



Thriving in Intercultural Marriages: Navigating Cultural Conflicts and Utilizing Social Resources in Korean-Vietnamese Couples in Vietnam

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Abstract. Intercultural marriages have increased in Southeast Asia. Vietnamese-based Korean households form multicultural communities, but little is known about their marital experiences. The objective of this study was to investigate and understand the dynamics of Korean-Vietnamese intercultural marriages in Vietnam. Additionally, the study aimed to identify the challenges faced by these couples and explore the coping strategies employed to address those challenges. Finally, the study examined the impact of cultural conflicts on marital relationships. A mixed-method approach was utilized in this study, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The study employed surveys, interviews, and focus groups to collect data from a sample of Korean-Vietnamese couples living in Vietnam. Questionnaires were administered, and a total of 39 responses were received and analyzed. The findings of the study revealed that Korean-Vietnamese intercultural marriages in Vietnam showed positive relationship quality but faced cultural conflicts. Couples used strategies like cultural assimilation, social networks, and prioritizing children's futures. Social resources and support played a crucial role in managing and improving marital relationships. The principal conclusion drawn from this study is that Korean-Vietnamese intercultural marriages thrive in Vietnam when couples use adaptive strategies, and social resources, and navigate cultural conflicts. These findings support the well-being of multicultural couples.

Keywords: Cultural Conflicts, Intercultural Marriages, Korean-Vietnamese Unions, Management Strategies, Relationship Quality

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M. I. Zainudin and H. Rahmat (eds.), *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Communication, Language, Education and Social Sciences (CLESS 2023)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 819, https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-196-8_24

1. Introduction

Toward the end of the 1990s, countries in East and Southeast Asia experienced an increasing scale of international marriages. This phenomenon is attributed to the development of transportation and globalization, particularly in the fast increase of foreign investments from developed economies such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore to less developed nations in Southeast Asia. The two-way flow between capital investment and marital migration suggests that there is a positive correlation between investment from rich nations and the immigration of women from poor countries [1]. Being known as a bride-supply country, the number of Vietnamese women who marry foreigners has risen steeply since the early 1990s, the time when Vietnam started to receive foreign direct investment. Among the receiving countries, South Korea is one of the three countries that host the most Vietnamese brides.

Since most Korean-Vietnamese unions settle outside Vietnam, the public tended to focus on multicultural marriages in Korea, especially when there were unfortunate tragedies depicted by the mass media. Yet, during the last ten years, a significant number of Korean men chose to settle down in Vietnam after marrying their Vietnamese wives. The number of Korean-Vietnamese families living in Vietnam's large cities has been increasing fast and their existences have significantly affected the local environment and society. Nevertheless, studies on these unions have received little attention. In fact, a review of the literature on multicultural marriages suggests that no research has been carried out to examine the marital quality of Korean-Vietnamese couples residing in Vietnam. There is also little empirical evidence for coping strategies and how the social resources owned by the Vietnamese wife are used to manage marital conflicts.

Hence, the main purpose of this study was to investigate the marital quality, challenges, and conflict management strategies employed by Korean-Vietnamese families living in Ho Chi Minh City, the biggest economic hub of Vietnam. To achieve these goals, the research asked the following questions:

- What are the challenges and conflicts experienced by intercultural Korean families, taking into account the cultural and social differences between the two nations?
- What are key coping strategies employed by intercultural Korean families to manage marital conflicts, given the wives' advantages of living in their native setting?
- How do the level of social resources influence management styles and the effectiveness of the coping strategy?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Multicultural Relationship Quality

Marriage across racial and cultural boundaries has been extensively studied in multi-ethnic countries, especially in the United States [2]. Intermarriage is often viewed as an indicator of social distance between different groups. Upon forming a union, the quality and stability of a couple might provide information about the strength of social boundaries or cultural lines between different societies. Given the homogeneity of society in East and Southeast Asia, racial and ethnic cultural marriages in large numbers are rather a new phenomenon [3]. Due to prevailing xenophobic ideologies, social distance and cultural lines between groups are strong, particularly in patriarchal nations like South Korea or Vietnam. As such, multicultural couples often face various types of discrimination and prejudices that adversely impact their marital quality [4]. In other words, multicultural marriages are at risk of being unstable or unhappy due to the racial backgrounds of the partners.

