

Cohabitation: An Exploratory Qualitative Study on the Challenges and Adaptive Strategies of Unmarried Couples in Malaysia

Kohabitasi: Satu Kajian Kualitatif Eksplorasi tentang Cabaran dan Strategi Adaptif Pasangan Tidak Berkahwin di Malaysia

Celeste Lee Xin Rou¹, Leong Qiao Yi², Wirawahida Kamarul Zaman³, Sonisha Johanthan⁴

^{1,2,3,4} Faculty of Arts and Social Science, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Jalan Universiti, Bandar Barat, 31900, Kampar, Perak, Malaysia.

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*Corresponding author:
Wirawahida Kamarul Zaman,
Faculty of Arts and Social
Science, Universiti Tunku
Abdul Rahman, Jalan
Universiti, Bandar Barat,
31900, Kampar, Perak,
Malaysia
Email:
wirawahida@utar.edu.my

Abstract: Cohabitation among unmarried couples has become increasingly visible in Malaysia despite persistent cultural stigma and the absence of legal protection. This exploratory qualitative study examines the lived experiences of four unmarried cohabiting couples to understand the challenges they encounter and the adaptive strategies they employ to sustain relationship stability. Using semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis, the study identified three major challenges: adjusting to daily living patterns, navigating external and cultural pressures, and managing financial strain. Participants described difficulties aligning routines, negotiating household responsibilities, concealing their living arrangements from disapproving family members, and coping with unequal financial contributions or ongoing monetary stress. In response, couples adopted a range of adaptive strategies, including collaborative household management, shared financial planning, structured communication rituals, cooling-off periods during conflict, and mutual compromise. Some also developed approaches to manage societal and familial disapproval, either through respectful boundary-setting or by prioritising personal autonomy. While these strategies often enhanced emotional closeness and mutual understanding, unresolved external pressures and financial burdens continued to strain certain relationships. The findings highlight the complex interplay between relational, cultural, and economic factors shaping cohabitation in Malaysia. This study contributes qualitative insight into an understudied population and offers implications for practitioners supporting couples navigating non-traditional relationship arrangements.

Keywords: cohabitation, unmarried couples, qualitative study, adaptive strategies

Abstrak: Kohabitasi dalam kalangan pasangan belum berkahwin semakin ketara di Malaysia meskipun wujud stigma budaya dan ketiadaan perlindungan undang-undang. Kajian kualitatif eksplorasi ini meneliti pengalaman hidup empat pasangan yang tinggal bersama bagi memahami cabaran yang mereka hadapi serta strategi adaptif yang digunakan untuk mengekalkan kestabilan hubungan. Melalui temu bual separa berstruktur dan analisis tematik refleksif, tiga cabaran utama dikenal pasti: penyesuaian kepada corak hidup harian, tekanan luaran dan budaya, serta ketegangan kewangan. Peserta melaporkan kesukaran menyelaraskan rutin, merunding pembahagian kerja rumah, menyembunyikan hubungan daripada keluarga yang tidak bersetuju, dan menangani ketidakseimbangan sumbangan kewangan atau tekanan kewangan berterusan. Sebagai respons, pasangan mengamalkan pelbagai strategi adaptif termasuk kerjasama dalam pengurusan rumah tangga, perancangan kewangan bersama, ritual komunikasi, tempoh bertenang semasa konflik, dan kompromi bersama. Ada juga yang membangunkan pendekatan untuk mengurus penolakan sosial dan keluarga, sama ada melalui penetapan batasan secara hormat atau dengan mengutamakan autonomi peribadi. Walaupun strategi ini meningkatkan keakraban emosi dan kefahaman bersama, tekanan luaran dan beban kewangan yang berterusan masih menjejaskan sesetengah hubungan. Kajian ini menyumbang pemahaman kualitatif terhadap populasi yang kurang dikaji dan menawarkan

implikasi penting kepada pengamal yang menyokong pasangan dalam hubungan tidak tradisional..

