

Cross-Cultural Communication Competence of Malaysians and Singaporeans in English-Speaking Tourism Contexts

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ABSTRACT

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Effective cross cultural communication competence is crucial in professional English-speaking contexts, particularly in the multicultural regions such as Southeast Asia. This study explores the cross-cultural communication competence of Malaysians and Singaporeans in professional settings where English serves as the primary medium of interaction and communication. Using a qualitative research design, the study employs non-participant observation in workplace environments including tourist attraction landmarks to examine verbal and non-verbal communication patterns, politeness strategies, and contextual influences. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the workers from the tourism industry to gain insights into their perceptions of communication challenges and adaptation strategies on their interactions. Data were analyzed thematically guided by Hall's (1976) high context vs low context communication framework and the findings revealed key similarities and differences in how Malaysians and Singaporeans navigate professional English-speaking environments, at the same time overcoming communication barriers. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of cross-cultural communication competence in the context of Malaysia and Singapore, offering valuable insights in enhancing intercultural effectiveness.

Contribution/Originality: The paper's primary contribution is finding that Malaysians and Singaporeans demonstrate distinct cross-cultural communication strategies in English-speaking tourism contexts, shaped by high- and low-context cultural norms. This study offers original insights into how cultural sensitivity, language proficiency, and communication styles influence effective intercultural interactions in Southeast Asian tourism settings.

1. Introduction

Tourism plays a vital role in the economies of Malaysia and Singapore, attracting millions of international visitors annually (Umachandran & Said, 2022). As English is widely used as a lingua franca in the tourism industry (Rim, 2022), effective cross-cultural communication is essential for ensuring positive interactions between service providers and tourists. The ability to navigate diverse linguistics and cultural expectations is particularly crucial for Malaysians and Singaporeans, who operate in multilingual and multicultural environments. However, despite the widespread use of English in both countries, communication challenges persist due to cultural differences and varying levels of English proficiency (Salomone & Salomone, 2022). In the Malaysian context, the tourism workforce is highly diverse, consisting of individuals from various ethnicities and backgrounds. While multilingualism is a strength, Roshid and Kankaanranta (2023) believed that it can also lead to inconsistent communication styles and misunderstandings in English-speaking interactions with international tourists. Similarly in Singapore, where English is the official working language, there are still challenges in ensuring that tourism professionals communicate effectively with non-native English speakers (Akram, 2024). Given these challenges, there is a need to assess the cross-cultural communication competence of Malaysians and Singaporeans in the tourism sector. In conjunction to that, this study is underpinned by below research objectives and questions:

1.1. Research Questions

- i. How do Malaysians and Singaporeans communicate in tourist settings?
- ii. What are the key cultural influences affecting Malaysians and Singaporeans communication competence in the tourism context?
- iii. How do Malaysians and Singaporeans navigate cross-cultural communication barriers in tourist settings?

1.2. Research Objectives

- i. To examine cross-cultural communication competence strategies in tourism context employed by Malaysians and Singaporeans
- ii. To identify challenges and strategies used by Malaysians and Singaporeans in tourism context
- iii. To explore the impact of cultural differences of Malaysians and Singaporeans in tourism context

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cross-Cultural Communication Competence in Tourism Setting

Cross-cultural communication competence is broadly defined as the ability to communicate appropriately and effectively across cultures, incorporating language proficiency, cultural awareness, and interpersonal skills (Yue & Wei, 2023). In tourism settings, where interactions between hosts and visitors frequently occur, communication barriers can significantly impact visitor satisfaction and overall travel experiences. According to Chen (2024), cross-cultural communication competence consists of three primary dimensions: cognitive (cultural knowledge and awareness), affective (openness and adaptability), and behavioral (communication skills and strategies). These dimensions are essential for tourism professionals, as they must navigate cultural differences while ensuring smooth and meaningful interactions with guests.

