
Causes of Personal Financial Stress in Malaysia: A Phenomenological Study

AHMAD AZRIN ADNAN^{1*}, SAKINAH MAT ZIN², MOHAMAD IZZUDDIN ABDUL AZIZ³, JUNAINAH AHMAD ESA⁴, NORFADZILAH RASHID⁵

^{1,3,5}Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA)

²Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Kelantan Branch

⁴Credit Counselling and Debt Management Agency (AKPK)

*Corresponding Author

Email ID: ahmazrin@unisza.edu.my, sakin405@uitm.edu.my, ezzdean93@gmail.com, junainah@akpk.org.my, nikmfadzilah@unisza.edu.my

Abstract: Weak financial planning is often the root cause of individual financial stress in Malaysia. However, this phenomenological study has discovered another major rationale. This paper attempts to explain the causes of financial stress among individuals who are almost bankrupt in Malaysia through a phenomenological approach. Three participants were involved in the observation and in-depth interviews. The classification of phenomenological data in the form of specific themes is analysed through continuous comparison methods. This study found that inaccurate *tasawur* or consumerism pattern had greater influence on individual financial stress than poor financial planning. The inaccurate consumerism *tasawur* has generated a mystical element of financial stress which is rarely discussed. These findings established the need to re-evaluate the aspects of sustainable lifestyle culture in Malaysia, and it is worth investigating.

Keywords: Bankrupt, Household, Financial Literacy, Financial Stress, *Tasawur*

INTRODUCTION

Although financial stress among individuals has long been researched on (Cuvillier, 1979; Newacheck and Halfon, 1986; Gordon et al. 1986), it is still considered as a current issue. In fact, it is becoming more prevalent in an economic recession. The COVID-19 pandemic affecting almost the entire world at present, has had a profound impact on the economic survival of this country in general and households in particular. Consequently, a study was conducted on 168,182 respondents with a minimum age of 15 years old to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the economy and individuals. The duration of the study done by the Department of Statistics Malaysia was from 18th to 31st March 2020 and it had revealed at least five discoveries. First, almost 53 percent of the respondents experienced financial stress especially during the Movement Control Order (MCO) period. Second, 71.4 percent of self-employed respondents had savings for less than a month. Third, financial savings for 69.7 percent of the respondents who had been working for less than a year and 63.2 percent of them who had been working for one to three years respectively, could only last less than one month. Fourth, almost 47 percent of the self-employed respondents lost their jobs due to the implementation of the MCO. Fifth, nearly all the self-employed respondents experienced reduction in monthly income. Although these findings should be interpreted with caution due to limitations in several aspects of the methodology, they do reflect the current distress situation. All five outcomes reveal the prodigious impact of COVID-19 on the level of financial stress to the point of affecting emotional and physical health, thus inhibiting the well-being of the households. The significant relationship between financial stress and emotional as well as physical health was found in the study of Gale, Goetz and Bermudez (2009), Siah-push et al. (2014) and Sturgeon et al. (2015).

As compared to previous researches (A Study on Financial Capability and Inclusiveness from the Demand Aspect 2018 by Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM) and A Study on the Financial Behaviour of Adult Malaysian Employees 2018 by Credit Management and Counselling Agency (AKPK)), there is no significant changes in terms of financial behavior, especially the ownership of emergency funds among Malaysians. The financial behavior among youths (Kamarudin, 2016) and adults (Loke, 2017) is far from the target set in the National Financial Literacy Strategy 2019-2023. This leads to the question of why there is financial pressure that limits the ability to do saving among Malaysians.

A one-year survey conducted by the Social Well-being Research Centre (SWRC) University Malaya in 2019 found that financial stress stemmed from uncontrolled spending. The over-spending of the respondents' total income eventually plunges them into debt. Uncontrolled spending and unmanaged debt activities are clearly linked to poor financial planning. This finding is in line with those of AKPK (2020), AKPK (2018) and BNM (2019)

saying that the weakness of financial planning is the main cause of individual financial stress, as depicted in Figure 1.

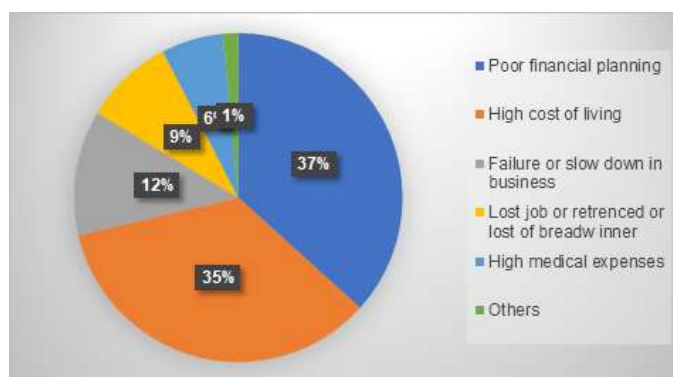


Fig.1: Causes of Debt Repayment Problems

Source: AKPK (as at April 2020)

Based on the above Figure, almost half of the debt repayment default cases are due to poor financial planning. Therefore, weak budgetary preparation is often considered to be the main cause for financial stress of households in Malaysia.

