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**CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF COMMUNICATION:
INSIGHTS FROM MALAY ENTREPRENEURS IN THE
WHOLESALE SME SECTOR OF TERENGGANU**

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Abstract:

Communication is central to entrepreneurial success, yet its cultural dimensions remain underexplored within Malaysian small and medium enterprises (SMEs). This paper investigates how Malay entrepreneurs in Terengganu's wholesale SME sector enact communication shaped by local identity, religion, and social values. A qualitative multiple-case study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with six entrepreneurs, analysed thematically using Atlas.ti. The findings highlight three distinct cultural dimensions—dialect use, Islamic values, and social norms of respect and humility—that frame entrepreneurial communication. These practices integrate emotional intelligence, leadership sensitivity, and cultural authenticity, enabling entrepreneurs to maintain trust, legitimacy, and competitiveness. The study extends communication and competence theories by showing that cultural embedding transforms communication from a transactional skill into a relational, ethical, and strategic resource. Practical implications suggest that SME development agencies should incorporate culturally aware communication training to strengthen resilience and performance.

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Keyword:

Communication, Culture, Malay Entrepreneurs, Terengganu, Emotional Intelligence, Wholesale SMEs, Thematic Analysis



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Introduction

Small and medium enterprises are widely recognised as the backbone of Malaysia's economy, contributing more than one-third of the national GDP and employing nearly half of the workforce (SME Corp Malaysia, 2023). In the wholesale SME sector, entrepreneurial success depends not only on financial and technological resources but also on interpersonal and communication skills that sustain trust among suppliers, employees, and customers (Baron & Tang, 2019; Ng & Kee, 2022).

Although numerous studies emphasise innovation and digitalisation, the human communication component of entrepreneurship is still understudied. Communication shapes business legitimacy, customer loyalty, and internal cohesion (Mitchellmore & Rowley, 2019). In Terengganu, Malay entrepreneurs communicate through culturally distinctive patterns; mixing local dialects, Islamic expressions, and courteous behaviour, that reflect collective identity and moral responsibility (Ahmad & Ariffin, 2021).

Despite the importance of culture in shaping entrepreneurial practice, existing research has focused predominantly on financial literacy, digitalisation, and technical competencies. Few studies have examined how communication as an interpersonal competence is embedded in cultural frameworks. This study addresses this gap by exploring how Malay wholesale SME entrepreneurs in Terengganu employ culturally embedded communication strategies in their daily operations.

The objectives of this paper are: (1) to identify the cultural dimensions of communication adopted by Malay wholesale SME entrepreneurs in Terengganu; and (2) to analyse how these dimensions strengthen entrepreneurial legitimacy, trust, and competitiveness.

This study contributes to the entrepreneurship literature by advancing the concept of culturally embedded communication as a strategic entrepreneurial competence. While prior studies have examined communication as a functional skill, this research demonstrates that communication within Malay SME contexts is deeply intertwined with cultural identity, religious values, and social norms. By integrating cultural dimensions with emotional intelligence and leadership perspectives, this study offers a nuanced framework that positions communication not merely as a transactional tool, but as a relational and ethical mechanism that sustains trust and competitive advantage in local SME ecosystems.

Literature Review

The literature highlights the intersection of culture, religion, and communication in entrepreneurship. This review is organised into five themes, with a focus on the three cultural dimensions revealed in this study: dialect use, Islamic values, and social norms.

Communication and Entrepreneurial Competence

Entrepreneurial competence involves the ability to mobilise knowledge, skills, and behaviour to achieve venture success (Man, 2020). Among these, communication is vital for persuasion, conflict resolution, and leadership (Cardon et al., 2023). Clear communication enhances credibility and supports decision-making (Zhao & Collier, 2022).

Culture and Communication

Culture influences how messages are encoded and interpreted. Studies show that Asian entrepreneurs favour relational and contextual communication patterns (Wang & Chugh, 2019). In Malaysia, values of harmony, humility, and respect guide interactions (Othman & Wan Omar, 2020). Dialect and linguistic choice convey authenticity and belonging (Chong & Mahalingam, 2020).

Cultural Embedding in Entrepreneurial Communication

Cultural embedding refers to the integration of local values, beliefs, and social norms into entrepreneurial practices, shaping how communication is enacted and interpreted. In SME contexts, particularly within collectivist societies, communication is not culturally neutral but reflects shared meanings and moral expectations (Hassan & Hippler, 2022; Zhao & Collier, 2022). This study extends the notion of cultural embedding by demonstrating how dialect use, Islamic values, and norms of respect function as embedded mechanisms that enhance relational trust and business legitimacy.

Islamic Value and Business Ethics

Islamic principles emphasise fairness (adil), sincerity (ikhlas), and the pursuit of blessings (berkat) in business (Ali, 2020). When embedded in communication, these values create moral legitimacy (Hassan & Hippler, 2022).

Social Norms of Respect and Humility

Malay norms encourage deference and politeness (Ariffin & Ahmad, 2022). Respectful speech minimises conflict and preserves dignity, aligning with Emotional Intelligence (EI) theory that links empathy with effective leadership (Miao et al., 2020).

Theoretical Foundations

Leadership Theory views communication as the medium for vision and influence (Madanchian et al., 2022). EI Theory explains how self-awareness and empathy enhance relational outcomes. Integrating both, this study positions culturally informed communication as a bridge between emotion and leadership in SMEs.