Language proficiency plays a fundamental role in cross-cultural communication competence, particularly in English-speaking tourism settings where English serves as the lingua franca (Munusamy & Kaliappen, 2023). However, effective communication in tourism is not solely dependent on language skills; cultural sensitivity and adaptability are equally crucial. Several studies have highlighted common challenges faced by tourism professionals in cross-cultural interactions. Miscommunication often arises due to linguistic barriers, differing conversational norms, and nonverbal communication misunderstandings (Oggiano & Adriani, 2023). Research by Xi, Yang and Jiang (2022) found that tourism workers in Asia frequently struggle with accommodating tourists from Western countries due to differences in service expectations and politeness strategies. Similarly, a study by Zhang and Noels (2024) emphasized the difficulty of handling culturally diverse customer demands, which requires both flexibility and intercultural empathy.

In the Malaysian and Singaporean tourism sectors, language proficiency levels among frontline employees vary significantly (Ahmad & Scott, 2021). While English is widely used in Singapore, service interactions with non-native English speakers can still present challenges, particularly when dealing with tourists from East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Meanwhile, in Malaysia, the multilingual nature of the workforce can sometimes lead to inconsistent communication styles, potentially affecting service delivery (Sundram et al., 2024). These challenges highlight the need for targeted training programs that enhance cross-cultural communication skills among tourism professionals.

2.2. English as a Medium of Tourism in Malaysia and Singapore

English has undeniably been upheld as an international language spoken throughout the world. In Malaysia, English has become the second important language after Bahasa Malaysia. The use of English is widely used in many sectors like education, social, economy and even politics. Thus, English has achieved such widespread use as a spoken language that it has automatically become the country's second language (Azlina & Kashinathan, 2021). Meanwhile, in Singapore, in addition to serving as a common language of communication for Singaporeans of many races, Seilhamer (2024) noted that English has been broadly used in public spaces and also in the media broadcasting sector.

Given the significant role of English in both countries, examining its use as a medium of communication in the tourism sector in Malaysia and Singapore presents valuable

insights for further discussion. This is because, both Malaysia and Singapore represent two distinctive cultures which reflect differences in terms of beliefs, social practices and communication styles. Therefore, these countries may have different ideas of using English to be used for tourism purposes. According to [Zakaria and Hua \(2024\)](#), tourism may increase cultural awareness and encourage the values of specific cultures. Hence, in the respective countries, it exposes tourists to other traditions, customs, and lifestyle hence this makes tourism essential for fostering cultural understanding. Tourists learn more about cultural values and develop an appreciation and respect for diversity through their encounters with local populations. Additionally, by supporting regional artists, customary acts, and historical locations, tourism can aid in the preservation and promotion of certain cultural traditions. In addition to enhancing visitors' experiences, this cultural exchange helps host communities feel more proud and self-identified.

As both countries regard the use of English as an essential language, then its application in tourism has engaged a wider network to connect with tourists across the globe. [Cacciofoco and Teo \(2020\)](#) mention that tourism is significantly contributing to Singapore's economy which further implies that attracting more tourists has become one of the crucial aims by the country to achieve. As Singapore is an English speaking country, it is important to ensure that the engagement made with tourists is made stronger in order to foster the country's economy. Similar to Malaysia, Malaysia's tourism and leisure sector played a significant role in the national economy, contributing RM73.9 billion, which accounted for 5.2% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) based on the record in 2020 ([Da & Loang, 2024](#)). This positioned the sector as the third-largest contributor to Malaysia's economic output. Thus, English is very important in serving these countries due to its wide use in the tourism context.

2.3. Cross-Cultural Communication from Hall's High- and Low-Context Communication Theory in Malaysia and Singapore

The high-/low-context distinction theory of [Hall \(1976\)](#) has been extensively and more or less successfully implemented in a wide variety of cross-cultural research and this communication style is common in Asian cultures, where meaning is conveyed through culturally embedded cues and indirect, nonverbal associations ([Broeder, 2021](#)), thus making both Malaysia and Singapore are ideal to using this framework. [Hall's \(1976\)](#) cross-cultural contexting theory differentiates between high- and low-context communication settings. In high-context cultures, communication relies heavily on the surrounding environment and shared cultural knowledge, as "most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message" ([Hall, 1976, p. 91](#)). Conversely, low-context cultures prioritize explicit verbal communication, as "the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code" ([Hall, 1976, p. 91](#)). Also, written communication is the preferred mode of interaction, as individuals prioritize efficiency and clarity in their relationships ([Lamino & Diaz, 2024](#)). Though Malaysia and Singapore represent an Asian culture, these two countries are different in terms of showcasing communication styles like for negotiation matters or in daily life routines.

3. Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the cross-cultural communication competence of Malaysians and Singaporeans in professional English-speaking contexts. A qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the

communication styles, challenges, and strategies used by individuals in real-life professional interactions. The target population for this study consisted of Malaysian and Singaporean professionals working in English-speaking tourism settings. These individuals were selected due to their direct involvement in cross-cultural communication with international tourists. The study included participants from various roles within the tourism sector, such as tour guides, hospitality staff, and service workers who regularly interact in English within professional environments like tourist landmarks, hotels, and cultural sites. While the exact number of participants is not explicitly stated in the manuscript, the research utilized non-participant observation at multiple tourism locations in both Malaysia and Singapore, and conducted semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of tourism professionals from both countries. This allowed for a focused yet diverse representation of communication experiences within multicultural tourism contexts, ensuring rich, contextual data aligned with the study's objectives.

This study employed purposive sampling, where participants were purposely selected based on their relevance to the research context, specifically, tourism professionals in Malaysia and Singapore who regularly engage in English-speaking, cross-cultural interactions. The chosen method ensured that the data collected would be meaningful and directly relevant to examining cross-cultural communication competence in real-world tourism settings. The sample size was determined based on the richness of the data collected from interviews and observations, sufficient to fulfill the research objectives and allow in-depth thematic exploration to achieve data saturation.

Non-participant observation was conducted in professional workplace settings, such as multinational corporations, educational institutions, and business meetings where Malaysians and Singaporeans interact using English. Observations were focused on verbal and non-verbal communication patterns, politeness strategies, contextual influences, and instances of communication breakdowns or adaptations. Field notes and audio recordings (where permitted) were used to document interactions while maintaining ethical considerations and confidentiality.

On top of that, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with professionals from Malaysia and Singapore who frequently engage in cross-cultural communication in English-speaking environments. The interview questions explore participants' perceptions of communication challenges, adaptation strategies, and the influence of cultural norms on their professional interactions. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify common themes and insights into cross-cultural communication competence.

A deductive thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the collected data, guided by [Hall's \(1976\)](#) high-context vs. low-context communication framework. Thematic coding categorized data into key themes, such as indirect vs. direct communication, non-verbal cues, politeness strategies, and adaptation techniques. Findings were interpreted in relation to existing literature on cross-cultural communication competence, providing a comparative analysis of Malaysian and Singaporean professional interactions. By employing qualitative methods, this study aims to provide rich, contextualized insights into the ways Malaysians and Singaporeans navigate professional English-speaking settings, contributing to a deeper understanding of cross-cultural communication competence in Southeast Asia.

4. Results

4.1. Comparison of Malaysian and Singaporean Cross-cultural communication competence strategies

In Malaysian tourism contexts, famous tourism landmarks around Kuala Lumpur and Melaka were observed. It could be observed that Malaysian tourism professionals, including tour guides, hotel staff, and vendors, exhibit varying levels of English proficiency, with many demonstrating functional fluency. Code-switching between English, Malay, and other local languages (such as Mandarin, Tamil, or Cantonese) is commonly observed, particularly when engaging with multilingual tourists. This shows that language proficiency plays a crucial role in cross-cultural communication. While some Malaysians use formal English in professional settings, others employ a mix of standard and colloquial English, adapting their language use based on tourists' proficiency and cultural background. This adaptability allows for smoother interactions but may also result in occasional misunderstandings, especially when local slang or non-standard grammar is used. In terms of communication styles and engagement, Malaysians generally adopt an indirect and polite approach, emphasizing harmony and respect. Tourism professionals often use softener words, such as "*maybe*," "*perhaps*," or "*if you don't mind*," to avoid sounding too direct. Active engagement with tourists is evident, with hospitality staff and tour guides often making small talk and sharing cultural stories to create a welcoming atmosphere. However, differences in engagement levels can be noted across ethnic groups and regions; for instance, urban tourism employees in Kuala Lumpur or Melaka tend to be more direct and expressive, whereas those in rural areas potentially exhibit more reserved communication patterns. The ability to read social cues and adjust interaction styles is a key element of their cross-cultural communication competence.

