

## SOCIAL PARTICIPATION OF MALAY OLDER PERSONS: A QUALITATIVE FINDINGS IN SELANGOR

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper attempts to explore the social participation among Malay older persons joining religious activities. As Malaysia is approaching aged-nation in 2030, active ageing practices should be promoted through social participation such as religious activities, lifelong learning activities and others. This paper applied the qualitative approach by using semi-structured interview, involving six (6) Malay female older persons from Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. The findings of the study revealed that there are five (5) main aspects that promote social participation among Malay elders including: (1) high needs of religiosity (2) willingness to learn; (3) able to concentrate on religion (4) loneliness; and (5) friendship. Notably, this paper is only representing Malay female older persons involving in selected religious activities in urban areas. Hence, the findings of this study is useful for the government to design and improve the existing programmes, for the elders to participate in religious activities, as one of the approaches to promote active ageing in the country.*

Keywords: malay elders, religious activities, active ageing

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### Introduction

Similar to other countries, Malaysia is expected to reach aged-country status by 2030, with 15% of total population (Department of Statistics Malaysia (2010)). The rising of ageing population of older person posed a challenge to government in addressing numbers of issues concerning social exclusion and loneliness, deterioration of physical and mental health, insufficient savings and pensions and others. There is one question that ponder the readers, is Malaysia ready to face aged-country status by 2030, despite of number of rising issues and challenges faced by older persons. Malaysia has just started to grasp an idea of active ageing as compare to other countries. Many developed countries like Japan and United States have taken number of measures to address the real needs of older persons including implementation of active ageing in order to empower older persons to stay active and independent lifestyle to spend their golden years. For example, the Japanese government has implemented Reprint volunteering programs, with aim to connect Japanese older persons with generations. Besides, this program also aims to resolve the issues of social exclusion among Japanese older persons through social participation of older persons in community.

As highlighted in Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (Carstensen et al., 1995), social participation is a key survival among older persons. The participation of older persons in social activities are important that can help older persons to uncover new role in community such as volunteer, advisor, mentor and others. Many developed countries such as United States has inserted the idea of social participation into main implementation of social activities programmes. One of the initiatives that introduced by United States government is implementing America senior club program, with aim to connect older persons in community (Americorps, 2018). This program provides an opportunity to older persons to assist other frail older persons to perform their daily routine tasks and acts as their companion (Americorps, 2018). This program not only offers a life fulfillment to older persons, but also educate them to improve their way of life through learning with others (Americorps, 2018). Social participation also acts as coping strategies among older persons including promoting active ageing, enhancing both physical and mental wellbeing as well as addressing the issues of loneliness and social exclusion. Thus, this study aims to explore the motives of social participation among older persons in social activities including religious activities, lifelong learning activities and others. This is important to

understand the real preference of older persons in promoting active ageing as well as part of preparation of our country to aged-country status by 2030.

### Social Participation Promotes Active and Healthy Lifestyles Among Older Persons

Most of the older persons have been detached away from their societal obligations such as career, family responsibilities, work colleagues and others. Older persons need to readjust with their brand-new lifestyle and get used to having more free time for themselves. Therefore, the social participation of older persons in community is important to uncover a new role in community, to catch up with their hobbies and to stay in an active and healthy lifestyle (Ang, 2018). Many countries such as Japan has taken numerous initiatives to encourage a healthy lifestyle among Japanese older persons such as the idea of reusing old playgrounds and the installation of outdoor exercise equipment and other social activities programs. This is to encourage Japanese older persons to do regular exercises and to get connected within their community and neighbors. This is supported in the study by Zaitsu et al. (2018) in Japan, revealing that the participation of Japanese elderly in the social group have reported better health status. Another study undertaken by Gaikwad and Shinde (2018), the findings also reveals that older persons often meet their friends at parks, while walking leisurely and performing light exercises with friends. There is also a growing number of older persons doing leisure walking at the nearest park from their home. For example, in China, most of Chinese older persons preferred a comprehensive park to do leisure walking and exercise. The comprehensive parks must at least include a wide square space, resting place (bench) that is near to a source of water, fitness outdoors equipment (Zhai & Liu, 2018). This initiative helps to cultivate a positive attitude among older persons to live in healthy lifestyle.

