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(IJEPC)**[www.ijeipc.com](http://www.ijeipc.com)**THE CHALLENGES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ISLAMIC  
COUNSELING IN MALAYSIA: A CONCEPTUAL PAPER**Hazrul Hizam Karim<sup>1\*</sup>, Muhammad Izzul Syahmi Zulkepli<sup>2</sup>, Nur Bakri Abd Hamid<sup>3</sup><sup>1</sup> Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities, Open University Malaysia, Malaysia

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**DOI:** 10.35631/IJEPC.954026**This work is licensed under** [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)**Abstract:**

This study investigates the integration of Islamic principles into counseling services in Malaysia, addressing the complex challenges arising from the nation's diverse sociocultural and religious landscape. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research explores the lived experiences of seasoned registered counselors to identify and categorize challenges, assess the impact of cultural diversity, and propose culturally competent strategies for effective Islamic counseling. Preliminary findings indicate significant obstacles such as the diversity of beliefs within the Muslim community, integration with secular practices, and the need for specialized training and accreditation. Further issues include stigma around mental health, gender sensitivity, technological integration, community engagement, and legal and ethical considerations. The results underscore the need for collaborative efforts among policymakers, practitioners, and religious leaders to enhance the effectiveness and cultural sensitivity of Islamic counseling in Malaysia, aiming to foster more inclusive and comprehensive mental health care. By recognizing and addressing these obstacles, Malaysia can harness the potential of Islamic counseling to support the mental health and well-being of its diverse population while respecting cultural and religious sensitivities. Future research directions and implications for practice are also discussed to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of Islamic counseling initiatives in Malaysia and beyond.

**Keywords:**

Counseling, Islamic, Challenges, Islamic Counseling, Malaysia, Religious

## Introduction

The landscape of counseling in Malaysia has undergone profound changes, increasingly focusing on the incorporation of Islamic principles into mental health services. This shift is driven by the need to address the holistic needs of a diverse Malaysian society. Despite the recognition of Islamic counseling's value, its integration into the existing mental health framework is fraught with challenges from socio-cultural, religious, and institutional dimensions (Rahman & Rahim, 2018). These barriers necessitate a deeper understanding and strategic approach to effectively implement Islamic counseling practices and achieve significant impacts on mental well-being.

This research aims to explore the multifaceted challenges hindering the full integration of Islamic counseling in Malaysia's complex socio-cultural environment. It seeks to provide insights for policymakers, mental health practitioners, religious scholars, and community leaders to overcome these obstacles and enhance the outcomes of Islamic counseling services (Kareem & Rahman, 2020). A comprehensive examination of socio-cultural dynamics, religious sensitivities, institutional frameworks, and professional standards is conducted to understand the barriers impeding the effective delivery of these services.

In an era marked by rapid technological advancements and socio-psychological shifts, the demand for tailored counseling services is on the rise. Establishing the Malaysian Board of Counselor has been a significant step toward ensuring that counseling services in Malaysia are professional and well-trained (Sapora & Hapshah, 2010). Islamic counseling, with its focus on psychological and spiritual balance, is posited as a comprehensive approach capable of transcending geographical and cultural boundaries and promoting holistic human development (Ahmad & Omar, 2021).

This paper emphasizes the need for ongoing dialogue, collaboration, and innovative solutions to the challenges faced in integrating Islamic counseling within Malaysia's evolving mental health landscape. It is also suitable for implementation across geographical and cultural boundaries, where human well-being, encompassing the psychological and spiritual balance focused on in Islamic counseling, can promote holistic human development in a balanced manner. By addressing these issues directly, this research aims to pave the way for a more inclusive, culturally sensitive, and effective implementation of Islamic counseling services across the nation (Mohamed, Sulaiman, & Saravanan, 2022).