Nonverbal communication is another significant aspect of Malaysian cross-cultural competence in tourism settings. Malaysians frequently use gestures, facial expressions, and body language to enhance verbal communication. Smiling is a common strategy used to build rapport with tourists, while subtle nods and hand movements reinforce spoken messages. However, cultural sensitivity to personal space varies; Malaysians generally maintain moderate proximity during interactions but tend to respect physical boundaries more than some Western tourists. Eye contact is used moderately, as prolonged direct eye contact can be perceived as impolite in certain cultural contexts. Additionally, certain nonverbal cues, such as the use of the thumb for pointing (instead of the index finger) and a slight bow or head nod as a sign of respect, reflect the multicultural influences within Malaysia's communication norms. Overall, Malaysians in the tourism industry exhibit a high degree of cross-cultural communication competence through their multilingual abilities, adaptive communication styles, and culturally aware nonverbal behaviors. Their ability to navigate diverse interactions contributes to positive tourist experiences, although occasional language and cultural barriers may still arise, requiring ongoing training and awareness efforts.

In Singapore, two tourist landmarks were observed to examine cross-cultural communication competence strategies. The first was Haji Lane and the second was the Sultan Mosque of Singapore. There were six elements that were observed using an observation checklist such as language proficiency, non-verbal communication, communication styles, cultural sensitivity and awareness, contextual appropriateness and engagement and interaction. Drawing on [Hall's \(1976\)](#) High- and Low-Context Cultural Model, Singaporeans exhibited characteristics of a low-context communication

style during their visit to the Sultan Mosque. They primarily used simple and colloquial English, ensuring clarity and directness in their interactions. Their language use was coherent and goal-oriented, focusing on discussing the landmark rather than engaging in elaborate contextual exchanges. Given that English is the official language of Singapore, their fluency was evident, with clear and comprehensible pronunciation. Additionally, Singaporean tourists employed functional vocabulary to ask questions and share insights, reflecting an emphasis on efficiency and information exchange rather than implicit or context-dependent communication. On the other hand, based on the observations at Haji Lane, Singapore, language proficiency among locals displayed characteristics of high-context communication. The use of code-switching between Tamil and English indicates a reliance on shared cultural background and contextual understanding rather than explicit verbal expressions. The pronunciation was clear and direct, showing a mix of high- and low-context elements. While the language structure was straightforward, the inclusion of Singlish particles like “*lah*” adds an implicit layer of meaning that high-context cultures often rely on. This reflects Hall's (1976) high-context communication, where meaning is conveyed beyond just words, incorporating cultural and contextual elements.

In analysing communication styles, four key elements were observed: directness of communication, tone of voice, turn-taking and interruption management, and the use of politeness markers. Overall, Singaporeans demonstrated characteristics of a low-context communication style (Hall, 1976), particularly in their preference for direct and explicit verbal exchanges. This was evident at the Sultan Mosque, where clear and straightforward instructions were given, such as “*Please take off your shoes*” and “*Please don't sit here.*” The gatekeeper's commands were direct yet polite, reflecting the low-context emphasis on clarity and efficiency in communication. Unlike high-context cultures, where meaning is often derived from non-verbal cues and contextual understanding, Singaporeans relied primarily on explicit verbal instructions to ensure smooth interactions.