Social interaction is a vital source of moral support among older persons, which has been emphasized in the concept of Active Ageing (WHO, 2002). The concept of Active Ageing has been used interchangeably by many scholars in exploring the social participation among older persons (Judith et al., 2014; Stenner et al., 2011). Active Ageing refers to “continuing participation in social, economy, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs” (Hamblin, 2013). Engaging in social activities not only enhance social interaction among older persons and the community, but also uncovers a new role in the community such as advisor in family, mentor and others. This is important to secure the wellbeing of older persons from social exclusion and loneliness, especially among those who have lost their husbands or families. Thus, social participation among older persons is important, which should not be taken lightly by all parties including government, agencies, families and society as part of preparation of aged-country status by 2030.

### Social Participation Acts as Coping Strategies to Reduce Loneliness

Despite of the health benefits of social participation, it also acts as a coping strategy to reduce loneliness (Aw et al., 2017) among older persons. Due to the social isolation and loneliness, it has led to a growing number of cases involving depression and deterioration on physical and mental health (Momtaz et al., 2012; Yaacob et al., 2009). Depression is mostly prevalence among older persons who are living alone. One way to reduce loneliness is promoting the participation of older persons in the social activities such as religious activities and community related activities. There are numbers of positive results of older person’s engagement in social activities including to balance the rhythm of life (Rey et al., 2017), to solve the hassle of daily life routines, to uncover friendship (Fesko et al., 2012; Liu & Richardson, 2012) and to regain life satisfaction (Ng, 2017). Friendship is identified as the second source of social support other than family. One study undertaken by Tobi et al. (2017), the findings discovered that the older persons uncovered their happiness through friendship. In addition, the religious and spiritual are also an essential aspect among older persons in eliminating the loneliness. This is supported in the study by Agli et al. (2015), the findings discovered that religiosity provides number of coping strategies for better quality of life to older persons including to uphold hope and friendship, to uncover meaning of life and others. Besides, another study undertaken by Zimmer et al. (2018), discovered that religious places act as a supporting role to those older persons who live alone. This is because, the main purpose of older persons to visit religious places is not only to devote their time to God, but also joining in for volunteering works or social works at the religious place in which they often visit (Katagiri & Lim, 2018; Zimmer et al., 2018). The religious place is usually visited by many families during special religious occasions or events. This can help the older persons to connect with society as well as perform religious duties as devotee such as praying.

### Methodology

A qualitative research approach by using semi-structured interview is applied in the study. Both states located in urban areas and have recorded a quite high number of ageing populations. The purposive and snowball sampling techniques were applied in this study to reach the targeted respondents. This is highlighted in the study by Bryman (2012), who highlighted that snowball sampling technique can assist the researcher to find a ‘hard-to-reach’ sample especially qualitative research. The criteria selection of the respondents refers to a person who aged 60 years and above and participated in social activities including lifelong learning activities, religious activities, community related activities and others.

### Findings

As presented in Table 1.1, a total of 6 respondents enrolled in this study, who majority are female, widowed and Malay Muslim. In terms of age group, majority of respondents are in the age group of 60-69 years old and age group 70-79 years old.