Kata kunci: kohabitasi, pasangan belum berkahwin, kajian kualitatif, strategi adaptif

Introduction

Cohabitation is defined as living together in a romantic relationship without formal marriage which has become increasingly visible in Malaysia as young adults weigh the emotional and financial risks of divorce against the perceived benefits of marriage (Brown et al., 2023; Yik, 2021). For many, cohabitation serves as a trial period to assess compatibility and relationship stability before entering a legal union (Yik, 2021). However, the Malaysian sociocultural and legal landscape presents unique challenges: domestic conflicts in cohabiting households are often interpreted differently from those in marriages, complicating access to social and legal protections (Lim, 2017). Cohabiting couples also experience higher dissolution rates due to weaker institutional support and differing long-term commitment goals (Eickmeyer et al., 2023). These pressures are compounded by societal expectations, financial disputes, and cultural disapproval, all of which threaten relationship stability (Bak-Matejczuk et al., 2020; Eickmeyer et al., 2023). While some couples employ adaptive strategies such as open communication and aligning financial or personal goals to strengthen their relationships (Foran et al., 2022; Graf, 2019), the broader Malaysian context remains largely unsupportive of cohabitation.

Despite the growing normalisation of cohabitation across Asia, driven in part by Western cultural exposure and shifting relationship norms (Lesthaeghe, 2020; Shi & Lievens, 2022), research in Malaysia remains limited. Existing studies tend to focus on married couples or Western populations, leaving significant gaps in understanding the lived experiences of unmarried cohabitants, the challenges they face, and how these experiences shape relationship stability (Foran et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2022). Although cohabitation is increasingly practiced, the mechanisms underlying its comparatively lower relationship stability remain unclear, particularly in contexts where legal protection is absent and social stigma persists (Malek, 2016; Uprety, 2023). Given that many of the complexities of cohabitation such as negotiating expectations, managing financial strain, and navigating external pressures are deeply subjective, a qualitative approach is essential to capture how couples interpret and respond to these challenges. Such insights are crucial for informing support services and guiding couples considering cohabitation within Malaysia's evolving sociocultural landscape (Seok et al., 2022).

To guide this exploratory qualitative study, the research objectives and questions were developed to focus specifically on understanding the lived experiences of unmarried cohabiting couples in Malaysia. These objectives and questions ensure that the inquiry remains centered on uncovering the challenges couples encounter and the adaptive strategies they employ within their cohabiting relationships.

The research objectives of this study are:

1. To explore the challenges that faced by unmarried couples during cohabitation
2. To explore the adaptive strategies towards challenges faced by unmarried couples

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. What are the challenges faced by unmarried couples during cohabitation?
2. What adaptive strategies do unmarried couples use to maintain relationship stability during cohabitation?

This exploratory qualitative study is significant because it offers much-needed insight into the lived experiences of unmarried cohabiting couples in Malaysia, a group often overlooked in relationship research despite the increasing normalisation of cohabitation in the country (Malek, 2016). By examining how couples navigate challenges such as differing expectations, communication breakdowns, and financial strain, the study provides practical guidance that may help future cohabitants anticipate potential risks and strengthen relationship stability. The findings also support practitioners, particularly marriage counsellors, by highlighting the distinct relational dynamics and coping mechanisms of cohabiting couples, enabling more tailored intervention strategies. For scholars, the study contributes qualitative depth to a field dominated by quantitative perspectives, offering a foundation for further interdisciplinary research on contemporary relationship structures within Malaysia's socio-cultural context.

Literature review

Cohabitation refers to unmarried couples living together in a shared household, a practice increasingly recognised as a meaningful relationship stage despite its varied definitions and motivations (Brown et al., 2023; Thornton et al., 2008). Individuals cohabit for reasons ranging from testing compatibility to viewing it as an alternative to marriage (Casper & Bianchi, 2001; Shenk, 2018). Although cohabitation has become more common globally, its acceptance and meaning differ across cultural contexts. In Malaysia, the trend gained visibility from the 1990s onward, influenced by Western norms and shifting attitudes toward marriage, even though cohabitants lack legal protection and continue to face social stigma (Malek, 2016; Shi & Lievens, 2022). Research also shows that cohabiting individuals often receive lower social approval from family and peers, which may contribute to relational strain (Dagar & Chawla, 2024).