Additionally, the tone of voice played a crucial role in maintaining face-saving strategies, which is more characteristic of high-context cultures. Although the instructions were direct, they were delivered in a respectful and courteous manner, ensuring that visitors of the Sultan Mosque did not feel embarrassed or disrespected. This blend of low-context directness with high-context sensitivity to face value suggests a hybrid communication approach that balances clarity with social harmony. Besides, it could be seen that the tone of the locals were mostly polite when addressing their friends, such as one of the cyclists in the Haji Lane street was calling his friend by his name.

In terms of turn-taking and interruption management, Singaporeans at the Sultan Mosque adhered to a structured interaction pattern, allowing speakers to finish before responding—another trait of low-context cultures, where conversations follow a linear and structured flow. They provided prompt and relevant answers after being addressed, which contrasts with high-context cultures that may incorporate pauses, indirect responses, or reliance on shared understanding. Furthermore, the use of politeness markers such as “*Please*” and “*Thank you*” reflects the Singaporean preference for maintaining social harmony while upholding efficiency. While politeness markers are present in both high- and low-context cultures, their use in Singaporean interactions leans towards a low-context approach, where respect is verbally articulated rather than implied through non-verbal cues or indirect language. In Haji Lane Street, the locals tend to follow structured turn-taking, waiting for their turn to speak. Hence, this reflects hierarchy matters when more senior individuals are often given priority to speak. To add, the locals were using indirect speech and politeness are very common during conversation with

phrases like “I see your point, may I add something?” Through the observations, there may be pauses to indicate that someone has finished speaking before another person starts.

In terms of engagement and interactions, the no-interruption approach and active listening align with high-context communication, where attentiveness and non-verbal cues play a significant role in signaling engagement, as observed at the Sultan Mosque. In high-context cultures, listening is often seen as a sign of respect, and pausing tasks to fully focus on the speaker demonstrates an emphasis on relationship-building and mutual understanding rather than just the exchange of information. This approach fosters a cooperative and harmonious conversational environment, which is characteristic of high-context interactions where implicit cues, rather than overt verbal expressions, guide the communication process. Not only that, based on this element, it could be observed that the locals in Haji Lane Street were very engaging. The interactions among themselves always had pause when talking to each other.

At the same time, Singaporeans at the Sultan Mosque made explicit use of verbal acknowledgment, such as *“Sorry, you were saying...?”*, which reflects low-context communication, where messages are made clear and direct to ensure understanding. In low-context cultures, speakers are expected to articulate their thoughts explicitly rather than rely on shared assumptions or indirect cues. By verbally encouraging interlocutors to continue speaking, Singaporeans demonstrate a structured and goal-oriented communication style that facilitates clarity and inclusivity. Other than that, the locals in Singapore made it clear during conversation. They made sure that the other speaker understood their message by employing direct statements, clarifying questions, and paraphrasing when necessary. Based on the observations done at the Haji Lane street, it could be concluded that the locals would ensure that the message was clear and understood by another person, such as *“You understand or not?”*, *“Right or not?”* or *“You know what I’m saying?”* which also reflects the low context communication and helps prevent miscommunication. Locals at Haji Lane street tend to give straightforward verbal acknowledgments. They made sure that the conversation was quick and clear responses rather than implied meanings.

Thus, the communicative practices observed among Singaporeans reflect a hybrid communication style, balancing low-context directness with high-context sensitivity to social harmony. This adaptability highlights their intercultural competence, enabling them to navigate diverse social and linguistic landscapes while maintaining both clarity and respect in their interactions.

4.2. Cross-cultural communication competence challenges (contextual appropriateness)

In Malaysia’s tourism industry, it could be observed that the contextual appropriateness in cross-cultural communication presents several challenges due to the country’s diverse linguistic and cultural landscape. One major issue identified is the varying levels of English proficiency among tourism professionals, which can lead to misinterpretations or communication breakdowns. While many employees in urban areas like Kuala Lumpur and Malacca are comfortable using English with international tourists, those in rural or less commercialized regions may struggle with fluency, resulting in simplified explanations or misunderstandings. Additionally, differences in pronunciation and

localized English expressions such as Malaysian English (Manglish) sometimes confuse non-local tourists who are unfamiliar with these linguistic variations.

