (2020) found that distractions are strongly correlated with higher well-being and positive emotions. Therefore, it is essential for participants to engage in activities that help divert their attention from marital problems, aligning with the "Engagement" aspect of the PERMA Model.

3.2.3 A Shared Culture

Over time, the participants and their spouses were able to comfortably share and practice both of their cultures, demonstrating their ability to adapt and integrate these cultural elements into their shared household.

3.2.3.1 Assimilation & Adaptation

“...But it was one of the things [visiting a Peranakan traditional house] that I think helped me to understand my husband's side even more...” (Shania)

“...Hindus do their own prayers, so I also try to follow lah...” (Diana)

“...He actually has a lot of self-initiative to try and understand because he doesn't know everything about my side of the family because we live here [West Malaysia]...” (Shania)

“...So, he actually was the one to hang up these small Chinese New Year lanterns and tiny, like lockets...” (Edith)

3.2.3.2 Incorporation of Both Cultures

“...Raya we must go to my, parents in law. So Gawai and Christmas we must go back to uh, Serian, to my own kampung...” (Jojo)

“...Chinese's celebration, all got. Malay one, also got. If I'm at Kuching, my sister celebrates Christmas, we would also tag along...” (Lina)

Adapting to and integrating two distinct cultures is essential, as it 'broadens people's horizons by recognising the value of other cultures, putting their own cultural norms into perspective, and

making them less in-group centric' (Galinsky, 2002). Participants recognised the significance of this process, enabling them to gradually embrace and practice a culture that was once unfamiliar to them. This aligns with Anaelechi et al. (2022), who emphasise that embracing differences can facilitate quicker adaptation.

3.3 Theme 3: The Collective Vision

Theme 3, summarised in Table 5, is called 'The Collective Vision,' whereby it explores the strategies and insights shared by participants on how to address the challenges of interracial marriage, focusing on destigmatisation, support systems, and advice for future couples.

Table 5. Theme 3.

Main Theme	Subthemes	Category
Theme 3: The Collective Vision	Destigmatisation	a. Education & Awareness b. Religion ≠ Race
	Messages of Support	a. Government Support b. Like-Minded Community
	Words of Wisdom	a. Be Ready & Smart b. Be Strong, Do it for Love

3.3.1 Destigmatisation

3.3.1.1 Education & Awareness

Most participants hoped that society would be more educated and be more open-minded on different cultures, as the first step towards destigmatising the taboo surrounding mixed marriages.

“...Try to live with other cultures also. Once you understand them, then they will understand you back...” (Jojo)

“...I would tell them to educate themselves. Because not everyone living in the same bubbles as theirs...” (Ika)

“...So, I do wish that it was actually more normalized and more like not so frowned upon because yeah, there's not something bad out of it, actually. If anything, you actually embrace a whole different culture altogether...” (Shania)

3.3.1.2 Religion ≠ Race

Participants also stated that it is important that we separate religion and race as two different things.

“...A lot of people misunderstand, traditions and religions, people don't understand, because it's all mixed up now. Like what Malay people cannot do, actually their religion does not allow it...” (Lina)

Destigmatising interracial marriages is crucial not only for helping individuals in mixed marriages feel more accepted in society, but also for fostering a more open-minded community that embraces differences, thereby reducing intercultural conflicts (Keith, 2019). It also plays a key role in distinguishing between race and religion. For instance, Lina expressed frustration that her parents did not support her marriage, as she had to convert to Islam when marrying her Malay husband. This mirrors findings from Reddy & Selvanathan (2020), which suggest that mixed marriages remain taboo in Malaysia, likely due to the perception that race, and religion are inherently linked. Shifting the view of mixed marriages from something shameful to a norm could contribute to a more unified society, challenging the belief that converting to a new religion requires one to abandon their racial identity.

3.3.2 Messages of Support

3.3.2.1 Government Support

For transnational couples, their challenges were primarily related to legal processes. As a result, they expressed a desire for greater support from the Malaysian government to help navigate these circumstances.

“...I need to have a clear goal, clear perspective and clear SOP. Because I deal with immigration in West Malaysia, I don't expect that totally different with immigration in Sarawak...” (Aina)

“...I would say maybe more support in immigration just because we're an international couple, our most recent obstacles were immigration related...” (Edith)

3.3.2.2 Like-Minded Community

In addition, the interviewees also mentioned having a community that recognises their experiences, enabling them to feel less alone and to garner important advice from others in the same situation.

“...It's either you have a role model, who is in sort of a similar boat as you or you have a community like a group of you...” (Shania)

“...Like me, I join the group right in Facebook, about mixed marriage, and it really help me...” (Ika)

Social support was also something participants expressed a desire for. Lina, for instance, wished her parents had been more supportive, as their opinions were particularly important to her. Her experience aligns with that of Henderson and Brantley (2019), who found that low parental support can contribute to poor mental health. In contrast, those in international marriages expressed a need for greater governmental support. Such support can enhance overall, as noted by Grether and Jones (2020). Furthermore, support also includes having people to talk to, especially those who understand the challenges they face. A community that acknowledges the struggles of interracial couples can prevent individuals from feeling isolated, offering a platform for advice, emotional expression, and ultimately helping to safeguard their well-being.