As demographics shifted toward multiculturalism, the marital quality of interracial unions started to attract scholarly interest because the stability of these cross-nation relationships has important implications for the sustainability of communities and beyond. Scholars defined relationship quality in various ways and marital quality is often viewed as a latent construct with multiple dimensions. The construct of marital quality includes five dimensions: satisfaction, positive interactions, family conflicts, perceived problems, and partner commitment. These dimensions are affected by interpersonal and contextual factors and most importantly the cultural composition of the couple. From a contextual perspective, the background and social resources owned by each partner may greatly affect their marital quality [5]. Most studies of

intercultural relationship quality focus only on families living in the receiving countries – where the husbands economically and socially dominate [5] [6] – leaving the open question of how the quality of these marriages compares with that of other multicultural couples who live in sending countries.

2.2. Challenges and Conflicts in Intercultural Families

Compared with same-cultural unions, interethnic relationships might face distinct challenges attributed to their differences in cultural settings and social backgrounds [5]. Contrasting values and expectations shaped by culture and living conditions at early ages often lead to marital conflicts, particular after the birth of the couple's first child. Differences in value orientations between partners are the most common causes leading to conflicts. When a spouse moves to a new environment, it is expected that this person adopts the host setting's culture. The process of culturally adapting to the native culture of the other spouse often causes internal tensions and stress.

Barriers to language and communication are considered key challenges in intercultural marriages. The inability to communicate effectively between partners often creates internal strains within the marriage. Effective communication requires each partner to understand the other's needs. When a partner's desires are not met, stress and conflicts arise. Therefore, communication competence plays a crucial role in bridging differences and promoting marital satisfaction. However, research suggests that there are exceptional cases in which language barriers compel individuals to communicate more, leading to better understanding and stronger bonds. In such cases, spouses may find alternative ways to express their needs and overcome language obstacles. Additionally, the use of a third language or a unique communication method shared by both partners can serve as an intermediary or catalyst for resolving conflicts.

As classified in the Hofstede's (2001) [7] framework, Korean and Vietnamese societies are collectivistic cultures that prioritize positive image – face – in social interactions. Hence, different face orientations between spouses might cause marital conflicts [7]. Recent evidence supports this idea as Taiwanese husbands prefer non-confrontational strategies to avoid losing face. These features have important implications for explaining the management strategies employed by Korean-Vietnamese unions. Apart from culture-related factors, other areas such as parenting, gender roles, education level, financial management and traditions were considered as common challenges experienced by cross-national families [8]. Difference in recognition and value orientations in these factors are main causes of psychological and emotional problems, leading to low levels of marital quality.

2.3. Managing Marital Conflicts and the Role of Resources

Success in managing relationship conflicts is critical to relationship satisfaction and marital stability. In cross-cultural marriages, conflicts likely occur when partners pursue incompatible goals or means attributed to their native culture. Hence, literature stresses the role of constructive communication in dealing with problematic situations. Individuals tend not to perceive the impacts of culture on their thoughts, feelings and actions. In everyday life, spouses often overestimate their ability to objectively understand their partners' demands. These misunderstandings are translated into wrong actions and dissatisfied behaviors, which spark the conflict. Hence, it is important that each partner is aware of their own goals and desires to constructively engage in communication and dialogue. Moreover, such personal characteristics as affection for another spouse, empathy, patience, flexibility and openness are also critical in solving conflicts.

In dealing with conflicts and distress, many studies show that women who immigrate to their husband's country choose to adopt their spouse's culture [9]. The effectiveness of this process, namely acculturation, is praised in many studies because such differences as spiritual beliefs, social norms, parenting approaches are narrowed down, resulting in fewer conflicts. But the acculturation might come with a cost of internal tensions experienced by women who are forced to drop their cultural identity. Therefore, cultural adaptation should not be seen as an absolute way of conflict mitigation. The adaptation is a multi-dimensional process in which an individual might choose to be acculturated to one, both or none of the cultural system. In fact, cultural adaptation is a complex picture since there are cases in which the gaps in cultural values, instead of generating conflicts, allow a third setting to be formed. Evidence in a

large number of cases confirm this view as interracial unions held shared views and parenting approaches [10]. In addition, it is common for cross-cultural couples to address conflicting values by co-creating their own reality, hence consequently developing shared meanings and common approaches to family issues [5].