Consequently, there are several issues arising from this situation. As revealed by the Financial Education Network (FEN) through the National Financial Literacy Strategy 2019-2023 on the current position of financial literacy in Malaysia, 76 percent of Malaysians have a financial budget. A study by Nuradibah et al. (2018) also found that 93.5 percent of respondents agreed on the importance of preparing a shopping list to avoid over-spending. This indicates that most Malaysians have knowledge in financial planning, especially for those who are less than 55 years old or known as Generation X, Y and Z. This group usually has greater accessibility to related materials from the online platforms. Wider accessibility is proven to increase the level of financial literacy (Servon and Kaestner, 2008). However, the current situation in Malaysia does not reflect this prevalence. The generation of baby boomers who are said to have low levels of financial literacy (Visyalini et al., 2018), on the other hand, exhibit lower number of bankruptcy cases than generations X, Y and Z (Department of Insolvency Malaysia, 2019). The baby boomers also have a lesser level of financial stress compared to generations X, Y and Z (AKPK, 2018). Thus, this circumstance raises the question of how true is the claim that financial planning weakness is the main cause for financial stress.

Taking everything into account, this study aims to deepen the knowledge of the causes of financial stress among individuals who are almost bankrupt in Malaysia through a phenomenological approach. Hence, this paper will focus on four things. First, it summarizes the sources of financial stress that have been found in the previous studies. Second, it elaborates on the methodologies. Third, it analyses the causes of financial stress. Fourth, it explains the relationship between the field of research and the philosophy underlying each of these discoveries. Hence, the findings of this study are believed to help cultivate sustainable lifestyles among Malaysian households.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Financial Pressure

There is a plethora of past studies on the cause of personal financial stress. Researches in many countries have indicated practically similar causes in the following five aspects. First, financial planning is the most important factor that determines financial well-being. For instance, the UK Financial Well-being Survey 2019 found that the inadequacy of savings for emergency circumstances was the main cause of personal financial stress among UK citizens. This factor is closely related to financial planning. As mentioned by numerous researchers (Samer Al-Shami et al., 2019; AKPK, 2018; Rahman et al., 2018; Ware, 2015), other factors; namely high debt levels, low savings rate, lack of investment and high credit card debt; were derived from the same cause i.e. weak financial planning. Moreover, financial planning is closely related to financial literacy. Previous studies have demonstrated that there is a significant correlation between financial literacy and financial stress (Abdullah and Razak, 2015; Delafrooz and Paim, 2011; Joo and Garman, 1999).

Second, disposable income uncertainty affects individual financial survival and his or her dependents (Hira et al., 2013; Chan, 2012; Chan et al., 2010). Godinho (2019) had examined the financial well-being in Norway, Ireland, Canada and Australia. He defined financial well-being as the ability to fulfil commitments and needs; and to maintain the resilience in the future. There are three important elements derived from this definition, such as income, expenses and disposable income (individual income minus mandatory deductions such as taxes). Other causes of financial stress, like rising cost of living, increasing medical costs, business failure, job loss and retirement, normally affect total income, expenses and disposable income.

Third, unpredictable events such as divorce, death of the head of family, health problems and accidents can also lead to financial stress. Samer Al-Shami et al. (2019) asserted that health problems and the loss of household heads are among the main contributing factors to the failure of women entrepreneurs in Malaysia. Thus, such condition puts pressure on the financial survival of households.

Fourth, creditors' policy can also influence the level of financial stress (Samer Al-Shami et al., 2019). The stricter the credit control policy imposed by the creditors, the higher the financial pressures faced by the borrowers.

Fifth, there are various studies exploring this issue from the Islamic perspectives (Ahmad Azrin Adnan et al., 2018; Mohd Shukri Hanapi and Siti Mastura Muhammad, 2017; Ahmad Azrin Adnan, 2012;). It is related to the inaccurate *tasawur* or consumerism pattern that will determine the accuracy of income generation and expenses distribution. Briefly, all five findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Causes of Household Financial Stress

Source	Sub-source
Inaccurate <i>tasawur</i> or consumerism pattern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spending according to one's desire • Involved in financial fraud activities • Involved in gambling activities • Drug addiction • Alcohol addiction
Low level financial literacy and weak financial planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absence or lack of emergency savings • Absence or lack of investment • High credit card debt • Weak debt management
Irregular disposable income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High cost of living • High medical costs • Business failure • Loss of work • Retirement
Unpredictable events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Divorce • Death of the household's head • Health problems • Accident
Creditor's strict policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No toleration from the creditor

Despite the similarity of the causes in many countries, some scholars argue that personal financial stress is a subjective phenomenon (O'Neill et al., 2006). It is based on the differences of income sources and spending patterns in order to fulfil various needs and wants. As a result, there exists different lifestyles among individuals.