Despite its growing prevalence, limited research has examined the specific challenges faced by unmarried cohabiting couples, particularly in Asian and Malaysian contexts. Existing studies highlight several potential stressors, including lifestyle adjustments, financial strain, and societal or familial disapproval (Malek, 2016; Karuppiah, 2017). These pressures may influence relationship stability, especially given that cohabiting couples tend to pool resources less and receive less familial support compared to married couples (Kravdal et al., 2023). Communication difficulties and unresolved conflicts further contribute to instability, whereas effective communication has been linked to better conflict resolution and improved mental health among cohabiting partners (Tam et al., 2011). During the COVID-19 lockdown, dyadic coping was found to be a key predictor of well-being among Malaysian cohabiting couples, suggesting that collaborative coping strategies play an important role in sustaining relationship quality (Seok et al., 2022).

Insights from related relational contexts further clarify how couples sustain their relationships under strain. Sawai et al. (2025), in their study of commuter marriages, emphasised that maintaining a relationship requires consistent emotional investment, communication, and shared responsibility, even when couples face structural challenges such as physical distance. Although commuter marriages differ from cohabitation, the underlying mechanisms of relationship maintenance they describe the role of emotional connection and equitable contribution, particularly parallel the strategies used by cohabiting couples to preserve stability. Their findings also highlight that financial contribution forms part of relational upkeep, aligning with evidence that economic imbalance and budgeting conflicts commonly disrupt cohabiting relationships.

Research comparing cohabitation and marriage also indicates that cohabiting unions may be more vulnerable to instability due to differing expectations, weaker institutional support, and greater emphasis on autonomy (Shenk, 2018; Thornton et al., 2008). While some cohabiting couples transition to marriage, this likelihood is shaped by socioeconomic factors and personal beliefs about long-term commitment (Manning & Smock, 2002; Miller et al., 2011). However, these findings are largely drawn from Western contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how Malaysian cohabitants navigate challenges and maintain stability within a socio-cultural environment that does not formally recognise or support their relationships. Psychological adjustment research similarly reinforces the importance of coping strategies in stressful interpersonal environments. Nurdin Muhammad et al. (2025) found that individuals experiencing prolonged uncertainty and limited social support often report emotional strain, which shapes their behaviour and interactions. These patterns mirror the experiences of cohabiting couples who navigate stigma, concealment, or family disapproval, suggesting that relational strain is frequently intensified by broader psychological and environmental pressures.

Given these gaps, the present study focuses on two key areas: (1) the challenges faced by unmarried cohabiting couples, and (2) the adaptive strategies they use to manage these challenges. By qualitatively exploring these lived experiences, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of cohabitation in Malaysia and provides insights into how couples sustain relationship stability despite social, financial, and interpersonal pressures.

Methodology

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design to investigate the challenges and adaptive strategies experienced by unmarried cohabiting couples in Malaysia. A qualitative approach was essential because cohabitation involves subjective, context-bound experiences that cannot be meaningfully captured through quantitative tools such as surveys or experiments (Turale, 2020). The target population consisted of unmarried heterosexual couples aged 21 and above who were currently cohabiting in Malaysia. Purposive sampling, specifically typical case sampling, was used to recruit participants who could provide rich and relevant information about the cohabitation experience (Campbell et al., 2020; Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). Inclusion criteria required participants to be Malaysian citizens, in a romantic

relationship, cohabiting for at least 6 months, currently working, and willing to discuss the challenges they face in their relationship. Muslims were excluded due to religious prohibitions against cohabitation. A total of eight participants (four couples) were recruited, with sample size determined by data saturation, consistent with qualitative research recommendations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Englander, 2012).

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words while giving researchers the flexibility to probe for deeper insights. Open-ended questions were used to explore challenges, adaptive strategies, and perceptions of relationship stability, aligning with qualitative inquiry guidelines (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Pathak et al., 2013). A pilot study involving one couple was conducted to refine the interview questions, resulting in clearer wording and removal of repetitive or unclear items.

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke’s (2021) six phases: familiarisation, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. This method enabled the identification of patterns related to challenges and adaptive strategies within cohabiting relationships. To enhance credibility, data source triangulation was employed, with information collected from both partners in each couple, allowing comparison of individual and shared perspectives (Carter et al., 2014). This strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings by ensuring that themes reflected multiple viewpoints rather than a single narrative.

