

# Systematic Review: Factors Associated with Divorce in SEA

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**Abstract:** This systematic review examines factors influencing marital divorce in Southeast Asian populations. Marriage, historically essential for societal stability, is linked to various benefits, including well-being and longevity. However, cultural differences impact marital stability, with individualistic societies exhibiting higher divorce rates. A systematic search identified two studies examining divorce-related factors in Singapore and Indonesia. Findings suggest that psychological disorders, such as OCD, may increase divorce risk, while higher subjective well-being appears to protect against marital dissolution. Limited research in Southeast Asia highlights the need for further empirical studies to better understand marriage dynamics and support stable relationships in the region.

**Keywords:** marriage, divorce, marital dissolution, Southeast Asia, relationship dissolution, intimate relationship, successful marriage, romantic couple

## INTRODUCTION

Marriage can be defined as the legal union of two individuals that is recognised by the local laws of each country (United Nations Statistics Division, 2024). Archaeological evidence of a ceremony uniting one man and woman was found as early as 2350 B.C., in Mesopotamia (Naranjo, 2023). Subsequently, the practice of being committed to one lifelong partner became a relatively universal human experience (Brown, 1991). One of the reasons why marriage became a highly popular mode of living might be due to the various benefits it confers to human functioning. Several scholars (Finkel et al., 2015; Amato, 2012) argued that early utilities of marriage come in the forms of the fulfillment of basic needs between the spouses, such as food production, shelter maintenance, the continuation of offspring, the sharing of resources, elder care and other general survival matters. It was suggested that this trend was initially brought about due to agricultural and technological revolutions. As humans became able to harness, contain, and manipulate energy in their natural environment, a stable ecosystem where humans can coexist with other humans was formed and the functionality of the marriage institution is now palpable.

As larger societies emerge and become increasingly complex, the utility of marriage continues to be observable. Findings from modern research seem to corroborate this idea that children who grew up in stable two-parent families exhibited higher psychological well-being and better physical health as compared with children of divorcees or children from one-parent families (e.g. Rodger & Pryor, 1998; Amato, 2012). Furthermore, older adults who are in a happy marriage tend to live longer, experience fewer health issues, and report a higher level of happiness than non-married or divorced individuals (Lawrence et al., 2019). However, the formation of marital partnership seems to also be influenced by cultural variations. In many parts of East and Southeast Asia, where social stratification and higher adherence to familial values can be observed, economic concepts such as bride-price and parent-arranged marriages were commonly documented (e.g. Mukhopadhyay, 2012). These two concepts signify the role and involvement of one's family in the decision-making process and ultimately symbolize the unification of two families through marriage. Still, some societies such as the US and Canada place a high premium on individual choice; initial feelings of romantic attraction toward a potential partner are deemed to be an important precursor to marriage rather than perceiving marriage as an extension of collaborative efforts between one and one's families (Mentser & Sagiv, 2025). Using this lens, Westernized marriages seem to celebrate the coming-together of two individuals more than the unification of two families. Perhaps more importantly, these cultural variations seem to be linked to the general trend towards divorce, which is defined as a legal dissolution of marriage (APA, 2018a).

As alluded briefly in the previous paragraph, two types of cultural differences are linked to divorce, namely, individualism and collectivism (Heine, 2019). Collectivist individuals tend to measure the advantages of a given decision based on how desirable the outcomes will be to their in-group members (e.g., choosing to marry someone based on one's family's arrangement). As a juxtaposition, individualists tend to make decisions that might be more in line with goals that are significant to their personal self-concept (e.g. choosing to marry someone based on a strong sense of affection in spite of the opposition from one's family). Using Hofstede's Cross-Cultural Index (1980), one can observe that higher divorce rates tend to come from individualistic and Westernized societies. Indeed, a country's divorce rate is strongly correlated with that country's degree of individualism (Lester, 1995). However, there has also been an uptick in the divorce rates of many non-Western populations (Chang, Ng, &

Hui, 2010). It appears that divorce is ubiquitous, but there are certain variables that can influence its prevalence in a given population.

Marital divorce remains a problematic issue. Past studies have investigated the socio-emotional impacts of divorce on adults and children. Amato (2012) revealed that, by looking into the results of meta-analyses on the impact of divorce on children's functioning, an effect size of -0.30 was discovered. This means that in general, children of divorcees scored 0.3 points below standard deviation on various measures of important life outcomes such as school performance, psychological well-being, and health. A longitudinal study also discovered that divorce predicted a lower level of well-being in adults 12 years later (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001). Perhaps more alarmingly, children of divorcees face a greater risk of divorce in their own marriages – this is commonly known as the intergenerational transmission of divorce and has been observed in various US and European populations (Diekmann & Schmidheiny, 2008). However, it is important to acknowledge that most findings discussed above were derived from studies using “WEIRD” (Westernized, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) samples. Non-WEIRD population societies, such as Southeast Asia, are relatively different from the US and other European countries. Besides geographical differences, nearly all Southeast Asian populations tend to be collectivist (Hofstede, 1980), and marriages in this region are characterized by traditional wedding practices (for example, see Goodkind, 1996).

Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan (2003) suggested that modern divorce trends in Southeast Asian (SEA) populations might be driven by the same factors as the West. To our knowledge, there are very few high-quality reports and studies, making it difficult to find empirical support for their argument. To illustrate this, a panel study looking into panel data from 33 non-ASEAN countries discovered that male unemployment is a risk factor for marital divorce (Alola et al., 2019). In comparison, we were only able to find one publication on divorce trends in Asia (e.g. Dommaraju & Jones, 2011), and the paper focused predominantly on the differential divorce rates rather than the associated factors of divorce. Therefore, the purpose of this systematic review is aimed towards finding the extant literature on factors associated with divorce in SEA populations.

## METHODS

### Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August 2024 using two electronic scientific databases, namely ProQuest and PubMed. The search aimed to extract articles providing information on marital divorce studies conducted in Southeast Asia. We used the Boolean phrase “divorce” coupled with country names such as “Malaysia,” “Thailand,” “Singapore,” “Vietnam,” “Indonesia,” “Philippines,” “Myanmar,” “Laos,” “Cambodia,” “Brunei,” and “Timor-Leste.” To broaden the scope of potential studies, associated terms such as “Employment OR retrenchment” were employed, thereby minimizing the risk of omitting relevant studies.

### Data Extraction and Analysis

The data were extracted and analyzed in accordance with the latest Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guideline (Moher et al., 2009). We used the following Population, Intervention, Comparison, and Outcome (PICO) criteria: (1) married adults in Southeast Asia; (2) factors that influence marital dynamics; (3) unmarried adults in Southeast Asia; (4) marital divorce. Exclusion criteria comprised Southeast Asians who are not living in the Southeast Asian region. The first author (BB) conducted data searches

from the two databases and collated the results, which included details such as titles, abstracts, and year of publication. Subsequently, all authors, including the first author, were then randomly grouped into two groups of four: group A and B (Table 1). Next, the two groups performed the screening by manually assessing the titles and abstracts of all search results to identify potentially relevant studies. A total of 5,392 articles were screened at the title and abstract level. There were 15 articles that were further assessed by both groups at the full-text level to determine their eligibility for the review (see Figure 1). Any discrepancies or disagreements were resolved through a discussion between the groups. For the risk of bias assessment tool, the Methodological Checklist by Scottish International Guidelines Network (SIGN) was utilized to appraise the quality of the evidence (Shea et al., 2007). The results are displayed in Table 2. Finally, a total of two articles were included in this analysis.