Lifestyle

Lifestyle is a concept often discussed by scholars so as to understand human behaviour (Kau Ah Keng et al., 1998; Mowen, 1995; Engel et al., 1993). There are studies that categorize the level of household indebtedness according to their respective lifestyles. Viaud and Levy (2000) categorized four levels of household indebtedness according to lifestyle by focusing on debt, credit utilization and family money management. First, a group of prudent households with the criteria of being young, having a loan, renting a home, having various savings accounts and having the habit of saving. Second, a group of accumulating savers who do not need any debt. They are aged individuals with many savings accounts and accumulate assets. Third, an extravagant household group (prodigal household). Fourth, a fragile group of borrowers.

Further, Viaud and Levy (2000) also found that there is a relationship among expenditure, income and indebtedness. The extravagant household group was found to have little savings account. They are more likely to spend until they reach an immediate level of satisfaction and focus on a luxurious lifestyle without thinking about the motives of the loan made. They also prioritize the purchase of domestic goods on a credit basis despite their ability to buy without making a loan. Moreover, the group of fragile borrowers are couples who are obtaining mortgages to purchase home and furniture through joint ownership. They have particularly high levels of household indebtedness.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a phenomenological approach that focuses on the study of an individual's life experiences within the world (Neubauer, Witkop and Varpio, 2019). Phenomenology is uniquely positioned to help scholars learn from the experiences of others. Specifically, the phenomenological approach aims to answer questions about the experience of an activity according to the perspective of the participants (Gay and Mills, 2016). Attempting

to explain the fundamental structures of human experiences (Brinkmann, 2017), this phenomenological study stresses on how the relevant phenomenon is expressed and how it occurs (Vagle, 2016).

Three participants selected through a purposeful sampling method were involved in this study. They were the customers of the Credit Counselling and Debt Management Agency (AKPK) participating in the Debt Management Program (DMP). According to Cresswell (1998) and Sabitha (2005), 2 to 25 participants are required for a phenomenological study. Anthony and Nancy (2007) mentioned that qualitative studies do not require a large sample size to avoid the difficulty of obtaining dense data; and not too small sample size because it will difficult for researchers to get saturated data.

Specifically, the participants involved in this study were individuals who were nearly bankrupt. According to the definition by the Department of Insolvency Malaysia, bankruptcy refers to a process in which a debtor is declared as a bankrupt in the Judgement Order issued by the High Court against the debtor for failure or inability to pay a debt of at least RM50,000. Being almost bankrupt is when an individual is unable to manage the repayment of a monthly debt to a financial institution but has not yet been declared bankrupt. This situation has caused the person to seek the advice of AKPK and subsequently participate in the Debt Management Program (DMP) to restructure the total debt repayment and to avoid from being declared bankrupt. DMP is specifically designed to assist those who are under financial obligated pressure by the financial institutions under the supervision of BNM. DMP allows AKPK and individuals to cooperate and restructure the loan repayment through negotiations with the credit providers from financial institutions regulated by BNM.

For that reason, there are two criteria of participants needed for this research. First, the individual must be a participant of DMP organised by the AKPK. Second, Muslim individuals. For the first criterion, the aim is to acquire participants who are truly experiencing financial stress. As for the second criterion, the purpose is to analyse the participant’s adherence to household consumer behaviour based on Islamic consumer behaviour. The background of the participants is described in Table 2.

Table 2: Background of the participants

Peserta	A	B	C
Age	51 years	52 years	47 years
Educational Background	Master’s Degree in Business at a public university in Malaysia	National Vocational Training Council Certificate	Standard Five Assessment
Working Experience	Former Manager in one of the Government Linked Companies. Received a compensation of RM150,000 after choosing the VSS and used the amount as business capital. Previously involved in Multi-Level Marketing (MLM) business, guest houses, restaurants and laundry services	He used to work in the Land & General Berhad factory in furniture manufacturing. He stopped working to take care of his sick mother in the village. During that period, he worked part-time selling sugarcane juice, until the death of his mother	She dropped out of school early when she was 11 years old as she had to help her parents make ends meet
Total Income	His income is RM1,500 per month. The monthly income of the household is RM7,000 as his wife is a civil servant	His estimated monthly income is RM1,800 working fulltime as a furniture maker. The work of transporting furniture and lorry rental is made part-time with an estimated income of RM2,000 per month	Monthly income of RM1,200 obtained from working part-time as a maid as well as selling eggs and chicks
Number of dependents	Has four children. The expenses of the children have to be borne by the wife because his income only covers personal needs, loan payments and business capital	Has dependents of 3 children and a wife	She is now a widow with six children from her three previous marriages including an adopted child
Background of participants registered with AKPK	Registered with DMP in 2015 due to arrears in personal loan payments	Registered with DMP in 2017 due to problems in housing loan payments in arrears of 4 months for the second time.	Registered with DMP in 2015 after being informed through promotions held by AKPK

Names of the participants are kept confidential to protect their privacy

A series of 3-part in-depth interviews were held with all the participants.