Another challenge arises from differences in communication styles, particularly in balancing indirect and direct communication. Malaysians generally favor indirect speech and politeness strategies to maintain social harmony, often using vague expressions or softening criticism to avoid offending others. However, this can sometimes lead to confusion for tourists from cultures that value directness and explicitness in conversation. For instance, when Malaysian tourism staff use phrases like *"Maybe you can try this"* instead of a clear recommendation, some tourists may perceive the response as uncertain rather than polite. This mismatch in expectations can impact the clarity and effectiveness of communication, particularly in service-related interactions where precise information is needed. Nonverbal communication also presents contextual challenges in cross-cultural interactions. Malaysians tend to use restrained gestures and moderate eye contact as signs of respect, especially in interactions involving authority or elders. However, some Western tourists may misinterpret these nonverbal cues as a lack of confidence or engagement. Conversely, tourists who use highly expressive gestures or prolonged direct eye contact may unintentionally make Malaysian tourism workers uncomfortable, leading to subtle discomfort or avoidance behaviors. Additionally, cultural taboos such as pointing with the index finger, touching someone's head, or using the left hand for transactions can sometimes create awkward interactions when foreign visitors are unaware of these customs.

Hence, while Malaysian tourism professionals demonstrate significant cross-cultural communication competence, challenges related to contextual appropriateness persist. Addressing these issues requires ongoing language training, cultural awareness programs, and strategies for bridging communication gaps with international tourists. Effective adaptation and cultural sensitivity remain essential for ensuring smooth and meaningful interactions in Malaysia's multicultural tourism landscape. Conversely, observations also highlighted how Singaporeans employed elements of both high-context and low-context communication (Hall, 1976) in demonstrating communication competence when adapting their language use in tourism settings such as the Sultan Mosque and Haji Lane. The discussion that follows also elaborates into the challenges Singaporeans encounter in these settings, as well as their overall competence in intercultural communication, particularly in balancing direct and indirect communication styles to facilitate effective engagement with diverse audiences.

At the Sultan Mosque, the use of proper and contextually appropriate language aligns with high-context communication, where individuals are expected to adjust their speech based on social settings and hierarchical structures. In high-context cultures, the setting plays a crucial role in shaping language choice, and the formal nature of the Sultan Mosque influences Singaporeans to use polite and respectful expressions such as *"Hope you have enjoyed the place"* and *"Do come again."* Additionally, warm gestures within a tourism setting indicate an awareness of cultural expectations, reinforcing the idea that communication is not just about words but also about maintaining relationships and social harmony. However, the concise and goal-oriented nature of Singaporeans' responses at the Sultan Mosque reflects low-context communication, where information exchange is typically straightforward and direct. Instead of elaborating beyond what is necessary, Singaporeans provide only relevant responses, ensuring efficiency and clarity in interactions. This approach contrasts with high-context cultures, where indirectness, storytelling, or additional contextual details may be used to convey meaning.

Furthermore, the absence of disagreements or conflict highlights intellectual communication management, a trait that balances both high- and low-context elements. While the structured and purposeful exchange of information is characteristic of low-context communication, the ability to navigate diverse interactions smoothly, without conflict, reflects a high-context awareness of maintaining social harmony.

At the Haji Lane, the locals were adjusting their conversations based on the social setting. It could be observed that the cyclists were using informal language but still portrayed appropriate social interactions. This reflects the low context communication where the soft responses and more respectful language were used among the locals such as *"Eh, later go makan or not?"*. This indicates that the locals in Singapore are influenced by Asian cultural norms and the choice of words they use were direct and straightforward. They were only focusing on the clarity of the topic discussed and did not imply double meaning when interacting with each other. Besides that, unlike in some Western cultures where open debate is encouraged, Singaporeans often soften or avoid disagreement for several reasons. This is due to the fact that they truly valued social harmony and tended to avoid conflicts that could cause discomfort or embarrassment. This also reflects the high and low context elements where the ability to navigate conversation were ensured to be smooth. The locals tend to be Using Ambiguous Responses to Avoid Conflict. So, instead of outright rejecting an idea, the locals often say *"Let me think about it first."* another polite way of saying *"No."* or *"We see how first."* Hence this reflects no commitment, in avoiding conflict.