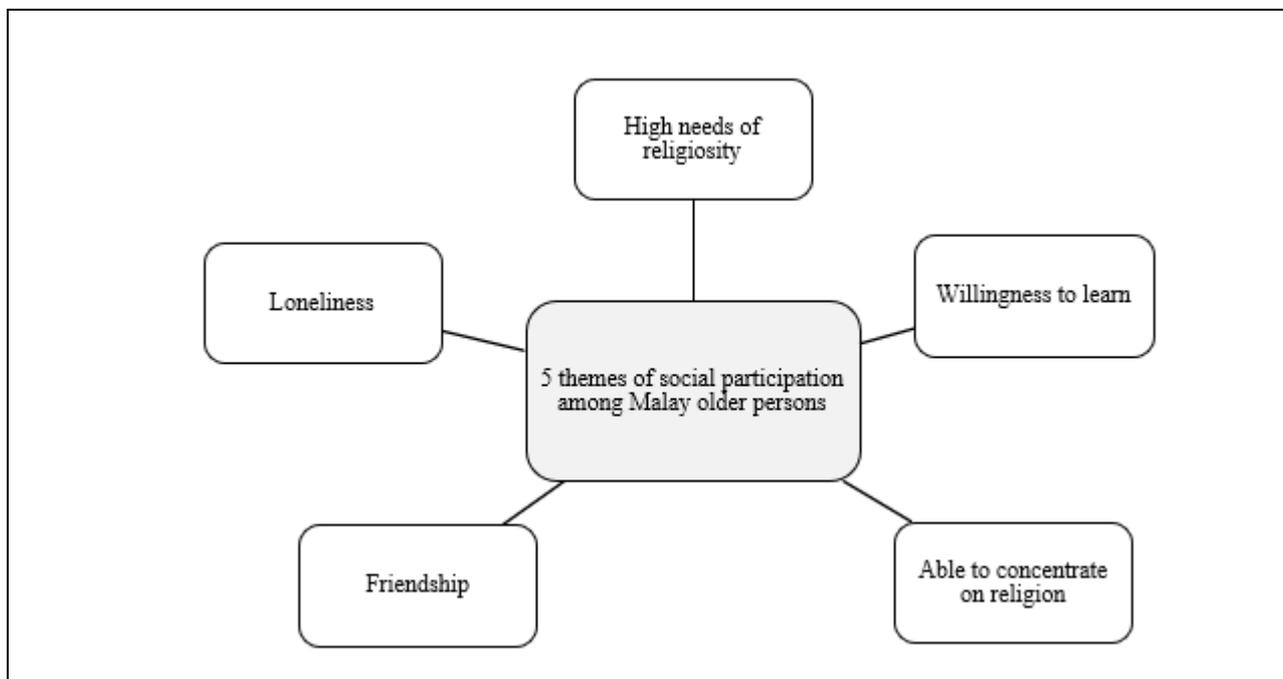
**Table 1.1: Demographic Profile of Respondents**

Respondents	Age	Marital Status	Education	No of	Working Status
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		Background		Children	
S13-F-M	85	Widowed	Never go to school	2	Unemployed
S14-F-M	68	Widowed	SPM	5	Unemployed
S15-F-M	67	Widowed	Form 3	4	Unemployed
S16-F-M	70	Widowed	Form 5	4	Retired
S17-F-M	77	Widowed	Form 3	1	Retired
S19-F-M	68	Single	SPM	1	Retired

Out of six respondents, 5 of them are residents at Darul Insyirah Centre for Senior Citizens to join the religious activities. Only 1 respondent who registered for leisure activities at University of Third Age (U3A), Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. In terms of education background, two respondents have completed the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM), which is considered as a good education level to achieve. Whereas, the remaining 4 respondents had no opportunity to complete their study due to financial constraints and poverty. Majority of respondents had no pensions or savings and mostly relied on their children. As presented in Figure 1.1, there are five main themes that emerged in the study including; (1) high needs of religiosity; (2) willingness to learn; (3) able to concentrate on religious activities; (4) friendship and lastly; (5) loneliness. The findings of each themes are presented in the next paragraph.

Figure 1.1: Five Themes of Social Participation among Malay Older Persons



**I. High Needs of Religiosity**

High needs of religiosity are identified as the main factors that influence the social participation among Malay older persons. Based on the findings, there are 4 respondents who emphasized on the high need of religiosity at their age. Among the reasons of their needs of religiosity due to insufficient supply for hereafter life and scared of death. The feedbacks of 4 respondents are presented as below:

*“It is for supply of old age to enter into hereafter life. What will happen to us, if we are not able to answer the questions asked by angel Munkar and Nakir in the grave? I’m scared because of hereafter”* (S17-F-M, aged 77 years old, italicized emphasized added). Refers to deceased people will be asked by angel Munkar and Nakir in the grave

*“This is for our supply. I feel that our supply is not enough to meet God. That’s why we need to learn about religion. When I am here, I feel my knowledge is incomplete. If we think*

about returned home, we are in loss side as what people saying” (S14-F-M, aged 68 years old, italicized emphasized added).

“I wanted to go to religious place for learning because I think my *knowledge about religion was not enough*” (S15-F-M, aged 67 years old, italicized emphasized added).

“Yes, religion is important for me. I already old. There is nothing that I can do in this world. *I need to balance both world and hereafter, because death is getting near.* We never know when we are going to die. Thanks to Allah, if we realise of our mistakes, we will do our best. God is watching us. I was ignorant when I am at the young age” (S16-F-M, aged 70 years old, italicized emphasized added).