## Research Objectives

There are several objectives that can be highlighted in this study. Here are the initial objectives from the researchers:

1. Identify and categorize the specific challenges faced by counselors in integrating Islamic principles into counseling practices.
2. Examine the impact of cultural diversity on the application and effectiveness of Islamic counseling techniques.
3. Propose recommendations for the development of culturally competent and effective strategies to address challenges in Islamic counseling.

## Research Questions

1. What are the challenges that counselors encounter when integrating Islamic principles into counseling sessions?

2. How do counselors navigate the tension between adhering to Islamic values and meeting the diverse needs of a contemporary and multicultural clientele?
3. To what extent do cultural differences impact the applicability and effectiveness of Islamic counseling techniques?

### Significant of the Study

Understanding the challenges faced by counselors in the application of Islamic counseling is essential for the development of culturally competent and particularly effective mental health interventions within the Muslim population. The significance of this study lies in several key aspects:

1. *Cultural and Religious Context* - Malaysia is a predominantly Muslim country with a rich Islamic heritage. Understanding the challenges in implementing Islamic counseling is crucial for respecting and integrating cultural and religious values into mental health services. Exploring these challenges can shed light on how Islamic principles intersect with modern counseling practices.
2. *Promoting Mental Health Access* - Investigating the challenges in implementing Islamic counseling can contribute to improving mental health services accessibility for Malaysian Muslims. By identifying barriers and obstacles, policymakers, counselors, and stakeholders can develop targeted strategies to enhance the availability and effectiveness of Islamic counseling services.
3. *Enhancing Counseling Effectiveness* – Understanding the challenges faced in implementing Islamic counseling can lead to improvements in counseling techniques, training programs, and curriculum development. By addressing these challenges, counselors can better meet the unique needs of Muslim clients and provide culturally sensitive and effective counseling interventions.
4. *Respecting Diversity and Pluralism* - Malaysia is a diverse country with various ethnicities and religious beliefs. Recognizing the challenges in implementing Islamic counseling underscores the importance of respecting diversity and promoting pluralism in mental health services. This study can contribute to fostering a more inclusive and culturally responsive approach to counseling practice.
5. *Policy Implications* - Findings from this study can inform the development of policies and guidelines related to mental health and counseling services in Malaysia. Policymakers can use this information to allocate resources, implement regulations, and promote collaboration among stakeholders to address the challenges identified in the study.
6. *Academic Contributions* - Research on the challenges in the implementation of Islamic counseling in Malaysia can contribute to the academic literature on counseling psychology, religious studies, and multicultural counseling. It can serve as a foundation for future research, theoretical developments, and empirical studies in the field.

The findings of this study will also contribute to the enhancement of counselor training programs, the development of tailored interventions, and the promotion of mental health

awareness within Islamic communities, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and supportive approach to mental well-being.

### Literature Review

As explained by Carlson (1988), counseling is a branch of the field of psychological studies, where it was first identified and developed in the West in the 19th century (Mohd Nasir, 2004). Counseling can be defined as a process in which a counselor assists the client in self-discovery and exploration of various self-potentials to make decisions in resolving the issues they face. Quoting George and Therese (1995), who outlined five fundamental goals of counseling, Mohd Nasir (2004) also listed them as follows:

1. Stimulating behavioral change;
2. Enhancing the client's ability to establish and maintain relationships;
3. Strengthening the effectiveness and capabilities of the client in facing challenges;
4. Facilitating the decision-making process; and
5. Stimulating the potential and development of the client.

The practice of counseling in Malaysia has seen considerable evolution, particularly with the increasing incorporation of Islamic principles, aimed at addressing the diverse needs of the Malaysian population. This integration, however, presents unique challenges due to the complex socio-cultural, religious, and institutional landscape of the country (Rahman & Rahim, 2018). Furthermore, when viewed from the perspective of efforts to introduce the concept of Islamic counseling in Malaysia, it has been initiated for quite some time. This can be seen from several studies conducted and books written by practitioners of counseling themselves. A study on the role of Islamic counseling has also been conducted in Malaysia, as it was determined that Islamic counseling was introduced in Malaysia in the 1980s (Norazlina, 2022). The following individuals, such as Abdul Halim Othman (1986, 1996, and 1998) and Wan Hussein @ Wan Azmi, Wan Abdul Kadir (1986 & 1995), authored publications that emphasized fundamental concepts pertaining to Islamic counseling. Subsequently, several prominent figures such as Aziz Salleh (1993), Kamal Abdul Manaf (2000), and Sapora Sipon (2016) have written books and articles presenting fundamental ideas related to Islamic counseling.