Part One: Interview that focused on the life history of participants

Part Two: Interview that focused on details of participants’ experiences

Part Three: Interview that focused on participants' reflection on the meaning of their experiences detailed in Parts One and Two.

At the same time, observations were made to get a more comprehensive picture and to check on each study finding. Here, two main things were put under scrutiny. First, a textural description that focuses on the cause of the financial stress experienced by each participant. The undergone experience is the objective aspect, the factual data and empirical occurrence. Second, a structural description that concentrates on how participants experience and feel. This description is subjective and related to the participants' opinions, evaluations, feelings, expectations, as well as feedback on the experiences. The questions posed to the participants are as follows:

- What were the participants' experiences when facing money shortages which led to financial stress?
- How did the participants feel about the experience?
- What connotations did the participants gain from the phenomenon?

For data analysis, there were six important procedures implemented in this phenomenological study as suggested by Hasbiansyah (2005), Creswell (1998) and Moustakas (1994). First, researchers set the scope of the phenomenon. In this regard, researchers sought to understand the philosophical perspective of the approach used, especially the study concept of how people experience the phenomena. The phenomenon scope is set through the participants. Second, researchers recorded research questions that revealed the meaning of the experience for individuals who were about to go bankrupt and asked them to detail up important experiences daily. Third, researchers collected data from participants through three series of in-depth interviews. Fourth, researchers analysed the data. This procedure involved three stages, namely the initial stage, the horizontalization and the cluster of meanings. In the initial stage, researchers explained about the financial stress experienced by the participants. All in-depth interviews with participants were transcribed into written form. In the horizontalization stage, important statements relevant to the topic were inventoried based on the transcription results. There was a possibility of delaying the assessment at this level. In the cluster of meaning level, researchers classified the statements from the previous level into themes, then segregated the repetitive statements. At this stage, textural and structural descriptions were carried out. Textural description is when researchers record the experience, that is, a description of what the participant is going through. For structural description, researchers note down the financial stress experienced by the participants. Researchers also looked for all possible meanings based on their own reflections; whether in the form of views, evaluations, feelings or expectations of participants about the causes of financial stress. Fifth, researchers developed a comprehensive description of the meaning and essence of the participants' experience. Sixth, researchers reported the results of the study indicating the existence of a single unified meaning from the experience of all participants.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This study aims to elucidate the causes of financial stress among individuals who are almost bankrupt through the following three questions:

Question 1: What were the participants' experiences when facing money shortages which led to financial stress?

Question 2: How did the participants feel about the experience?

Question 3: What connotations did the participants gain from the phenomenon?

Different demographic backgrounds and life experiences have resulted in a variety of causes of financial stress among individuals. Some causes are within the control of individuals, while some reasons are beyond their control. Everyone has his or her own needs and wants that differ from one another and change from time to time. For example, internet accessibility, which was once considered as a want, is now a necessity not only to the workers, but also to the students. The new norms environment in particular, relies heavily on technological facilities. Regrettably, it is these needs that create stress and ultimately shape the diversity of behaviours.

Causes of Financial Stress

Based on in-depth interview data and observations, there are four causes of financial stress among individuals who are nearly bankrupt: (1) creditors' strict policies and emotional reactions, (2) inaccurate *tasawur* or consumerism pattern and mystical elements, (3) poor financial planning, and (4) unpredictable events.

(1) Creditors' Strict Policies and Emotional Reactions

Living in a state of financial hardship is certainly not easy, especially for individuals who have dependents. It is not surprising that the financial factor is the main cause of divorce in Malaysia (Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development, 2019). Indeed, all participants in this study are showing various emotional responses such as depression, fear, panic and anger.

Participant A: I am stressed... the bank keeps sending messages. The bank is so disturbing... Feeling very stressed. I want to pay but I cannot afford it. Feel uneasy. There is a feeling of discomfort with the bank. If I must go to jail, be it then.

Participant B: ...there is only the bank. They pushed me hard, asking me to pay, to the extent of threatening me. They gave me a warning of the consequences if I did not pay. I am stressed out. Feel like throwing away this phone.