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to minimise potential researcher bias. The researchers acknowledged that their own assumptions and perspectives could influence data interpretation, particularly given the sensitive nature of cohabitation in Malaysia. Reflexive awareness was upheld by documenting reflections, discussing interpretations within the research team, and continuously examining personal beliefs to ensure transparency and reduce interpretive bias.

Results and Discussion

This study aims to explore the challenges and adaptive strategies unmarried couples face during cohabitation. Two research questions were developed to achieve the objectives. The first research question examines the challenges that unmarried couples face during cohabitation, with three themes emerging: Adjusting to Daily Living Patterns, Navigating External and Cultural Pressures, and Managing Financial Strain. The second research question focuses on how couples adjust during cohabitation, with three themes emerging: Collaborative Maintenance of Household and Relationship, Conflict Resolution, and Negotiating Societal and Familial Perspectives.

Table 1: First Research Question

| Themes | Subthemes |
|--|--|
| Adjusting to Daily Living Patterns | 1.1 Managing Routine Differences |
| | 1.2 Negotiating Household Responsibilities |
| Navigating External and Cultural Pressures | 2.1 Responding to Familial Disapproval |
| | 2.2 Confronting Cultural Norms and Expectations |
| Managing Financial Strain | 3.1 Negotiating Spending and Budgeting Practices |
| | 3.2 Balancing Unequal Financial Contributions |
| | 3.3 Coping With Ongoing Financial Pressure |

Theme 1: Adjusting to Daily Living Patterns

Couples often struggled to align their daily routines, particularly when partners had different sleep patterns or levels of noise sensitivity. For Couple D, Ms. D shared that she typically wakes early and functions well on “5 to 6 hours” of sleep, whereas Mr. D needs “8 to 9 hours.” This mismatch created tension when her morning activities disrupted his rest. Mr. D explained that “when she wakes up and does stuff too loud, it would wake me up,” especially when she used her hair dryer before school. Although Ms. D noted that “we didn’t really fight over it,” she acknowledged

that he “*did get a bit annoyed.*” These experiences illustrate how small routine differences can accumulate into relational strain when partners share a confined living space.

“Sleep schedule is different? Like I’m the type of person that sleeps for a short time, maybe 5 to 6 hours is enough. But he needs to sleep 8 to 9 hours, then is enough.” (Ms. D)

“So sometimes when she wakes up and does stuff too loud, it would wake me up.” (Mr. D)

“We didn’t really fight over it, but he did get a bit annoyed before.” (Ms. D)

Cohabitation also required couples to renegotiate expectations around household chores. Some partners entered cohabitation with assumptions about who would take on more responsibilities. Ms. D admitted she initially expected Mr. D to “*take more responsibility for household chores,*” but later realised that equal division was more practical. Her surprise at his limited “*practical life skills,*” such as needing guidance with cooking or cleaning, highlighted how cohabitation exposes gaps between expectations and reality. These adjustments required couples to develop new routines that felt fair, sustainable, and reflective of each partner’s capabilities.

“Thinking that he might be taking more responsibility for household chores? But after living together for a long time, I think it would be better if household chores are split evenly.” (Ms. D)

“Maybe I didn’t think that he could be quite bad at practical life skills. Like maybe he didn’t learn to cook at home, or required me to teach him how to do household chores.” (Ms. D)

Theme 2: Navigating External and Cultural Pressures

Family reactions played a significant role in shaping couples’ emotional experiences. Some participants concealed their cohabitation to avoid conflict. Ms. C shared that although her mother approved, she deliberately hid the arrangement from her father because she “*knew he would disagree*” due to his traditional beliefs. She described this as a tension that “*won’t exist if I didn’t speak out about it,*” reflecting the emotional labour involved in managing family expectations while maintaining autonomy.