Several studies have addressed the cultural and religious dimensions of these challenges. Kareem and Rahman (2020) highlight institutional barriers in embedding Islamic practices within the national mental health services, pointing out discrepancies in professional training and ethical standards that need bridging. Similarly, Ahmad and Omar (2021) discuss the necessity of developing cultural competence among practitioners to enhance the effectiveness of Islamic counseling practices, underscoring the need for a tailored approach that respects Islamic teachings while accommodating modern counseling methodologies.

The importance of adapting counseling practices to suit the needs of a technologically advancing society is another focal point. Mohamed, Sulaiman, and Saravanan (2022) delve into the role of technology in delivering Islamic counseling services, noting both the opportunities and challenges it presents, such as maintaining confidentiality and upholding Islamic values in a digital space.

From a historical perspective, Islamic counseling's foundational theories and applications have been substantially discussed in the works of early scholars like Badri (1978, 2002) who paved

the way for the Islamization of psychology, emphasizing the alignment of psychological practices with Islamic teachings. This historical context is crucial for understanding the contemporary application and challenges of Islamic counseling in Malaysia.

Furthermore, socio-psychological challenges such as family issues, financial burdens, and interpersonal relationships are seen as limiting factors that affect individuals' mental health and the efficacy of counseling services (Sapora & Hapshah, 2010). The literature suggests that addressing these issues requires not only an understanding of Islamic principles but also an integration of these principles with modern psychological practices to effectively manage the sociopsychological complexities of Malaysian society.

The professional aspect of counseling in Malaysia is also under scrutiny. The establishment of the Malaysian Board of Counselors was a significant step towards ensuring the professionalism and competency of counselors, which is seen as crucial for the credibility and effectiveness of counseling services across the country (Jabatan Pengajian Tinggi, 2011). The precise definition of counseling in Islam is perceived as challenging due to its broad and comprehensive meaning and scope. Although the counseling profession has been recognized by the government as one of the professional services in Malaysia, it faces its own challenges (Mohd Tajudin & Rohany, 2014; Nor Ezdianie & Mohd Tajudin, 2017).

Mohd Tajudin and Rohany's 2014 book, "Profesionalisme Dalam Kaunseling dan Cabaran Masa Kini di Malaysia," discusses the professionalism in counseling and the contemporary challenges faced in Malaysia. The authors examine the evolving demands on counseling professionals within the Malaysian context, highlighting the need for continuous education, adherence to ethical standards, and culturally sensitive practices. They argue that Malaysian counselors must navigate a complex array of societal changes, technological advancements, and increasing multicultural dynamics. The book emphasizes the importance of developing robust training programs and regulatory frameworks to ensure that counselors are well-equipped to meet these challenges effectively, thereby enhancing the overall quality of mental health services in the country. The book from Mohd Tajudin and Rohany (2014) also proves that the growing counseling profession is not exempt from facing its own challenges.

The presence of Dr Malik Badri, the Father of Modern Islamic Psychology, serving as a professor at the International Islamic University Malaysia, further intensified discussions on Islamic counseling. This occurred notably when he presented his paper titled "Muslim Psychologists in the Lizard's Hole" in Kuala Lumpur in 1995. His strong criticism of Muslim psychologists who were misled into following Western psychology, which he characterized as "entering the lizard's hole," stirred the thoughts of Muslim counselors, particularly in Malaysia. This criticism raised awareness and prompted a higher level of consciousness to practice Islamic counseling. In his earlier article, Badri (1978) provides the groundwork by exploring the dilemmas faced by Muslim psychologists in reconciling their religious beliefs with Western psychological theories. He further broadened the discussion in his 2002 article advocating for the Islamization of Psychology, arguing for the necessity of incorporating Islamic beliefs and values into psychological practices.