Participant C: ...Bank XXX oppresses us. My son said, "ma, the police will come tonight to take you". I said it is ok if the police come and take me, I will submit myself, what can I do as I do not have the money to pay RM3000 at one go. The bank asked for RM3000. I told them that I am poor, have no money. Before this, if you had asked me for any amount, I would have given you as much as I had. They first asked me to pay RM150 this week, then tomorrow or the day after they call and ask for another RM150. If I have the money I pay. If I don't have the money I don't pay. I truly don't have the money. I told him, is Bank XXX helping the people or ripping-off the people? This is like sucking the blood of the people. It certainly hurts my feelings.

Participants' emotional response is related to the policies of some banking institutions that do not adopt sympathetic values in their debt collecting process. Whether the clients suffer from financial constraints or not, the bank places more emphasis on credit control performance. This statement is in line with the personal experience of one of the researchers who has served in a bank under the Credit Control Department.

Subsequently, such situation increases the level of anxiety among participants and disrupts the quality of life. In the case of participant A, for instance, there are three effects of stress, namely disharmonious family relationships, financial stress that also affects the wife and decreasing sources of income.

Participant A: Sometimes I regret resigning from my job. Only sometimes. Because I feel sorry for my wife.

Participant A: That is normal. When I am sick, the financial resources are reduced. Then the children need money for their school expenses. Well, I am not working anymore. So, all the cars are under my wife's name, she becomes stressed. Even more stressed.

The disrupting emotions also affect thinking and skills in making judgments. To make the matter worse, the financial stress will lead to depression. Fitch et al. (2011) have proven that stressed individuals facing debt problems are at a high risk of having depression. This problem could be the reason why people are quitting their jobs (Mohd Ikhwan Aziz et al., 2019). A survey by AIA Vitality 2019 on 17,595 employees also found that financial stress influenced mental health problems when 22 percent of employees are in financial hardships. The annual survey aims to understand how workplaces can affect employees' health by linking their health to the performance and work engagement.

(2) Inaccurate Tasawur or Consumerism Pattern and the Mystical Element

Participants agreed that financial stress is caused by irrational judgements when deciding to go into debt. For example, the problematic loan by participant A was a loan classified at tahsiniyat (for luxurious intentions) meant for fulfilling one's wants. The loan was not due to financial need, but rather peer influence that had made the person feel like enjoying a better standard of living. He stated that: -

Participant A: I never thought of it, because at that time I only thought of wanting the money. But now I feel there is no need to burden myself by taking note of this matter, taking the loan I mean. For me, with my age and what my wife is earning, there is no need to follow my desires anymore.

Participant A: Because of my friends. Then, the desire to enjoy with the money.

This loan was for personal purposes and dependents as well as business capital. Initially, the business income obtained was the only supplementary income of the household in addition to the income in one of the government-linked companies (GLCs). The loan he obtained was not syariah compliant. However, he believed that it was not against religious teachings because the product was presumed to be Halal and did not burden the borrower. He further added that:

Participant A: Halal? That I did not think about. I didn't think of it when making the loan. What was important was I get the RM30,000 and use it. The re-payment is ok, it is deducted from my salary. At that time, I was employed. With a salary of RM6,000-RM7,000, I felt that a deduction of RM500-RM600 would not be any problem. But I didn't expect to be out of a job.

This shows that participant A and the other two participants have low level of Islamic finance literacy. Participant C for example did not know the difference between debt facilities provided by Islamic and conventional banks. Her problematic loan turned out to be a nonshariah-compliant product. Besides, participant A's choice of having a full stomach rather than repay the loan in full settlement provides a clear indication. The consideration framework for the priority of avoiding harm over retaining goodness is completely inaccurate.

It is quite difficult to prove empirically the relationship between the level of financial stress and that of religious appreciation. However, there are numerous studies that have discovered this relationship. Masjuki Misbah (2017) shows that there is a significant relationship between the level of implementation of prayer and emotional intelligence. Better implementation of prayer improves emotional intelligence. Mohd Suhardi Jusoh (2004) and Nor Azira Yusoff (2008) also prove that negligence in performing prayers can produce negative effects on an individual. All these findings were in line with the situation of participant A. He admitted his weakness in the aspect of religious appreciation. When his financial position was still stable, he sometimes did not complete the obligatory number of prayers, especially during his working hours. Apart from rarely attending religious lectures, he also seldom performed congregational prayers in the mosque. Likewise, participant C acknowledged that she did not put her priority towards reading the Quran. She stated:

Participant C: Frequency of reciting the Al-Quran? Never...once in six months...once a month...once a week maybe.. Reciting al-Mathurat...hmm.. never...I will be honest with you.