**Table 1**

*Reviewers Grouping (Randomized).*

Group A	Group B
ENBZ	BBC
SAG	CLXQ
CHM	LJY
GJSA	NCKJ

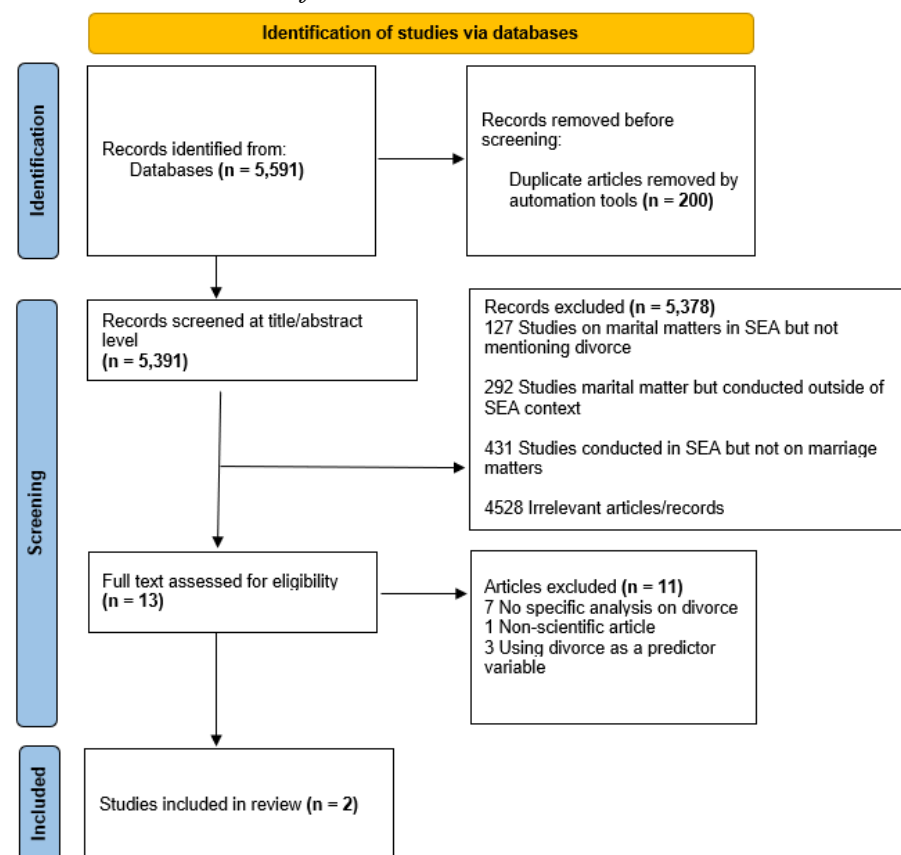
**Table 2**

*Summary and Level of Evidence*

Authors and Year of Study	Study Design	Sample Size	Source of Data	Main Findings	Level of Evidence
Subramaniam et al., 2012	Cross-sectional survey	6,616	Singapore Mental Health Study (SMHS)	OCD is significantly correlated with marital divorce. Respondents with 12-months OCD reported "family relationship" as the domain most impaired by their illness, as assessed with Sheehan Disability Scale (SDS)	Acceptable
Sujarwoto, 2019	Longitudinal survey	23,776	Indonesia Family Survey (IFLS)	Happiness level predicts marital outcomes. Happier Indonesian had higher career success, were more likely to be married, and were less likely to be divorced 7 years later.	Low quality

**Figure 1**

*PRISMA Flow Chart of the Review Process*



## RESULTS

### Study Characteristics

Of all the studies screened at the full-text level, two articles were selected due to our inclusion and exclusion criteria. We narrowed down our focus to studies that specifically involved an analysis of marital divorce as an outcome. The systematic review included a total of 30,392 participants from the two studies. The first article that was included in this review utilized a sample of Singaporean adults who suffered from mental health disorders and the authors employed a cross-sectional design. The second article that was included in the review looked at a general population in Indonesia and employed a longitudinal design. Both studies measured marital divorce as an outcome of an analysis. Two key findings were observable from our review of these articles.

### Finding 1: Presence of a Psychological Disability

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a type of anxiety disorder that is characterized by maladaptive thinking and behavioural patterns, causing one to have intrusive thoughts and emotional distress, which lead to the performance of a ritualized behaviour to alleviate the internal discomfort (Eisen & Rasmussen, 2002). The first article was aimed towards establishing the epidemiology of OCD in the Singaporean population as well as looking into

the degree of social impairment reported alongside the disorder (Subramaniam et al., 2012). A total of 6,616 respondents were surveyed in a face-to-face format. In the adult population, the lifetime and 12-month prevalences of OCD were 3.0% and 1.1%, respectively. Of all respondents with 12-month OCD, the most commonly cited domain in life that was affected by the disorder was “family relationship”. Gender and ethnic differences were not significant predictors, but marital status was significantly associated with OCD. It appears that marital breakdown might be influenced by the state of one’s psychological functioning.

### **Finding 2: Subjective Well-Being**

Subjective well-being can be defined as an evaluation of one’s own level of happiness and quality of life (APA, 2018b). Using panel study data from the Indonesian Family Life Survey (IFLS), 23,776 respondents took part in a longitudinal survey that was conducted once every seven years (Sujarwoto, 2021). The author investigated various factors associated with self-reported happiness levels. It was found that there was no difference in happiness levels among Indonesians between the year 2007 and 2014. Types of occupation (i.e., self-employed or formal employment) and gender were not associated with happiness. In contrast, marital status was significantly associated with happiness. Married adults were shown to be happier in comparison to single, divorced, or widowed adults. Notably, further analysis indicated that happier Indonesians in 2007 were more likely to get married and stay married in 2014. In other words, happier adults appeared to be less likely to divorce.