Psychological stress can create tension within the family and diminish marital happiness. To manage stress, individuals may adopt different strategies, including antagonism, avoidance, freezing, and positive engagement [6]. These strategies reflect the interplay between stress demands and individual resources that are capable of explaining management styles used by intercultural couples. Although economic resources keep an important position, non-financial resources such as social capital and advantages of living in one's native country play a key role in cross-nation relationships. Linking and bridging networks determine the strength of social capital, on which an individual can withdraw in critical situations.

2.4. Korean-Vietnamese Households in Ho Chi Minh City

In the early 1990s, the transformation of Vietnam's economy attracted a large amount of investment from Korea. Due to work requirements, many Korean businessmen came and worked in Vietnam [11] [12]. Among them, a large proportion of Korean men married Vietnamese women and their families chose to settle down and form large communities in Vietnam's largest cities [13]. As of December 2020, there are over 100.000 Koreans and family members living in Vietnam, and a third of them residing in Ho Chi Minh City. The Korean communities in Ho Chi Minh city can be categorized into two groups: same-cultural Korean families and multicultural Korean families. Both husbands and wives in the former are Korean whereas the latter households are characterized by a union between a Korean man and a Vietnamese woman. The two groups tend to live in the same neighborhood and jointly create a Korean community [13]. In Ho Chi Minh City, most Korean families reside in the new town of Phu My Hung, forming a vibrant town of over 12.000 Korean nationalities in District 7. In recent years, young households have moved to new residential complexes such as Vinhomes Central Park – Binh Thanh District and Vinhomes Grand Park – Thu Duc City. These intercultural communities have been generating direct and indirect impacts on the City's physical and socio-economic spaces [14]. On the one hand, their marital stability has important implications for both Vietnamese and Korean societies.

2.5. Research Gaps

In the context of Vietnam, Korean-Vietnamese families face unique challenges due to their multicultural backgrounds. However, there is a lack of research focusing on the marital quality of Korean-Vietnamese couples residing in Vietnam. This study aims to address this research gap by exploring the marital circumstances of these households. The objectives of the study are threefold: firstly, to examine the challenges faced by Korean-Vietnamese couples and their impact on marital quality, considering the

advantages of living in Vietnam for the wives; secondly, to investigate the role of social resources and cultural values in Vietnam in addressing marital conflicts; and finally, to explore the strategies used by multicultural couples to enhance marital satisfaction and understand the interplay between social resources and conflict management. The findings of this study contribute to the discussion on the post- pandemic impacts on family values, multiculturalism, and individual well-being in Southeast Asia, while also providing insights into the importance of understanding and addressing cultural challenges for improving the quality of cross-national marriages and promoting marital stability.

3. Methods

This study used focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews to explore marital conflicts among Vietnamese wives married to Korean men. The qualitative approach provided a deeper understanding of cultural factors and perceptions that influence conflict management in intercultural couples. Participants were selected based on specific criteria, including marriage duration and having children. Three focus group interviews and follow-up individual interviews were conducted to gather data. In addition, individuals familiar with Korean-Vietnamese families were interviewed to gain diverse perspectives. The study aimed to examine marital conflict experiences, considering cultural factors and individual perceptions.

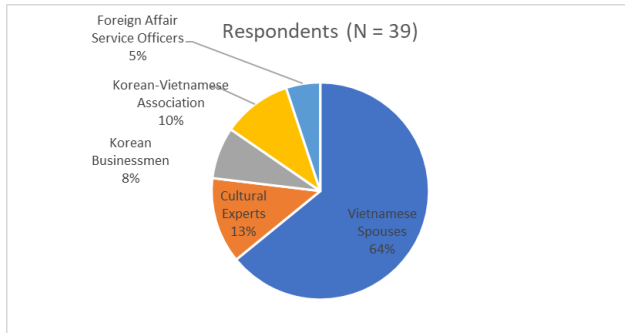


Figure 1: The Composition of the Sample Respondents (Source: authors)