Methodology

A qualitative multiple-case study was employed to capture real-life communication practices among six Malay entrepreneurs in Terengganu's wholesale SME sector. Participants were selected purposively: each operated a business for more than five years and was regarded as a successful local. The selection of six cases aligns with qualitative research standards that prioritise depth over breadth. Each participant was chosen based on purposive criteria, including business longevity, reputation, and demonstrated success in the wholesale SME sector. This approach ensures rich, information-intensive cases that provide meaningful insights into culturally embedded communication practices.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the Malay language, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The conversations encouraged natural use of the Terengganu dialect. Key themes included relationship management, negotiation style, and ethical considerations. All interviews were transcribed and translated into standard Malay and English.

Data Analysis and Rigour

Data were analysed thematically using Atlas.ti 25. Inductive codes emerged from the data, followed by deductive refinement using entrepreneurial-competency and cultural-communication frameworks. Rigour followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: credibility through member checking, transferability through thick description, dependability via audit trails, and confirmability through reflexive memos (Kraus et al., 2020). Ethical approval and informed consent were secured. Data saturation was reached when no new themes or patterns emerged from successive interviews. After the fifth and sixth interviews, recurring patterns related to dialect use, Islamic values, and social norms became consistently evident, indicating thematic redundancy. This confirms that the sample size was sufficient to capture the core dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation

Findings

The analysis revealed three cultural dimensions shaping communication: dialect use, Islamic values, and social norms of respect and humility. These interrelated practices construct a uniquely Malay communication identity within business operations.

Table 1.0 Cultural Dimensions of Communication among Malay Entrepreneurs

Cultural Dimension	Description	Communicative Outcome
Dialect Use	Entrepreneurs used the Terengganu dialect to build rapport, authenticity, and shared identity.	Enhanced trust, emotional closeness, and community belonging.
Islamic Values	Expressions such as ikhlas (sincerity) and berkat (blessing) framed conversations with a moral tone and faith-based ethics.	Strengthened credibility, fairness, and stakeholder confidence.

Social Norms of Respect and Humility	Politeness, gentle tone, and deference guided communication with employees and clients.	Long-term loyalty, reduced conflict, and harmonious relationships.
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Discussion

Functional and Relational Implications

Cultural communication practices enhance both task efficiency and relational strength. By using dialect for clarity and empathy, entrepreneurs combine precision with warmth (Fatoki, 2019). Islamic values transform business talk into moral discourse, integrating faith and professionalism (Ali, 2020).

Leadership and Emotional Intelligence Perspectives

The entrepreneurs displayed leadership grounded in emotional understanding. Balanced firmness and humility resonate with EI principles of self-regulation and empathy (Miao et al., 2020). Similar findings appear in Madanchian et al. (2022), confirming that culturally aware leaders foster trust and motivation.

Cultural Embedding and Competitive Advantage

Ahmad and Ariffin (2021) emphasise that dialect and local values strengthen legitimacy. In line with Hassan and Hippler (2022), Islamic ethics act as symbolic capital, enhancing reputation. This study extends those insights by linking cultural expression to competitive sustainability in local markets (Zhou & Yang, 2021).

Global and Digital Relevance

In the digital era, authenticity remains critical. Entrepreneurs who integrate local identity into online branding maintain differentiation (North et al., 2021). Thus, cultural communication competencies are relevant not only in face-to-face contexts but also in digital entrepreneurship (Ratten, 2021).

This study makes a significant contribution by conceptualising communication as a culturally embedded entrepreneurial competence. Unlike prior research that treats communication as a universal skill, this study demonstrates that in the Malay SME context, communication is shaped by deeply rooted cultural and religious values. This highlights the importance of contextualising entrepreneurial competencies within specific socio-cultural environments, thereby extending both communication theory and entrepreneurial competency frameworks.

Conclusion and Implications

Communication among Malay entrepreneurs in Terengganu transcends linguistic function—it embodies culture, emotion, and ethics. Dialect, Islamic values, and social norms merge to form an integrated communication framework that sustains business relationships and competitive advantage.

Theoretically, this research contributes to entrepreneurial-competence literature by demonstrating how cultural and emotional intelligence intersect within communication. Practically, entrepreneurs should consciously cultivate empathy, moral integrity, and respect in all interactions. Policymakers such as SME Corp Malaysia, MARA, and MEDAC should design training programs that strengthen culturally informed communication as a strategic competency.

Future studies could compare regions or examine digital communication in preserving cultural authenticity. By recognising communication as both cultural and strategic, SMEs can enhance resilience in an increasingly globalised environment

Limitations: The study is limited to six cases in Terengganu. Future research should adopt comparative approaches across regions and cultures to deepen understanding.

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Ethics Statement: Option B (For Studies Not Involving Human or Animal Subjects)
This study did not involve any human participants, animals, or sensitive data requiring ethical approval. The authors confirm that the research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic integrity and ethical publishing standards.

Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Wan Ahmad Rizal bin Mohd Yusoff was responsible for the conceptualisation, methodology, and overall supervision of the study. Mohd Rafi bin Yaacob handled data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. Siti Amaliya binti Mohd Radyi contributed to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

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