“But for my family, my mom agreed on our cohabitation, but I know that my dad would disagree on this even though I haven’t told my dad. So, I actually haven’t told my dad about this. This counts as a tension, but its like it won’t exist if I didn’t speak out about it.” (Ms. C)

Cultural norms surrounding propriety, gender roles, and premarital relationships also contributed to stress. Ms. A described strong disapproval from relatives, especially her grandmother, who believed that unmarried couples “*should not live together*” because it would cause a woman to “*lose their innocence.*” The resulting gossip left her feeling “*irritable*” and distressed. Similarly, Ms. D explained that her family believed that daughters “*should be protected*” and should live only with a partner after marriage. These accounts demonstrate how deeply rooted cultural scripts continue to influence perceptions of cohabitation, leaving couples to balance personal choices with societal expectations.

“For me, the opinion from my relatives is very strong.” (Ms. A)

“My grandma initially cannot accept boy and girl living in a same room, especially unmarried ones. My grandma occasionally would come to my house, and she saw my boyfriend and I were staying together and she cannot accept that. Then she would put pressure on my mom, tell her not to let us sleep together. Because they would say like not religion, but Chinese folks would think male and female sleep together will cause the female to lose their innocence, like they immediately think of sexual behavior.” (Ms. A)

“I think it is irritable like they spread rumors about me and nasty ones.” (Ms. A)

“Maybe just their personal thoughts, because they think that daughters should be protected or they are being over protective.” (Ms. D)

“My family might nag me a lot, thinking ladies should not live with a man before marriage, it should be after marriage then only can live together.” (Ms. D)

Theme 3: Managing Financial Strain

Financial disagreements were common, particularly when partners had different spending habits. Mr. D shared that he often needed to stop Ms. D from making *“impulse purchases,”* acknowledging that although it sometimes annoyed her, he felt it necessary *“to maintain financial discipline.”* These small but frequent negotiations highlight how financial management becomes a shared responsibility that requires communication and compromise.

“Maybe she likes to make impulse purchases, so I need to stop her. Sometimes she would be annoyed but I still need to tell her about it. So this is just a small conflict, not until a major one.” (Mr. D)

Financial imbalance emerged when one partner contributed more to household expenses due to differences in income or life stage. Ms. D explained that after Mr. D began working, he *“would be responsible in contributing more money,”* while she, still a student, needed to limit spending. To maintain fairness, they avoided expensive outings and ensured their *“level of spending power must [be] at the same level.”* This reflects how couples actively adjust their lifestyle to prevent feelings of dependency or inequality.

“But after he had been working, he would be responsible in contributing more money.” (Ms. D)

“Because I’m still in university and he just got to work, so we would want to save our own money. So, we will make own decision and agreed on not going to the places that are too expensive, or expensive restaurants. Our level of spending power must at the same level.” (Ms. D)

Some couples experienced chronic financial stress that affected their emotional well-being. Ms. A described months when food expenses exceeded her earnings, leaving her feeling that she was *“doing work for nothing.”* Despite switching to cheaper meals, she and her partner continued to experience *“financial stress,”* which contributed to ongoing frustration and anxiety. These accounts show how prolonged financial strain can influence both daily functioning and relationship satisfaction.

“But there was one time we ate too much for a month and what I earn from work is not even enough to eat like this, I felt like I was doing work for nothing.” (Ms. A)

“At that time, I was stressed of financial problem” (Ms. A)

“He’s always in financial stress and for now we already eat mixed vegetable rice but still got financial stress.” (Ms. A)

Table 2: Second Research Question

| Theme | Sub-Theme |
|--|--|
| Collaborative maintenance of the household and the relationship | 4.1 Task allocation strategies |
| | 4.2 Shared financial responsibilities |
| | 4.3 Relationship communication rituals |
| Conflict resolution | 5.1 Cooling-off periods |
| | 5.2 Compromise |
| Negotiating Societal and Familial Perspectives | - |

Theme 4: Collaborative Maintenance of Household and Relationship

Couples commonly adopt intentional approaches to dividing household responsibilities, often relying on personal

strengths or preferences to maintain efficiency and fairness. For many, this strategy reduced conflict and created a sense of shared contribution. Mr. B explained that he and his partner divided tasks *“like you do this one, and I do that one,”* giving the example of one partner preparing their cat’s meal while the other cleaned the litter box. Similarly, Ms. C shared that they handled chores based on what each person was *“good at,”* such as her partner cooking while she washed dishes. Couple D echoed this approach, noting that one partner preferred sweeping while the other preferred cleaning the toilet. These examples show how aligning tasks with each partner’s strengths helped couples maintain a balanced, cooperative household.