4. Results

4.1. Demographic Data

Table 1. Demographic Profile

No.	Characteristic		Frequency (N=25)	Percent (%)
1	Age	Under 35 years old	14	56%
		From 35 years old	11	44%
2	Employment	Professional	9	36%
		Housewife	17	68%
3	Education Level	Secondary Education	13	52%
		Undergraduate	12	48%
4	Matrimonial Duration	Under 10 years	15	60%

		From 10 years	10	40%
5	Number of Children	1	7	28%
		From 2	18	72%
6	Residential Area	Ho Chi Minh City	23	92%
		Other Province(s)	2	8%

The data analysis involved transcribing audio recordings in Vietnamese, which were then analyzed in two steps to identify patterns and themes. The Vietnamese wives in the study ranged from 24 to 46 years old, with varying marital durations and children. Most of the wives had lived in Korea before settling in Vietnam. Some were working, while others were homemakers. 56% of the respondents were under 35 years old, and 44% were 35 years or older. 36% of the respondents were professionals, and 68% were housewives. 52% of the respondents had a secondary education, and 48% had an undergraduate degree. 60% of the respondents had been married for less than 10 years, and 40% had been married for over 10 years. 28% of the respondents had one child, and 72% had two or more children. 92% of the respondents lived in Ho Chi Minh City, and 8% lived in other province.

4.2. Challenges Affect Quality of Vietnamese-Korean Marriages

The focus group discussions highlighted that cultural differences between Vietnam and Korea pose significant challenges in intercultural marriages, impacting the quality of relationships. Food preferences emerged as a frequent issue, with Vietnamese wives struggling to meet their Korean husbands' tastes and nostalgic attachment to Korean cuisine. Language barriers exacerbated the problem, hindering effective communication during arguments and serious discussions. Cultural backgrounds and communication styles also contributed to misunderstandings between spouses. Surprisingly, the study found that financial management, parenting, and social roles did not have a significant influence on marital conflicts. Many wives considered their marriages better than those of their peers, emphasizing the importance of economic stability and complementary roles in building a happy family life.

4.3. Strategies Used by Vietnamese Wives to Mitigate Conflicts

During the study, participants were open about their strategies for dealing with conflicts in their intercultural marriages. Most Vietnamese wives acknowledged the stereotype of Korean men being caring but easily losing their temper. As a result, they adopted a compromising and negotiating approach, first attempting to calm their husbands' temper before engaging in a discussion when both parties were receptive. This strategy was effective in resolving conflicts for some participants. Additionally, Vietnamese wives made sacrifices in their personal careers and adjusted their interests to prioritize family harmony. Many chose to stop working or take on less demanding jobs after marriage, even though they had stable careers before. These sacrifices were significant considering that their incomes supported their extended families back in rural areas. Adjusting to Korean culture, learning to cook Korean dishes, and aligning their schedules with their husbands' were also part of the strategies employed by Vietnamese wives. Interestingly, participants tended to share their psychological concerns with peers rather than their Korean spouses, possibly due to language barriers and a desire to avoid burdening their husbands. These behaviors demonstrated personal sacrifice and a sense of over-responsibility among the wives.

4.4. Children as Potential Mediators for Conflict Resolution

The participants' behaviors and decisions varied based on their family characteristics, but a common theme across all families was the central role of child rearing in Korean-Vietnamese family life. The education and future of their children influenced many decisions, including where to live, neighborhood choices, and family organization. Vietnamese wives often took charge of their child's education, as their

Korean husbands had busy schedules. Interestingly, there were no significant conflicts related to education in the study, as Korean spouses had unwavering trust in their Vietnamese wives and delegated decision-making rights to them. The wives were responsible for selecting schools, extracurricular activities, and language courses. The focus on the children's future acted as a unifying factor for the couples, mediating disputes and fostering a shared perspective. The participants believed that providing their children with opportunities for international education would contribute to their happiness and success. Ultimately, the participants saw their children's potential as a driving force behind their family plans and were willing to make sacrifices to ensure their well-being and education.