The religious appreciation highlighted here is related to Tauhid. Tauhid is the backbone of all aspects in human life, including consumer activities. A strong belief in tauhid will build a *tasawur* that is truly based on Islam. The consumerism *tasawur* that arises from the right path of tauhid will form a balanced consumption system between material and spiritual needs (Mohd Shukri Hanapi and Siti Mastura Muhammad, 2017). The disparity in these two aspects will result in the emergence of other things that are difficult to be explained scientifically. This is what happened to participant A who has claimed to be put under a spell to the extent that it has affected his physical and emotional health as well as business performance. The practice of blackmagic has a mystical element, which is a supernatural power that is out of human comprehension. He further added:

Just like me, I have experience, money and education, not just at SPM level, I feel there are many things that I can do. Sometimes, in our business activities, we do not even care about mystical things. Although we believe in those superstitious things, like..ahh..it doesn't matter very much but when we have undergone it ourselves.. oohh .. it is really like this. No wonder I was anxious to do business even though I got RM1,000 to RM2,000 overnight. Indeed, I think it's worth that I quit my job..it is worth it..but it was only when it happened to me, then I realised the extent of the pain I was suffering until I could not do any work. A lot of money was used.

He further made the following statement:

Just get the traditional treatment. I used to go to the hospital, but they said nothing was abnormal. I went to the hospital but there was no effect. But when it comes to traditional treatment, that is something we do not know. After two or three days the pain recurred, making things like a mystic. It is up to you to believe or not. I'm actually reluctant to tell things like this to people, sometimes people who never experience it, they don't know. Probably this is because I have neglected God on many occasions.

(3) Weaknesses in Financial Planning

Poor financial planning and high cost of living remain as the two main sources of financial stress among individuals receiving AKPK services. Among all the AKPK cases for 2018, 43.3 percent was due to poor financial planning and remained the main source of financial pressure since 2013. What happened to all participants, further confirmed this fact. Observations have also shown that participants paid less attention to aspects of household utility savings, thus increasing household cash outflows. In terms of savings, all participants do not give priority in this regard. Participant A, for example, said:

Participant A: I prioritise spending. I spend first. Then I pay my debts, and only later save some money.

This study clearly shows that all participants in this study have experienced financial difficulties. The remainder of their income after deducting all expenses, including debt commitments, had at times experienced a deficit. More than half of their income was used for repaying loans. For example, in the case of participant A, half of his household debts comes from the house loan payment. This shows a strong influence of debt on disposable household income. Since the balance of the money is too little to be saved, all participants will surely face difficulties in making investments.

(4) Unpredictable Events

Of all the participants, participant C's survival was the most challenging. Her business was sabotaged by her ex-boyfriend whose engagement proposal was once turned down by her. She expressed this:

It's is part of human nature .. if people want to start a business or anything, like I used to, first 300 ducks, people are upset, there were people putting clorox in the ducks' drink, many ducks died. I knew it when I made a report to the Veterinary Department, I always keep in touch with the Veterinary Department, when they came to investigate, they asked me, "eh..there is clorox in the water, did you put clorox?". I would never do that. The ducks were laying eggs. The eggs were big. RM1 per egg as it was big. Haa..but he had heartaches. It hurts me deeply when I actually know the culprit. He proposed me to marry him at that time. He already has a wife, he came to propose to me, I said "eh.. are you crazy...you are already married and your wife is pretty and you are doing this, don't do crazy things". Then he said, "If I don't get you, you will not have an easy life". After one week all my 300 ducks had died. I was just being patient when that tragedy happened. I waited for 6 months to earn some profits. I went to take the fish bellies in Kuala Kemaman every evening. I then boiled them on a wood stove. The smell was horrible, then I returned after Maghrib prayers to feed the ducks. But when that incident happened, I said. "ermmmm never mind, it was not our sustenance (*rezeki*)". The second time I had 800 ducks, that was truly painful.

At the same time, she was always threatened by her ex-husband who was in jail. She made the following statement: That man is also mentally ill. He was sent from Kuala Berang Hospital to Bahagia Tampoi Hospital for a month, now he is back. He is in prison right now. When I talked to the police, he said the man would eventually be released. And the police said if he wanted to take his child back, he could do so. This is not a matter of wanting to take his child, the problem is he is violent towards the child. That's why I put the grill on the door. I am afraid too. If anything happens, I will lock the door immediately. Moreover, it is easy to jump over the original door. I also did it for the safety of the children. Because when I go to work, only the girls are staying in this house. So, when there is a house grill and if anything happens, it will be easy to lock the grill and stay quietly in the house. In addition, she also suffers from nerve breakdown that requires large medical expenses, thus reducing her savings. All of these problems are unpredictable events that necessitate radical solutions for financial survival.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

It has been proven that there are other major causes compared to weak financial planning which has long been considered as the main root of financial stress. Inaccurate consumerism *tasawur* clearly has a bigger influence compared to the weakness of financial planning. Inexact *tasawur* would generate a measurement basis that deviates from the real consumerism goal. For example, a person's success is usually measured by material possession. Materialistic elements such as big houses, luxury cars and exclusive jewellery are usually highlighted as a measure of one's success. It does not mean that Islam prevents the accumulation of wealth as iterated by Allah s.w.t through surah al-Maidah verse 87 which means: O you who believe, do not forbid anything good that Allah has made lawful for you and do not transgress. Wealth accumulation is allowed as long as it is acquired and distributed in the right way (*makarim al-akhlaq*). At the same time, it must not lead to a lavish and extreme lifestyle (*mahasin al-'adat*). These kinds of lifestyles lead to wastage and wealth squandering (*al-Shatibi, 1997*). Even though luxury and material wellbeing are permissible in Islam, true wealth is the richness of the soul which cannot be excluded in any measurement.