All these 4 respondents aimed to increase their supplies (good deeds) to prepare themselves to face death. These respondents also emphasized that the death is getting closer since they are getting old. For example, S17-F-M also associated limited of time with the fear of the death. She did mention about the fear of meeting angels of the grave named Mungkar and Nakir when she dies. Therefore, she wants to prepare herself with enough supply so that she can answer the questions from those angels.

## II. Willingness to Learn

Based on the findings, there are 3 respondents who emphasized that they came to the center with their own accord and willing to learn at their old age. The responses from 3 respondents are presented as below:

“*I come here with my own accord* [...] I asked my children’s permission and suggestion to find the religious class for learning” (S14-F-M, aged 68 years old, italicized emphasized added)

“*I wanted to go to religious place to learn* because I think my knowledge about religion was not enough” (S15-F-M, aged 67 years old, italicized emphasized added).

“During the younger age, I learn religion at other people’s house. There is no religious school. Except, you go to religious teacher or Imam’ house. Bring the Al-Quran to learn [...] There is no ‘Alif Ba Ta’ (no basic to read Al-Quran), I just read and memorized it. *So, I want to learn all of that again.* That what I like” (S17-F-M, aged 77 years old, italicized emphasized added).

For example, a 77-year-old female, S17-F-M claimed that she did not have a chance to upgrade her knowledge in reading the Al-Quran, a holy book of the Muslims. Therefore, she took her own initiative to survey religious centre to learn more about the religion of Islam to better prepare herself.

## III. Able to Concentrate on Religious Activities

Among others, there is 1 respondent who emphasized that she is able concentrate on religious activities, while joining religious classes at the centre. There is no distraction and she can fully concentrate on religious activities.

“At the religious center, your discipline is very good. But, when we at home, when I listened the Azan, I said wait few minutes. When I fried banana and listened to Azan, I said wait. If I am at this religious place, I will pray on time (S17-F-M, aged 77 years old, italicized emphasized added).

S17-F-M also added that she gets easily distracted while doing housework chores that causes her to delay her praying. She also added that “there is no time (not enough time). After that, we want to read Al-Quran, do not waste time. After having meal, we rest for a while in our room; we take out the small notebook to read. There are many books related to religions”. She also expressed that she enjoys learning and joining the religious class, which reminds her of the days when she would be at school in her younger years.

## IV. Friendship

The findings also discovered that friendship is another reason of social participation among older persons. Out of 6 respondents, there are 4 respondents who emphasized on friendship, which presented as below:

“If we are outside, we will be lonely, right. But, if we have our friends, when we are not used to, so friends will do” (S19-F-M, aged 68 years old, italicized emphasized added).

“Sometimes, when we returned home, *I think about my friends*. I want to go back, miss them. Thank God giving us this time. We never know about our future [...]” (S14-F-M, 68 years old, italicized emphasized added).

“I can eat. When I don’t eat or drink, I get sick. I don’t have appetite. I sit alone and think emptily. *But now I have friends*. No more quiet. No more alone” (S15-F-M, aged 67 years old, italicized emphasized added).

“I am so bored to stay at home. But, when I am here *I really enjoyed*. I am *really enjoy to stay here*. This is because, when I stayed at home, there is no one talk. No coverage to communicate” (S17-F-M, aged 77 years old, italicized emphasized added).

For example, a 68-year-old female S19-F-M, who highlighted that friendship offered their help to her during the class. She was thankful to her friends, who helped her to get used with new environments and new places. Other than that, another respondent S17-F-M also highlighted that she enjoys following religious classes and she also uncovers a brighter side of her life to experience good friendship at a new place. Meanwhile, S14-F-M also considered their friends like their own family. She expressed how she missed her friends, when she returned to her children’s house during weekend. She considered her friends as if they were her own family.

## V. Loneliness

The findings also discovered that loneliness is another reason that urged the respondents to seek places to learn. Out of 6 respondents, there are 3 respondents who highlighted that they were lucky to meet their friends, who helped them to cope with loneliness and some even cure their emptiness. The feedbacks of these 3 respondents are shown as below:

“I come here with my own accord. Actually, I lived alone in Taiping. After my husband died, I stayed with my daughter. While I stayed in Taiping, all my children are working, and my grandchildren are going out to school. *I feel empty, this keeps me reminded with negative thoughts*. It keeps coming into my mind” (S14-F-M, aged 68 years old from Perak).