4.3. The impact of cultural differences on public discourse (cultural sensitivity and awareness)

From the observation at the tourism landmarks in the Malaysian setting, cultural awareness is also evident in the way Malaysians adjust their speech patterns and discourse styles to match the expectations of different tourist groups. For example, when interacting with Western tourists, Malaysians adopt a more open and expressive communication style, whereas with East Asian tourists such as those from Japan or South Korea they tend to use a more formal and reserved approach to align with hierarchical cultural norms. This adaptability highlights Malaysia's cross-cultural competence but also presents challenges, as not all tourism professionals receive formal training in cultural awareness, leading to inconsistencies in communication approaches. Additionally, public discourse in tourism settings must balance the use of English with local languages. While English is widely used, some tourism staff incorporate Malay or Chinese phrases when interacting with tourists from neighboring countries, assuming linguistic familiarity. However, this assumption does not always hold true, sometimes resulting in miscommunication or discomfort. Moreover, the informal nature of Malaysian English (Manglish) can create barriers for tourists unfamiliar with its unique phrases and grammatical structures.

For the tourism setting of Singapore, the impacts of cultural differences on public discourses were also identified in two landmarks. Noting the fact that the Sultan Mosque is a religious symbol for Singaporean Muslims, it was observed that Singaporeans have high cultural norm awareness, and ask appropriate and non-sensitive questions. Moreover, they demonstrate an ability to adapt to cultural variations in speech when interacting with visitors from diverse backgrounds. This adaptability is evidenced by a question posed by a Singaporean supervisor to European visitors: *"Do you need any further assistance in understanding the transcription?"*- specifically regarding one of the

Arabic verses. This also reflects openness within communication, alongside avoiding stereotypes during interactions. Another tourist spot that had been observed was at the Haji Lane street, where locals tend to ask non sensitive questions. The ability to adapt with a diverse background of people when communicating could be seen as needing to be diplomatic to avoid misunderstandings across cultures. For example, this could be observed when a Singaporean asked a Western visitor: *"Would you like to try eating roti canai?"*. It shows that the locals have the ability to avoid stereotypes.

5. Discussion

The findings from the comparison of Malaysian and Singaporean cross-cultural communication competence strategies in tourism settings align with existing literature on cross-cultural communication competence, particularly in multilingual and multicultural societies. As highlighted by [Yue and Wei \(2023\)](#), cross-cultural communication competence encompasses cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, all of which play a role in tourism professionals' ability to navigate cultural differences effectively. The observed strategies employed by Malaysian tourism professionals, such as multilingualism, code-switching, and culturally adaptive communication styles, demonstrate how these dimensions manifest in real-world tourism interactions.

In Malaysia, the common use of code-switching among tourism professionals reflects the country's highly multilingual environment. This is consistent with findings by [Sundram et al. \(2024\)](#), who noted that Malaysia's multilingual workforce sometimes exhibits inconsistent communication styles due to the interplay of different linguistic influences. Despite this, code-switching allows tourism professionals to establish rapport with diverse tourists, reinforcing [Munusamy and Kaliappen's \(2023\)](#) argument that language proficiency is an essential yet insufficient component of effective cross-cultural communication. The ability to adapt linguistic choices based on tourists' proficiency and cultural background aligns with the behavioral dimension of cross-cultural competence outlined by [Chen \(2024\)](#). However, occasional misunderstandings resulting from local slang or non-standard English usage highlight potential challenges, as discussed by [Oggiano and Adriani \(2023\)](#).