Such consumerism *tasawur* is related to one of the seven principles of Islamic-based development introduced by Muhammad Syukri Salleh (2003), that is human beings are the agents of development. Since human beings are recognized as caliphs, not economic animals (*homo-economicus*), the measure of the caliphate is faith and lust. The faith and lust of the person must be encouraged to be at least at the level of *faith ayan* and *nafsu (lust) mutmainnah* respectively. It is not possible for consumer behavior to be strengthened from time to time if the person's faith is below the *ayan* faith such as *taqlid* faith and 'ilm faith only. Similarly with lust, persons who have lust below the *nafsu (lust) mutmainnah* such as *nafsu (lust) ammarah, lawwamah* and *mulhimah* certainly would face difficulties to fortify the consumerism behavior from time to time.

If the above principles are linked to the life experience of the study participants, it explains three things. First, the top fundamental in any consumerism activity is the management of faith and lust. This study clearly proves that high knowledge and awareness in preparing financial planning does not guarantee that a person is free from financial stress. Limited knowledge of financial planning does not necessarily lead to financial constraints. For instance, a number of the baby boomers' generation with limited exposure to financial management knowledge, do not face financial constraint. Rarely are they found creating a periodic household budget in debit and credit. Even so, they could still meet their own needs and that of their dependents. Strangely enough, they continue to carry out *infaq* practices. This situation is believed to be related to the correct *tasawur* according to the religious perspective. Elements such as blessings in sustenance (*rezeki*) have made them feel contented with what they receive. This differs with the current society which is facing a moral crisis in the economic system. Greed, stinginess, misery and likewise; will impair the well-being of individuals, families and communities. Wastage of food during the month of Ramadan, for instance, reveals the weakness in managing faith and lust. The amount of consumption, which is supposed to decline due to fasting, has actually risen as evidenced by the increased in the metric tons of garbage throughout the month of Ramadan.

Second, financial planning is a requisite for the financial survival of households. In addition, the pandemic has seen the emergence of various forms of needs and wants in the new normal. Failure to plan one's finances ordinarily affects expenditure management, investment for self and dependents, and future preparation. The spending patterns of the study participants clearly show significant weaknesses in the aspect of financial planning. In this case, their financial survival depends entirely on monthly income. They also survive on part-time work, overtime and commissions or bonuses to pay for their daily cost of living. There are those who do not bother about the actual amount of their debt until they receive a statement. Besides that, the expenditure pattern that has resulted in a lack of disposable income is admittedly disrupting the harmony of the household. However, financial planning alone without relying on Islamic *tasawur* simply produces a person who is overly calculative in philanthropic activities either in the form of *zakat, waqf* and donations. The argument raised by one of the study participants was the concern over reduced disposable income volume due to increased cash outflows through philanthropic activities. Conversely, the Prophet s.a.w once said: Wealth will not be reduced because of alms (narrated by Muslim, hadith no. 4689).

Third, the inaccurate consumerism *tasawur* has caused an imbalance between physical and spiritual needs. The confession of the participants that they neglected prayers in their efforts to increase household income; had led to absence of peace of mind. More surprisingly, this condition creates mystical elements; a source rarely found in previous studies. These new findings further enrich the understanding of unpredictable events as a cause of financial stress. The experience of being put under a spell not only harms the physical health, but also negatively affects the emotions of the participants and their spouses. These discoveries explain that financial hardship is not only due to controllable factors such as poor financial planning, but also uncontrollable factors such as being bewitched.

Taking everything into account, the question of why personal financial stress occurs has been answered by the above arguments. Therefore, there is an imperative need to re-evaluate the cultural aspects of sustainable lifestyle

among households in Malaysia. The current lifestyle among Muslims can be described in four quadrants as shown in Figure 2.