Since the year 2000, Muslim counselors, particularly those serving as academicians in higher education institutions, have taken significant strides in developing modules for Islamic counseling. Othman Mohamed (2005) is identified as one of the early contributors to the



development of an Islamic counseling model, which he named Cognitive ad-Deen. Other Islamic counseling models developed in Malaysia include the Counseling of Soul Building by Kamaruzzaman Jalaludin (2006), iCBT (Islamic Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) by Nadiyah Elias (Zakaria and Mat Akhir, 2013), Counseling in the Style of the Prophet (Mohd & Hadith Psychology Researchers Team, 2013), and Counseling with the Names of Allah (Wan Mohd, 2013). Additionally, there are researchers who have delved into the psychological theories of Iman al-Ghazali and subsequently developed al-Ghazali counseling models, such as Yatimah Sarmani (2003, 2005 & 2008), Salasiah Hanin Hamjah (2008), and Md Noor Saper (2012).

Awareness of the practice of meditation as therapy to help in improving the mental health issues has also increased, especially in Malaysia. According to Nur Yani & Muhammad Nubli (2018), meditation is said to enhance focus, relieve stress, regulate emotions, and also improve cognitive sharpness. Therefore, their study on the technique of contemplation proves that it is a psychospiritual meditation technique most suitable for Muslim counselors, where contemplation integrated with psychological and physiological elements helps improve mental health and overcome stress issues. This study also proves that emphasis on Islamic counseling perspectives has begun to gain prominence, especially in Malaysia.

Based on the development of Islamic counseling as previously stated, it can be concluded that the Islamic counseling movement in Malaysia has entered a phase of growth and model development (Zakaria & Mat Akhir, 2016b), moving beyond issues of identity or authenticity (Zayed, 2014). However, counselors advocating for Islamic counseling in Malaysia still face challenges and obstacles in their efforts to establish the prominence of Islamic counseling in the country. Several challenges have been highlighted in past studies, where researchers have taken the initiative to explore the perspectives of Muslim counselors in Malaysia. This endeavour aims to turn these challenges into empirical data that can be published as guidance for future generations involved in the field of Islamic counseling.

### **Proposed Methodology**

This research will utilize a qualitative design in identifying the issues pertinent to the research questions and to gain in-depth insights into the challenges faced in implementing Islamic counseling in Malaysia. Qualitative research will allow for the exploration of experiences, perceptions, and contextual factors.

The researchers will use the phenomenological technique, which is one of the components of qualitative research methodology. The phenomenological methodology serves as a framework for exploring the lived experiences of participants in relation to the phenomenon under investigation. The purpose of the strategy in accordance with an aspect phenomenology sought, namely the experience of counselors which perceived to integrate Islamic counseling into the counseling services provided. Thus, arriving at an understanding of the essential structures of the 'thing itself', the phenomenon." Subsequently, the collected data will be analysed using the Thematic Analysis model which was developed by Braun and Clarke (2012).

The researchers intend to conduct a semi-structured interview with individuals among the Registered Counselors who have served for more than 10 years, to explore their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to Islamic counseling implementation. This study will also be focused on Muslim counselors, where the understanding of the concept of Islamic counseling application can be accepted by them.