4.5. Peer-networks Play a Critical Role in Marital Satisfaction

The participants in the study are part of various social networks that connect Vietnamese wives married to Korean men. The Vietnamese Wife Group, known as “nhóm vợ Việt chồng Hàn,” is particularly significant for them as a primary source of information and emotional support. These networks play a critical role in maintaining Korean-Vietnamese families by providing insights, experiences, and assistance in acculturation processes. Vietnamese wives often share recipes and cooking techniques for Korean dishes within these groups, benefiting from the collective knowledge. In times of difficulty or complex family issues, Vietnamese wives turn to their network for advice and guidance, exchanging experiences and coping strategies. This helps narrow the cultural differences between spouses and enhances their understanding of Korean culture. Moreover, these networks serve as a form of mental therapy, providing emotional support and alleviating stress for Vietnamese wives. The networks allow wives to share their anxieties and seek comfort from others who face similar challenges. Additionally, these networks provide a sense of belonging and counteract social exclusion, as intercultural couples may face verbal harassment or hostility from the majority society. The Vietnamese wives find solace in connecting with peers who have similar experiences, forming friendships, organizing gatherings, and allowing their children to socialize. The rapid growth of these networks has been acknowledged by the Korean-Vietnamese Association, highlighting their importance within the community.

4.6. Impact of Resources and Home Country Advantages

The participants in this study are characterized by living in the wife's home country and within her cultural sphere, which differs from previous studies that focused on the husband's home setting. This unique aspect brings several advantages, according to the interviewees. One advantage is the balance it provides in the family economy, countering the power asymmetry favoring the husband as the breadwinner. Vietnamese spouses who understand the laws and regulations of Vietnam can navigate the system effectively, gaining economic advantages such as obtaining long-term residence cards for their husbands. The residential roof of the Vietnamese wife also offers benefits, including reducing investment red tape, expanding the market, and facilitating property investment for the Korean husbands. Vietnamese wives often have the final say in choosing a neighborhood or renting an apartment due to their familiarity with the local environment and regulations. The role of Korean husbands in these multicultural families is primarily focused on income generation, while Vietnamese wives handle various other family aspects due to their understanding of the local environment, official regulations, and social norms. Vietnamese spouses also have advantages in their children's education due to their peer networks and personal experiences, which enable them to make informed decisions. The social capital and support provided by the Vietnamese wives' families in their hometowns during challenging times, such as the pandemic, is another critical resource for these intercultural families. Overall, living in Vietnam offers undeniable advantages for Vietnamese spouses in multicultural Vietnamese-Korean households.

4.7. Discussion

This study focuses on Vietnamese-Korean households in Vietnam and explores the marital quality of these intercultural unions. It finds that these families face unique challenges compared to those living in the husband's country. However, living in their home setting provides Vietnamese spouses with various resources that positively influence conflict management, coping strategies, and overall relationship quality.

The findings align with the demand-resources theory, which suggests that individuals' coping styles are influenced by the balance between demands and resources. Vietnamese wives, benefiting from abundant resources in their home country, employ engaging approaches that lead to effective conflict resolution. Cultural familiarity also plays a role, empowering Vietnamese spouses and reducing power imbalances within the multicultural household. These notions were confirmed by Korean officials and cultural experts during the interview:

The stability of Vietnamese-Korean families is due to the fact that they know how to utilize their local advantages. Thanks to support from their wives, business people in Vietnam could overcome hardship. This was clear during this Covid-19 crisis.

Informant O1, Korean Association in HCMC

Vietnamese wives' advantages and efforts further explained by Informant O1 – a Sociologist at the University of Social and Sciences – Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh:

Those who are married to Korean men live in Ho Chi Minh City. Most of them came from rural areas but they had lived here before. After they got married, they tried hard to adapt, quite flexible to overcome the language and cultural barriers.

Informant O12, Sociologist

The study challenges stereotypes of immigrant wives as greedy or opportunistic, highlighting the efforts Vietnamese wives make to maintain relationship stability and prioritize family happiness. These women willingly give up their cultural identity to adopt Korean culture, including cooking Korean dishes, studying the language, and assimilating their children into Korean society. They prioritize the well-being and future of their children above personal interests or individual lives, reflecting the qualities that Korean men find appealing in Vietnamese women.