Fig.2: Islamic-based Financial Literacy Matrix Tasawur

Quadrant 1 Accurate consumerism tasawur with poor financial planning	Quadrant 4 Accurate consumerism tasawur with good financial planning
Quadrant 2 Inaccurate consumerism tasawur with poor financial planning	Quadrant 3 Inaccurate consumerism tasawur with good financial planning

Financial Planning

In the first quadrant, an accurate consumerism tasawur without good financial planning is enough to sustain oneself and dependents, especially for basic necessities. In the second quadrant, weaknesses in the aspects of tasawur and financial planning have a detrimental effect not only on oneself but also on his/her family and society. The financial survival of this group cannot last long and has the potential to increase the incidence of poverty in terms of wealth and soul. In the third quadrant, precise financial planning without accurate consumerism tasawur can still provide a comfortable life. However, it is troubling that the benefits are limited to only the participants and their dependents. The society will find it difficult to benefit from the participants' extra resources. In the fourth quadrant, it is the strengths in the aspects of tasawur and financial planning that constitute a sustainable lifestyle. The participant's extra resources can be enjoyed by the less fortunate people, and this makes him/her the best human being. This are expressed in a ḥadīth which states that: "A better human is one who benefits other humans" (Narrated by Ahmad, ath-Thabrani, ad-Daruqutni in Shahihul Jami' No: 3289).

Efforts to foster the fourth quadrant of financial literacy should begin at the primary level of education by improving the Islamic education curriculum; and incorporating elements of Islamic consumerism into the syllabus of courses or subjects. Similarly, the current teaching and learning activities must be strengthened to make them more interactive, thus providing a better understanding of the precise consumerism philosophy according to Islam. Consequently, children will be nurtured and entrenched with the true tasawur, which values is blessed by Allah SWT; and not the western tasawur that focuses on materialistic values. If this can be implemented, a sustainable lifestyle filled with human values can be cultivated in the new norms.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research is supported by Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) under the Translational University Grant [UniSZA/TUG/2019/02]. The authors would also like to express gratitude to the Credit Counselling and Debt Management Agency (AKPK) for the support.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad Azrin Adnan (2012). Gelagat pengguna Islam: Satu disiplin atau sub-disiplin? (Islamic consumer behavior: A discipline or sub-discipline?). *Jurnal Pengurusan*, 35, 139-149.
- Ahmad Azrin Adnan, Mohd Izzuddin Abdul Aziz, Sakinah Mat Zin & Wan Anisah Endut (2018). A redefinition of the productive debt concept in halal lifestyle framework. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 8(6), 553-565.
- Agarwal, S., & Mazumder, B. (2013). Cognitive abilities and household financial decision making. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 5(1), 193–207.
- Agensi Kaunseling dan Pengurusan Kredit (2018). Financial behaviour and state of financial well-being of Malaysian working adult. AKPK.
- Anita, W. (2014). *Educational psychology*. New Jersey: Pearson New International Edition.
- Bank Negara Malaysia (2018). Annual Report. BNM.
- Brinkmann, S. (2017). *Philosophies of qualitative research (understanding qualitative research)*. Oxford University Press.
- Brown, S., & Taylor, K. (2014). Household finances and the "Big Five" personality traits. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 45, 197–212.
- Cuvillier, R. (1979). The housewife: An unjustified financial burden on the community. *Journal of Social Policy*, 8(1), 1-26.
- Donnellan, M. B., Conger, K. J., McAdams, K. K., & Neppl, T. K. (2009). Personal characteristics and resilience to economic hardship and its consequences: Conceptual issues and empirical illustrations. *Journal of Personality*, 77(6), 1645–1676.
- Financial Education Network (2019). *Malaysia: Strategi Literasi Kewangan Kebangsaan (Malaysia: National Financial Literacy Strategy) 2019-2023*. FEN.
- Gay, L. R. & Mills, G. E. (2016). *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and applications*, New

Jersey: Pearson.

13. Gordon, B., Paul, L. & Jack, G. (1986). Farm crisis: Patterns and impacts of financial distress among IOWA farm families. *Rural Sociology*, 51(4), 436.
14. Letkiewicz, J. C., & Fox, J. J. (2014). Conscientiousness, financial literacy, and asset accumulation of young adults. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 48(2), 274-300.
15. Mohd Ikwana Aziz, Suchi Hassan, Ahmad Azrin Adnan & Wan Hasannudiin Khairy (2019). An empirical investigation into Malay workers' intentions to leave their jobs. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, 7(10), 57-75.
16. Neubauer, B. E., Witkop, C. T., & Varpio, L. (2019). How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others. *Perspectives on medical education*, 8(2), 90-97.
17. Newacheck, P. W. & Halfon, N. (1986). The financial burden of medical care expenses for children. *Medical Care*, 24(12), 1110-1117.
18. Social Well-being Research Centre Universiti Malaya (2019). Financial Stress Research Survey. SWRC.
19. Servon, L. J. & Kaestner, R. (2008). Consumer financial literacy and the impact of online banking on the financial behavior of lower-income bank customers. *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 42(2), 271-305.
20. Vagle, Mark D. (2016). *Crafting phenomenological research*. Taylor and Francis.
21. Yao, R., and Xu, Y. (2015). Chinese urban households' security market participation: Does investment knowledge and having a long-term plan help? *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 36(3), 328–339.