This research is expected to be completed in 17 weeks with the following indicated as the activity's durations for every section of the research project:

**Table 1: Timeline for Conducting Research**

<i>Research Section</i>	<i>Duration</i>
1. <i>Title</i>	1 week
2. <i>Introduction</i>	1 week
3. <i>Background</i>	3 weeks
4. <i>Research Objectives</i>	1 week
5. <i>Research Questions</i>	1 week
6. <i>Research Methodology</i>	4 weeks
7. <i>Data analysis and discussions</i>	3 weeks
8. <i>Summary conclusion and recommendations</i>	2 weeks
9. <i>Reviewing work for final submission</i>	1 week

### Findings and Discussion

The challenges in the implementation of Islamic counseling in Malaysia are multifaceted and encompass various aspects, reflecting the diverse sociocultural and religious landscape of the country. The researchers anticipate several findings from the study that can contribute to addressing the research questions and objectives. These anticipated findings will guide the actual study, providing a basis for its substantiation later on. Hence, the following discussion outlines some of the prominent challenges faced in the implementation of Islamic counseling and potential areas for exploration:

1. **Diversity of Beliefs and Practices:** The challenge lies in creating Islamic counseling approaches that respect the religious diversity of Malaysia, accommodating not only various Muslim practices but also the practices of other faiths.
2. **Integration with Secular Counseling Practices:** This theme addresses the need for a balanced integration of Islamic principles with secular counseling techniques and ethics to ensure inclusivity and effectiveness in mental health services.

3. **Professional Training and Accreditation:** The findings highlight the importance of establishing standardized training programs and professional accreditation to enhance the credibility and acceptance of Islamic counselors within the broader counseling framework.
4. **Stigma and Mental Health Awareness:** Overcoming the societal stigma associated with seeking mental health counseling and enhancing awareness about the importance of mental well-being are crucial for fostering a supportive environment for Islamic counseling.
5. **Gender Sensitivity:** The need for gender-sensitive counseling approaches that respect Islamic principles of modesty and privacy while addressing the unique needs of both men and women.
6. **Incorporation of Technological Advances:** This theme explores the integration of technology in counseling services, focusing on the challenges of maintaining accessibility, confidentiality, and adherence to Islamic values in a digital context.
7. **Community Engagement and Support:** The importance of engaging the community, building trust, promoting awareness, and involving religious leaders to support Islamic counseling initiatives as key components for successful implementation.
8. **Legal and Ethical Considerations:** The complexities of navigating legal and ethical standards in Islamic counseling practices, ensuring they align with both Islamic principles and national regulations.

Addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts from religious scholars, mental health professionals, policymakers, and the community at large. Research in this area can delve deeper into each challenge, exploring potential solutions, and providing insights that contribute to the effective implementation of Islamic counseling services in Malaysia.

The researchers summarized the key categories and their corresponding challenges or considerations for Islamic counseling in Malaysia. This table below organizes the thematic challenges and considerations identified in the research findings into clear categories, providing a structured overview of the factors impacting the implementation of Islamic counseling in Malaysia.

**Table 2: Summary of Challenges Categories**

Category	Description
Diversity of Beliefs and Practices	Focuses on creating Islamic counseling approaches that respect the religious diversity in Malaysia, accommodating not only various Muslim practices but also those of other faiths.
Integration with Secular Counseling Practices	Addresses the need for a balanced integration of Islamic principles with secular counseling techniques and ethics to ensure inclusivity and effectiveness in mental health services.
Professional Training and Accreditation	Highlights the importance of establishing standardized training programs and professional accreditation to enhance the credibility and acceptance of Islamic counselors within the broader counseling framework.



Category	Description
Stigma and Mental Health Awareness	Emphasizes overcoming societal stigma associated with seeking mental health counseling and enhancing awareness about the importance of mental well-being to foster a supportive environment for Islamic counseling.
Gender Sensitivity	Focuses on the need for gender-sensitive counseling approaches that respect Islamic principles of modesty and privacy while addressing the unique needs of both men and women.
Incorporation of Technological Advances	Explores the integration of technology in counseling services, focusing on the challenges of maintaining accessibility, confidentiality, and adherence to Islamic values in a digital context.
Community Engagement and Support	Underscores the importance of engaging the community, building trust, promoting awareness, and involving religious leaders to support Islamic counseling initiatives as key components for successful implementation.
Legal and Ethical Considerations	Deals with the complexities of navigating legal and ethical standards in Islamic counseling practices, ensuring they align with both Islamic principles and national regulations.