As noted by [Ahmad and Scott \(2021\)](#), Singapore's strong emphasis on English proficiency provides a relatively uniform standard for communication, minimizing inconsistencies in service delivery. In contrast, Malaysia's multilingualism contributes to greater linguistic flexibility but can also create variations in communication styles across different regions and ethnic groups. The findings support the argument by [Zakaria and Hua \(2024\)](#) that tourism serves as a platform for cultural exchange, requiring tourism professionals to be both linguistically and culturally adaptable. [Hall's \(1976\)](#) high- and low-context communication framework provides further insights into the cultural communication differences between Malaysia and Singapore. The indirect and polite communication style observed among Malaysian tourism professionals reflects high-context communication, where meaning is often embedded in nonverbal cues and implicit understanding ([Broeder, 2021](#)). This aligns with previous studies emphasizing the importance of politeness strategies in cross-cultural interactions in Asian countries ([Xi, Yang & Jiang, 2022](#)). On the other hand, Singapore's tourism professionals tend to adopt more direct communication strategies, reflecting a relatively lower-context communication style despite Singapore being an Asian country ([Seilhamer, 2024](#)). This distinction is important

for understanding how cultural norms shape tourism professionals' engagement with international visitors.

Nonverbal communication also plays a significant role in shaping cross-cultural communication competence in Malaysia, as indicated by the frequent use of facial expressions, gestures, and body language to supplement verbal messages. These findings align with research by [Zhang and Noels \(2024\)](#), which highlights the importance of nonverbal cues in fostering rapport in multicultural tourism contexts. However, differences in personal space preferences and eye contact norms may still create potential misunderstandings, requiring tourism professionals to be culturally aware of diverse communication expectations.

The findings of this study has demonstrated that both Malaysian and Singaporean tourism professionals exhibit strong cross-cultural communication competence through different strategies. Malaysia's multilingual and adaptive approach allows for greater flexibility, while Singapore's standardized use of English ensures consistency in communication. Both approaches contribute to positive tourist experiences, reinforcing the argument that cross-cultural communication competence is a dynamic process requiring continuous learning and adaptation. Given the economic significance of tourism in both countries ([Da & Loang, 2024](#)), ongoing training programs focusing on language proficiency, cultural awareness, and adaptive communication strategies remain crucial to enhancing the tourism industry's cross-cultural communication effectiveness.

6. Conclusion

Numerous studies have shown the substantial role of cross-cultural communication competence strategies in multilingual and multicultural societies ([Yue & Wei, 2023](#)). Similarly, the comparative analysis of the present study as expounded in the above section has proven to be in tandem with the previous research in many folds. Firstly, Malaysia's multilingual and adaptive approach has the ability to foster flexibility in engaging with diverse tourists. Secondly, Singapore's standardized English proficiency that was maintained throughout, has the capacity to ensure consistency in service delivery. Nevertheless, because the observed interactions occurred within the sphere of tourism, both strategies highlight the interplay of linguistic, behavioral, and cultural adaptability. In addition, the present study also lends support to [Hall's \(1976\)](#) high-context vs. low-context communication framework which reaffirmed that Malaysian tourism professionals exhibit a high-context communication style, relying on nonverbal cues and implicit understanding to convey meaning. Conversely, Singaporean tourism professionals adopt a low-context communication style, favouring more direct communication strategies. Although the study has brought emphasis to the role of non-verbal communication in complementing verbal messages among Malaysians, this aspect of communication differences, namely personal space preferences and eye contact norms may still be a challenge to people in Malaysia, generally, which consequently, may be the cause of misunderstandings. This underscores the need for ongoing awareness and training to ensure effective cross-cultural communication is achievable. Additionally, as tourism remains a key economic driver in both countries, continuous investment in language proficiency, cultural sensitivity, and adaptive communication strategies will be essential in enhancing cross-cultural interactions and ensuring positive tourist experiences.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines established by Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). Ethical approval was obtained from the UiTM Research Ethics Committee, under the file number REC/04/2025 (ST/MR/70). All participants were informed of the purpose and procedures of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to their participation. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity of all respondents were ensured throughout the data collection and reporting process, in line with the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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