Vietnamese women are smart and sincere. Korean men can earn lots of money but they expect their wife to love towards the end of their life, regardless of economic conditions. Here, in Vietnam, if troubles occur, foreigners are the most vulnerable groups. Thanks to the Vietnamese spouses and support from the wife's family, the Korean husbands can focus on their career.

Informant O14, Cultural Expert

The study identifies two types of third spaces employed by Korean-Vietnamese households to address marital challenges effectively. Physically, they choose specific neighborhoods that are somewhat privileged for Koreans and their partners, providing a safe zone free from hostile attitudes and negative impacts. Psychologically, using a third language like English can mediate conflicts and prevent severe consequences. These third spaces also relate to the self-help network among Vietnamese wives, creating a neutral space that increases well-being and marital quality. The rapid development of the group, for example, was praised by leaders of the Korean-Vietnamese Association:

Just eight years, the group has become a large network recognized by the 100.000-Korean community in Vietnam. At the beginning, there were around 100 members, but now there are over 300 people participating in a big event.

Informal O5, Korean-Vietnamese Association

The fast growth of the network suggests the need of third spaces that fulfil the role of a multi-dimension networks.

The future of the children is a significant concern for Vietnamese-Korean families, and growing up in Vietnam offers several benefits for both the multicultural households and their offspring. While education

remains important, these families in Vietnam are more relaxed compared to those in Korea due to the intense pressure and challenges faced in the Korean education system. Consequently, the children of multicultural families in Vietnam have a wider range of choices in terms of cultural adaptation and educational opportunities, allowing for greater alignment of their interests and future employment prospects.

During the interview, many participants highlighted these educational and environmental advantages. Given the fierce competitions attributed to new technologies and globalization, experts pointed out the fact that children of multicultural families may have better conditions:

Growing up here, their offspring can command two or three languages. Such global settings as international schools in Ho Chi Minh City can provide appropriate spaces for learning Korean and English based on Vietnamese. In Korea, health facilities and social benefits are better but multicultural families' children are more likely to face discriminations.

Informal O7, Korean Businessman

This might be due to the fact that education pressure back in Korea is tremendous and growing-up difficulties were first-hand experienced by both husbands and wives. Thus, the Korea-Vietnam parents are well aware that their children will have a low rate of success either in education or employment in the father's land. Understandingly, they wanted to protect their children from these fierce competitions. Hence, children of multicultural families tend to have a wide range of choices, both in cultural adaptation and educational opportunities. In other words, the second generation of Korean-Vietnamese families enjoy a relatively freedom in education and lifestyles, resulting in better chances of aligning their interests and future employment.

5. Conclusion

This study focuses on intercultural households consisting of Korean husbands and Vietnamese wives who chose to settle down in Vietnam instead of immigrating to South Korea. The research aims to investigate the characteristics, challenges, and coping strategies of these Korean-Vietnamese households living in Vietnam. The findings indicate that the advantages of living in the wife's home country contribute to the quality of multicultural relationships. The abundance of resources available to Vietnamese spouses helps them effectively address marital difficulties and conflicts, reducing power imbalances in the household. Practical networks and social capital provide support in various aspects of family life, contributing to marital satisfaction. Vietnamese wives prioritize the happiness of their families and children over their own interests, sacrificing their self-identity to mitigate cultural differences and ensure relationship stability. These findings suggest the implicit contributions of Vietnamese spouses to the satisfaction of Korean-Vietnamese marriages.

It is important to note that the study does not objectively compare living in the wife's country to living in the husband's country. The national restrictions in both countries present different challenges for Korean and Vietnamese spouses, and trade-offs are made in every decision. The study acknowledges limitations such as the homogeneity of the sample, which consists of middle-income individuals, and the absence of Korean husbands' perspectives. Future studies should include perspectives from Korean individuals and consider a broader range of income groups and locations. Comparisons between Korean-Vietnamese families living in Vietnam and those living in South Korea would provide valuable insights into coping strategies and conflict management. The study's findings have implications for policymakers in Vietnam and beyond, concerning how multicultural marriages are approached and supported.

6. Funding

This research is funded by the Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM) under grant number B2022-18b-04.

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