“We do the chores like you do this one, and I do that one, which would be on the spot. Like you in charge of cooking the cat’s meal, and I would be going there cleaning the cat’s poop and pee.” (Mr. B)

“For household chores, we would do the household chores that we are good at. Like he is good at cooking dishes, then he would cook, and I would be washing the dishes.” (Ms. C)

“For household chores, we would balance out as well. For instance, I’m good at cooking dishes, so I would cook and he will be responsible for washing dishes or cleaning up the kitchen.” (Ms. D)

“Oh just like he likes to sweep the floor, and I like to clean the toilet. So we split the tasks like this is enough.” (Ms. D)

In contrast, Couple A adopted a more reactive approach, where *“the one who cannot bear the mess will does it.”* While this method avoided rigid expectations, it also reflected a more passive strategy that depended on tolerance levels rather than structured planning. Mr. A justified this by saying that *“other people’s habits could not be changed,”* suggesting that acceptance, rather than negotiation, guided their approach.

“Our household chores are like the one who cannot bear the mess will does it.” (Ms. A)

Financial collaboration was another key strategy for maintaining stability. Most couples shared food expenses either by splitting bills or alternating payments. Ms. A described this as a way to avoid burdening her partner, explaining that she would *“share the food expenses with him”* or treat him to dinner when he fetched her from work. Couples also applied similar principles to rent, utilities, and household bills. Ms. B emphasised the importance of financial planning, noting that they kept *“a list to keep our expenses in check”* and revised it regularly to ensure they were *“not going hungry but still living comfortably.”*

“So, whenever he comes and fetch me, I would treat him for dinner and eat whatever he likes, because I felt like it was my responsibility.” (Ms. A)

“We are more like this time I pay for it, and next time he pays for it, because I don’t want us to be imbalanced in money” (Ms. A)

“I think financial planning is very important, and we will split expenses equally. For example, for food, bills, and other expenses, we have a list to keep our expenses in check. ... We often have to revise the list to make sure we’re not going hungry but still living comfortably.” (Ms. B)

Some couples adjusted contributions based on income differences. Ms. C explained that although they usually split expenses, her partner sometimes paid more because *“his salary is slightly higher than mine.”* Similarly, Ms. D shared that after her partner began working, *“he would be responsible in contributing more money,”* while most daily expenses remained split evenly. These strategies reflect how couples balanced fairness with practicality, ensuring that financial responsibilities did not become a source of resentment.

“Now that we’re both working, it is still basically split finances. But if his salary is slightly higher than mine, he might take on more of the expenses. For example, I won’t let him bear everything for food expenses because he also needs to save.” (Ms. C)

Only Couple C described a structured communication ritual that strengthened emotional connection and mutual understanding. Ms. C explained that they talked *“for at least half an hour before we sleep,”* using this time to reflect on their day and explore *“the psychological reason”* behind their reactions. This practice allowed them to revisit situations with greater clarity and empathy, deepening their relational insight. Such rituals served as

intentional spaces for emotional maintenance, helping partners stay attuned to each other's needs and perspectives.

"We had a habit like we would talk for at least half an hour before we sleep. Its like the things we want to say today, and we would say something every day ..."(Ms. C)

Theme 5: Conflict resolution

Many couples used cooling-off periods to de-escalate conflict and prevent impulsive reactions. Ms. B described withdrawing into solitary activities, such as using her phone or playing with her cat, when she felt upset. Couples C and D adopted a more structured approach, separating for "30 minutes to an hour" before discussing the issue calmly. Mr. C emphasised that they "would never carry problems over to the next day," while Ms. D noted that cooling off prevented them from saying things "out of impulse." These strategies highlight how emotional regulation and temporary distance helped couples approach conflict more rationally.