## Conclusions

In navigating the complex landscape of Islamic counseling in Malaysia, this research may conclude numerous challenges, each presenting a facet of the endeavour to integrate Islamic principles into contemporary mental health practices. The significance of recognizing and respecting diverse beliefs within the Muslim community cannot be overstated, as it forms the bedrock for effective and inclusive Islamic counseling services.

The delicate challenge of integrating Islamic counseling into the broader secular counseling context comes to the forefront. Balancing Islamic teachings, modern counseling techniques, and ethical considerations stands as a paramount requirement for successful integration. This integration calls for an understanding of how Islamic principles complement or diverge from secular practices. Collaborative strategies involving Islamic scholars, counselors, and policymakers are identified as essential for navigating this delicate balance and ensuring inclusivity within the diverse counseling landscape.

The challenges related to the availability of qualified Islamic counselors and the establishment of standardized training programs form another layer of complexity. Professional accreditation, ethical guidelines, and a standardized curriculum emerge as key components essential for enhancing the credibility and acceptance of Islamic counseling within the larger counseling framework. Efforts to establish accreditation bodies and training programs must evolve in alignment with the dynamic needs of the field, necessitating collaborative endeavors between academic institutions, counseling professionals, and regulatory bodies.

Overcoming the stigma associated with seeking counseling for mental health issues is underscored as an imperative for progress. Raising awareness about the pivotal role of Islamic counseling in addressing psychological challenges emerges as a catalyst for fostering a more

accepting and supportive societal environment. Initiatives to destigmatize mental health issues within Islamic communities must strategically leverage culturally sensitive narratives, engaging religious leaders and community influencers in the journey towards understanding and acceptance.

Addressing gender dynamics within Islamic counseling surfaces as a recognized challenge, demanding gender-sensitive approaches aligned with Islamic principles of modesty and privacy. The ongoing consideration for the development of tailored counseling services for both men and women necessitates a deep understanding of Islamic teachings on gender roles and collaboration with gender scholars and community representatives.

Furthermore, the incorporation of technological advances in Islamic counseling introduces contemporary challenges. Striking a balance between technological progress and cultural sensitivities becomes crucial, addressing issues of accessibility, confidentiality, and adherence to Islamic values in a digital context. Clear guidelines and ethical standards, established through collaborative efforts involving technologists, counselors, and religious scholars, are identified as essential for the development of culturally sensitive digital counseling platforms.

Community engagement and support emerge as critical success factors for the implementation of Islamic counseling initiatives. Building trust, promoting awareness, and involving religious leaders in advocating for mental health support within Islamic frameworks are identified as essential components. Multifaceted community engagement strategies, encompassing educational programs, outreach initiatives, and collaborations with religious institutions, are underscored for their potential to enhance the legitimacy and acceptance of Islamic counseling services.

Finally, navigating the legal landscape while ensuring adherence to Islamic principles and national regulations stands as a complex challenge. Balancing individual autonomy with legal and ethical standards requires careful attention. A comprehensive understanding of legal frameworks and ethical guidelines, aligned with Islamic teachings, is deemed essential. Collaboration between legal experts, counselors, and religious scholars is envisioned as a key driver for developing strategies that address the complex legal and ethical considerations inherent in Islamic counseling practice.

As we draw our conclusions from this extensive exploration, it becomes evident that the path to seamless integration of Islamic counseling in Malaysia is both intricate and multifaceted. The challenges identified pave the way for strategic interventions, collaborative initiatives, and a holistic approach that respects the rich tapestry of beliefs and practices within Malaysia's diverse Muslim population. In confronting these challenges, the vision of an inclusive and effective Islamic counseling framework stands as a beacon, guiding the way towards mental health support that is culturally attuned, ethically grounded, and universally accessible.

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