3.3.3 Words of Wisdom

3.3.3.1 Be Ready and Smart

The participants offered a few words of wisdom to other Sarawakian women considering interracial marriage in the future. Many emphasised the importance of being truly ready before settling down.

“...It helps to actually like talk to people or get to know each other for a while to see what you're getting yourself into...” (Shania)

“...Like I have to face the religion that I will convert to later. So I think, before marriage, you have to have understanding. Must understand yourself first...” (Lina)

3.3.3.2 Be Strong, Do it for Love

Participants also agreed that being strong is the best case to overcome challenges in their interracial marriages.

“...And then you must get ready, especially women, they must get ready for the consequences...” (Aina)

“...I think don't be afraid lah, because differences are not necessarily a bad thing...” (Shania)

Besides, reminders that love for their spouses drives the marriage are also agreed upon.

“...Don't matter how his culture is, but if you love that person, love him as the one he is ...” (Ika)

Having experienced interracial marriage, the participants believe there are key steps women should take before pursuing a mixed marriage. First, rational thinking is crucial. This involves conducting a background check on a potential spouse and gaining a clear understanding of one's own desires. According to Hadden et al. (2018), a person who is ready for marriage will invest more and be fully committed. Additionally, despite the challenges that may arise later, it is important to remember that love can overcome all obstacles. Furthermore, being strong-willed is essential. Any woman entering an interracial marriage must be prepared for difficulties and maintain a positive mindset, believing that differences should be celebrated rather than seen as an issue.

3.4 Application of PERMA Model

The PERMA model can be applied to the challenges faced by Sarawakian women in interracial marriages. In terms of Positive Emotions, participants initially reported feeling negative emotions due to marital issues; however, as they found effective coping strategies, they gradually experienced happiness. Regarding Engagement, participants engaged in hobbies that helped distract them from their hardships. In terms of Relationships, those with strong connections to their spouses and others received constant support, which helped them navigate difficulties in their marriage. Meaning was found when participants had the opportunity to understand and appreciate a culture different from their own, enriching their lives. Finally, Accomplishment was achieved when participants were able to resolve the challenges in their mixed marriages, improving their psychological well-being.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by shedding light on the challenges faced by women in interracial marriages, offering new perspectives on the Asian experience. The findings are beneficial for marriage and relationship counsellors working with interracial couples. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of social support in destigmatising mixed marriages. Future research could expand the scope by including participants from other states in Malaysia to enable comparisons between West and East Malaysia or focus specifically on international couples to better understand their unique challenges. Mixed methods research, combining surveys on well-being with interviews, could also enhance data collection.

However, there are limitations to this study. As the research is qualitative and interview-based, the findings may be subject to bias, and the generalisability of the results is limited. Given that this study focuses on a small sample of Sarawakian women, the findings may not represent the experiences of men or individuals from other regions of Malaysia. Furthermore, the conclusions drawn may not be applicable to other areas of the country. The primary aim of this study was to understand the challenges faced by Sarawakian women in interracial marriages, and the limitations outlined above should be considered when interpreting the findings.

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APPENDIX A: GUIDED QUESTIONS

Section A: Building Rapport and Explaining the Purpose of the Interview

1. Hi, how are you today?

(The researcher conducts a self-introduction and explains the objectives of the interview)

Section B: Understanding the Demographics of Participants and Their Spouses

1. What should I call you during this interview session?
2. How old are you? And your spouse?
3. Where is your hometown located? What about your spouse's?
4. What are you and your spouse's occupation? What is your income range respectively?
5. What is your ethnicity? What is your spouse's ethnicity?
6. What are you and your spouse's highest educational qualifications?
7. What is your current religion and your partner's?
8. How did you meet your current spouse? What's the story behind it?
9. How long have you been married to your spouse? How many children do you have?

Section C: Exploring the Challenges Faced in Interracial Marriages

1. Are there any challenges that you have experienced related to marrying a partner of a different ethnicity than your own?
2. Do you find it challenging to adapt to/adopt your partner's own cultural beliefs and norms?
3. How do you and your partner try to tolerate or incorporate one another's culture into your married life together?
4. How did your loved ones react when they found out you were marrying someone of a different race?
5. Do you think social stigmas surrounding interracial marriage have affected your relationships with your spouse and loved ones?
6. (For those who switched religions due to interracial marriages) Do you find the experience of converting to another religion after marriage hard?
7. As the wife, do you find that it is more challenging to navigate married life, especially in the context of interracial marriage when compared with your spouse?
8. What are the challenges you have faced as a woman in your marriage?
9. (For those with children) Do you think that your child, having mixed cultural and racial identity may face challenges in these aspects as well? If so, what type of challenges?

Section D: Understanding the Coping Strategies Employed by Women in Interracial Marriages

1. What would you usually do in dealing with these challenges?
2. Are the coping strategies effective in assisting you?
3. Do you have any support system that you turn to for help in navigating these challenges?
What kind of assistance/support do you need?
4. How do you and your spouse work together to overcome these difficulties?

Section E: Understanding Their Hopes and Expectations for the Future

1. What do you wish for in the future in terms of society's perception/stigma on interracial marriages?
2. What type of social support do you anticipate for other people in interracial marriages?
3. What are your expectations for women in the future who may marry a partner of a different race?