"But our cooling-off period is not one or two days, it is more like 30 minutes to an hour. I will gauge her emotional state and mine as well before we talk again. We would never carry problems over to the next day." (Mr. C)

In contrast, Couple A relied on avoidance-based strategies, such as taking trips or distracting themselves to temporarily forget problems. Ms. A acknowledged that this was "not the best approach," noting that unresolved issues often resurfaced. This illustrates how avoidance may offer short-term relief but limits opportunities for constructive problem-solving.

"One rather immature way we deal with problems is by trying to forget about them like going on trips or doing other things to temporarily set aside our relationship issues. ..."(Ms. A)

Compromise emerged as a central strategy for maintaining harmony. Couples recognised that personal habits and preferences needed adjustment when living together. For example, Mr. A reduced his badminton sessions from daily to "two to three times a week" to accommodate Ms. A's feelings, while Ms. A used his badminton time to "do my own thing," such as reading. This mutual adjustment reflects how partners balanced individual needs with relational expectations.

"I don't know to describe it but especially when I feel down or sad, he suddenly says he would go play badminton. Yeah, this is what I felt mad about. So, what I'm doing now is I try to get used to it. Like when he plays badminton, I use this time to do my own thing, read about my book or something. Then time would pass faster." (Ms. A)

Communication was also essential for resolving conflicts. Mr. B described their approach as listening first and then finding "a solution that we can both agree on." Ms. C emphasised the importance of timing, noting that issues "shouldn't be dragged out," and even minor concerns should be addressed promptly. Ms. D reinforced this, stating that "open communication is the most important." These accounts show how intentional dialogue and willingness to compromise helped couples navigate disagreements constructively.

"Even if the issue is minor, we should still address it immediately and treat it seriously." (Ms. C)

"Open communication is the most important. If there is a problem, it needs to be brought up." (Ms. D)

Theme 6: Negotiating Societal and Familial Perspectives

Couples also developed strategies to manage societal and familial disapproval of their cohabitation. Some adopted a stance of respectful acceptance. Ms. A explained that she does not "try to change people's opinions," acknowledging that everyone has "their own way of thinking." Mr. B similarly stated that they chose to "respect their boundaries," allowing family members time to adjust.

"I don't try to change people's opinions because, whether they're elders or close friends, everyone has their own way of thinking." (Ms. A)

"All we can do is respect their boundaries, and over time, they'll gradually accept it." (Mr. B)

Others adopted a more independent stance by distancing themselves from external judgments. Mr. C shared that he did not *“really care about their opinions much,”* emphasising that he was *“living my life with my partner, not with my parents.”* Ms. D echoed this sentiment, stating that she simply informed her parents and accepted *“whatever they say after that.”* These strategies reflect how couples balanced maintaining family harmony with protecting their autonomy and emotional well-being.

“But I don’t really care about their opinions much, because I’m living my life with my partner, not with my parents.” (Mr. C)

“I just told them I’m living with my boyfriend, that’s all. Whatever they say after that is up to them.” (Ms. D)

The findings of this study indicate that participants' challenges not only contributed to emotional and relational distress but also prompted the use of various adaptive strategies to manage them. Participants described that stressors such as lifestyle differences, external pressures, and financial strain often led to heightened tension, frustration, and conflict within relationships. In response, some individuals adopted problem-focused coping strategies, including open communication, compromise, and adjustments to daily routines, to reduce conflict and improve mutual understanding. Others relied on emotion-focused strategies, such as seeking support from friends or family members, engaging in personal reflection, or temporarily distancing themselves from stressful situations to regulate their emotions. However, the effectiveness of these adaptive strategies varied across participants. While some reported improved relationship satisfaction and reduced tension through constructive coping, others continued to experience unresolved conflicts, particularly when external pressures such as familial expectations or financial difficulties persisted. In certain cases, less adaptive responses, such as avoidance or withdrawal, were also evident, which may have limited opportunities for conflict resolution and contributed to ongoing dissatisfaction.

Unmarried cohabiting couples face several interconnected challenges that can undermine relationship stability. A primary difficulty involves adjusting to shared living, including differences in sleep patterns, noise tolerance, and division of household chores. These mismatches often lead to frustration, stress, and recurring conflicts when routines and expectations are not aligned. External pressures, particularly cultural expectations and family disapproval, also significantly impact cohabiting couples. In traditional contexts such as Malaysia, cohabitation is often stigmatized, leading some couples to conceal their living arrangements. This reflects findings that Asian cultural norms place pressure on cohabiting couples, contributing to stress and dissatisfaction (Lai & Song, 2022).