“Feel happy. We forget about old things. We already have new people. If we want to remember our parents, they will not be here anymore. We just can pray here. If I want to remember husband, just pray for every praying, doing ‘Tahajud’ at middle of night” (S17-F-M, aged 77 years old).

“*My husband is no longer alive*. So, my friends asked me to join this religious center. I also lived alone. So, I don’t want to stay there” (S13-F-M, aged 85 years old).

As highlighted by 3 respondents, they have experienced emptiness right after they lost their loved one. This has causes loneliness to loom over various aspect of their life, although they reside at their children’s home. They felt sidelined since their children went to work or their grandchild went to school. For example, S14-F-M shared that she was alone and always remembered with negative thoughts when she alone at home.

## Discussion

Based on the findings, there are five themes that were highlighted by respondents including high needs of religiosity, willingness to learn, able to concentrate on religious activities, friendship and loneliness. Religion is resilience among older persons as they perceive their time is running out as death is near to them. Hence, this situation urged for a high need of religiosity among older persons due insufficient supply for afterlife and scared of death, as facing after life without enough supply was unimaginable to older persons. According to Fletcher (2004), there is a high need of finding the real meaning of life has become resilient at the later age as death is closer. Fletcher also claimed that religion beliefs offer an infinity of inner strength in enduring life especially among lonely older persons. Based on the findings of the study also highlighted on the needs of religiosity among respondents due to insufficient supply and fear of death. In one study undertaken by Zainab et al. (2012), also revealed that. accumulation of good merits has become the main priorities among Muslim retirees for afterlife preparation. Besides, older persons are willing to learn due to no opportunity to learn and hardship. In one study undertaken by Friebe and Schmidt-Hertha (2013), the findings also revealed that the participation of older persons in learning activities is also influenced by the opportunity of informal or formal education received during younger years. Older persons took their own initiative to learn at old age, as they have free time and opportunity to engage in lifelong learning activities. This is supported in the study undertaken by Zainab et al. (2012), which revealed that there are 5 main motives of older participants in one religious institute such as Al-Jenderami Institute (one popular religious center among Malaysian Muslim retiree) including; (1) consistent in performing prayer; (2) joining friends to mosque; (3) learning with friends; (4) to deepen understanding in Islamic religion; and lastly (5) accumulate good merits for after life. The finding of study by Zainab et al. (2012) also shows that older persons are able to concentrate and discipline in performing their prayer at religious center. Besides, older persons uncover friendship, which can help to eliminate their loneliness, gain moral

support and happiness, hence verifying the finding of the study. Number of studies also emphasize that friendship can act as a coping strategy to overcome loneliness among older persons, which in turn provides moral support and encouragement (Reynolds, 2015; Bachmann, 2014). Friendship can be categorized as an important source of social support among older persons other than family members (Pakstis et al., 2018; Rey et al., 2017; Lim et al., 2016). Thus, friendship offers encouragement and motivation to older persons to stay active and to get connected with groups of friends in their golden years.

## Conclusions

As a conclusion, social participation among older persons in social activities is indeed crucial to maintain the wellbeing of older persons in both the state of their physical and mental health. Not only that, the continuous participation of older persons in the community can overcome the feeling of loneliness experienced by older persons, especially among female older persons. The social support offers strength and moral support to lonely older persons to move forward and live happily. There are five main factors that were highlighted by the respondents including high needs of religiosity, willingness to learn, the ability to concentrate, friendship and loneliness. All these factors have influenced the respondents to continuously engage in their preferred social activities. The findings of the study are only limited to older persons who reside in Selangor states, that cannot be generalized to the entirety of older persons in Malaysia. The findings of this study are useful for the related parties either government or non-governmental organization to consider the preference and interest of older persons in designing more social activities programs in future. There are several measures that can be considered by government in promoting participation of older persons in lifelong learning including low fees participation, accessible education, reduce the geographical barriers (rural and urban areas) and subject tailored to the older persons' interest and preference (Friebe and Schmidt-Hertha, 2013). Besides, all parties including government and non-governmental agencies need to play their role in supporting social participation among older persons. The Malaysian government also can follow suit the best practices of other developed countries such as the United States in promoting social participation among Malaysian older persons.

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