## **DISCUSSION**

The aim of this systematic review was to investigate the availability of empirical studies on marital dissolution specifically in Southeast Asian countries. The results from our review point to two major psychological experiences that might predict whether or not one might eventually encounter marital breakdown, namely, psychological disability and subjective well-being. The first study (Subramaniam et al., 2012) investigated the degree of various impairments reported by individuals who were suffering from OCD. The authors found that OCD was strongly associated with marital status in Singaporean adults. While the cross-sectional design does not permit for an argument of causality (i.e. whether having OCD might have caused marital breakdown), when being asked to indicate the domain of life that was most impacted by the disorder, “family relationship” was chosen by most respondents. This pattern is consistent with other psychiatric studies conducted using non-Southeast Asian populations, such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany (Adam et al., 2011), suggesting that psychological disability can adversely impact the quality of one’s intimate relationship. In other words, it appears that psychological disability is a risk factor that is associated with marital breakdown regardless of one’s cultural environment.

On the other hand, the second study focused on a potential protective factor against divorce (Sujarwoto, 2021). The happiness level of a large number of Indonesian adults, spanning from 2007 to 2014, was tracked, and it was discovered that happier Indonesians in 2007 were less likely to have been divorced in 2014. Furthermore, there were two notable points of consideration. To begin with, there were no temporal differences detected on the cohort’s subjective well-being scores in the population, both in 2007 and 2014. Moreover, the author controlled for relevant socioeconomic and demographic factors that might influence one’s happiness (e.g., household expenditure, occupation, age, gender, religiosity, and a few more) in the analysis and the effect remained observable. It can be argued that the effect of happiness on marital status was occurring at an intrapersonal level and not due to external circumstances. Presumably, higher subjective well-being serves as a protective factor in an

intimate relationship dyad, such that a higher happiness level keeps people together in the long run.

The findings mentioned above also dovetail with a common trend found in mate-preference research whereby individuals from various cultures prefer a happy predisposition as a quality they seek out in a potential long-term partner (Cunningham et al., 1995). Men and women seem to value this quality to a comparable degree. Similarly, a yearbook study conducted in the US by Hertenstein et al. (2009) found a similar theme: students who were judged to be happier based on the facial expression that they exhibited in their yearly photo-book were found to be less likely to have been divorced in adulthood. Taken together, it seems that happier adults tend make a more successful spouse in many cultures, including the Southeast-Asian populations. However, we were unable to find Southeast-Asian publications that looked into specific risk factors such as male unemployment found in Alola et al. (2019).

### **IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS**

Understanding factors that influence marital outcomes is essential to promote higher relationship fulfilment in adult intimate relationship dyads. Current findings highlight the potential contributing aspect of subjective well-being, or lack thereof, on one's marital trajectories. It appears that adults with a greater sense of welfare might be on course for a stable and satisfying relationship, and this could be a compelling reason for one to seek out professional help, to adopt welfare-enhancing strategies. This study provides corroborating evidence to the values of counselling, therapy, and intervention programmes that target one's well-being as self-care seems to be closely linked with success in relationship domains. A recent cross-sectional study conducted in Turkey (Birni & Eryılmaz, 2022) lends tentative support to this idea, but an in-depth empirical investigation is warranted to check whether the same pattern holds in the Southeast Asian sample.

It is also important to note several limitations. Firstly, based on the result of our systematic search, there appears to be a lacuna in the literature on predictors of marriage outcomes, specifically in the Southeast Asian context. To illustrate this, we were only able to discover two articles through our databases. It is also plausible that there are other publications available in other databases that we were unable to access at the time of the data collection. Future research can use this knowledge to conduct a more expansive search using a wider range of databases. Subsequent research can also investigate specific risk factors that were previously linked with divorce, as discussed in the prior section. Furthermore, based on our bias assessment analysis, one of the two articles suffers from a relatively low level of evidence quality. To make a stronger and more generalizable conclusion about Southeast Asian populations, replicable, high-quality research must be conducted and reported appropriately. Nevertheless, the strength of this study is that it provides a direction for researchers interested in studying this domain. Even though the systematic review points to the existence of one potential risk factor and one potential protective factor of marital outcome, it is relatively premature to conclude that Southeast Asian marriage phenomena have been investigated thoroughly. Despite some consistency with past findings, future research will need to consider conducting further empirical investigation into this domain and ultimately, to help Southeast Asian couples navigate marriage successfully.

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### **STATEMENT OF ETHICAL CLEARANCE**

Ethics approval was not required as no data is being collected from a research subject.

### **DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

Data is available upon request from the first author.

### **DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY**

As the corresponding author I certify that this manuscript is original and its publication does not infringe any copyright. As the corresponding author I declare that the manuscript has not been previously published, in whole or in part in any other journal or scientific publishing company. Also the manuscript does not participate in any other publishing process. As the corresponding author I declare that all persons listed hereafter were committed in the creation of the paper and were informed about their participation.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

### **PUBLISHER'S NOTE**

The views and claims expressed in this article do not represent the Board of Editors and the Reviewers.



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