The relational strategies observed in this study, such as shared responsibilities, communication routines, and mutual adjustment, mirror broader findings on relationship maintenance in other Malaysian contexts. Sawai et al. (2025) showed that sustaining a relationship requires consistent emotional investment and active engagement, even when couples face structural challenges such as physical distance. Although commuter marriages differ from cohabitation, the underlying maintenance processes they highlight reinforce the importance of everyday relational practices in preserving stability.

Compared to Western societies, where cohabitation is more accepted, limited social support in such contexts increases uncertainty and relational tension. Similar patterns have been observed in other traditional societies, where cohabiting couples report higher levels of stress and anxiety due to social disapproval (Jain & Priyesh, 2023). Financial tension represents another major challenge, particularly when partners are at different life stages. Imbalances in income, such as one partner being a student and the other employed, can lead to guilt, perceived burden, and dissatisfaction. Financial stress has been shown to increase conflict and reduce positive interactions in relationships (Peetz et al., 2024). Prolonged financial strain may contribute to long-term relationship problems and emotional distress (Jenkins et al., 2022; Sawai et al., 2025).

To cope with these challenges, cohabiting couples adopt adaptive strategies that emphasize collaboration and shared responsibility. Many couples divide household tasks and financial obligations based on individual strengths, thereby promoting fairness and reducing potential conflict. This approach aligns with findings that equitable task-sharing is positively associated with relationship quality (Carlson, 2022). Financial cooperation, such as splitting expenses or alternating payments, also enhances financial satisfaction and reduces tension (Kruger et al., 2023). Regular communication, including daily discussions, further strengthens mutual understanding and supports the

quality of the long-term relationship (Kanter et al., 2022).

Effective conflict management and boundary-setting are also critical strategies. Couples often use cooling-off periods before addressing disagreements, allowing emotional de-escalation and more constructive discussions (Harrison, 2022). Active listening and balanced communication contribute to better conflict resolution and relationship outcomes (Arican-Dinc & Gable, 2023; Adegboyega, 2021). Participants' reliance on cooling-off periods, withdrawal, and other emotion-focused strategies reflects broader psychological patterns in stressful environments. Nurdin Muhammad et al. (2025) found that individuals experiencing prolonged uncertainty and limited support often experience emotional strain, which shapes their behavior and coping responses. These parallels suggest that some conflict-management behaviours among cohabiting couples are not merely relational choices but also psychological responses to accumulated stress. When faced with familial disapproval, many couples prioritize their relationship by limiting external influence and framing cohabitation as a personal decision, consistent with research on parental pressure in cohabiting relationships (Obeng-Hinneh & Kpoor, 2022). External pressures such as stigma, concealment, and family disapproval intensified emotional strain for cohabiting couples. Similar dynamics were noted by Nurdin Muhammad et al. (2025), who reported that restrictive environments and limited social support heighten feelings of loneliness, frustration, and stress. This comparison highlights how sociocultural constraints can amplify relational tension, particularly when couples lack access to supportive networks. Overall, these strategies demonstrate that while cohabitation presents notable challenges, effective communication, shared responsibility, and emotional regulation can mitigate conflict and enhance relationship stability.

Conclusion

This research set out to explore the challenges faced by unmarried cohabiting couples and the adaptive strategies they employed. Through the thematic analysis of interview data, some main themes were identified. Couples had reported challenges such as adjusting to each other's living habits, facing familial and cultural pressures, and living with financial tension. To address these challenges, couples have used adaptive strategies, including collaborative household management, shared financial responsibilities, and conflict-resolution methods such as compromise and cooling-off periods. These experiences led to cohabitation, enhancing mutual understanding and emotional closeness for most couples, but some experienced a decline in passion over time. This study highlights that unmarried cohabiting couples face relational, cultural, and financial challenges, use adaptive strategies to maintain stability, and experience both increased emotional closeness and potential declines in passion, while emphasizing the influence of ecological and social exchange factors

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