

The Exploration of Face-Negotiation Communication Theory in Bridging Cocos Islanders in
Tawau, Sabah and Cocos Islanders Keeling Island, Australia

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Abstract

This study critically examines the applicability of Stella Ting-Toomey's Face-Negotiation Theory (FNT) in interpreting intercultural communication dynamics between two culturally related yet nationally distinct communities: the Cocos Malays of Tawau, Sabah, and those residing in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands of Australia. Despite sharing common ethnic and linguistic origins, these communities have developed divergent communicative norms influenced by differing socio-political systems, colonial legacies, and national identities. Face-Negotiation Theory posits that face defined as an individual's projected self-image within a relational context is a key variable in managing interpersonal and intercultural conflict, shaped significantly by cultural value orientations such as individualism and collectivism. While both communities exhibit collectivist tendencies, their lived experiences within Malaysian and Australian contexts may mediate face concerns and conflict styles in distinct ways. Drawing on an extensive review of interdisciplinary literature including intercultural communication theory, diaspora studies, and sociolinguistics this study offers a theoretical analysis of facework as a potential mechanism for fostering mutual understanding and mitigating communication tensions. Rather than employing field interviews, this research synthesizes empirical and conceptual findings from prior academic work to highlight conceptual gaps, propose integrative frameworks, and suggest directions for future empirical validation. The study contributes to the broader discourse on intra-ethnic communication across national boundaries and offers a model for contextualizing face negotiation within diasporic and postcolonial settings.

Abstrak

Kajian ini meneliti kesesuaian Teori Perundingan Muka (Face-Negotiation Theory) oleh Stella Ting-Toomey dalam memahami komunikasi antara budaya antara komuniti Melayu Cocos di Tawau, Sabah dan komuniti Melayu Cocos di Kepulauan Cocos (Keeling), Australia. Kedua-dua komuniti ini mempunyai akar budaya dan bahasa yang sama, namun telah berkembang dari segi konteks negara, sistem politik, dan sejarah kolonial yang berbeza. Teori ini menyatakan bahawa 'muka' iaitu gambaran sendiri seseorang dalam interaksi sosial merupakan aspek penting dalam mengurus konflik dan membentuk strategi komunikasi, yang sangat dipengaruhi oleh nilai budaya seperti kolektivisme dan individualisme. Walaupun kedua-duanya tergolong dalam budaya kolektivistik, pengalaman hidup dalam sistem masyarakat Malaysia dan Australia mungkin membawa kepada perbezaan dalam cara mereka mengekalkan atau memulihkan gambaran sendiri dalam komunikasi harian. Kajian ini tidak melibatkan temubual lapangan, sebaliknya menggunakan analisis kritikal terhadap kajian terdahulu dan sastera ilmiah yang merangkumi bidang komunikasi antara budaya, diaspora, dan sosiolinguistik. Melalui pendekatan ini, kajian ini mengenalpasti jurang konseptual, mencadangkan kerangka

pemahaman yang lebih kontekstual, dan membuka laluan kepada kajian empirikal pada masa hadapan. Penemuan kajian ini menyumbang kepada wacana akademik berkaitan komunikasi intra-etnik merentas sempadan negara dan memberi perspektif baharu tentang bagaimana teori komunikasi seperti FNT dapat diaplikasikan dalam memahami kerumitan identiti dan interaksi dalam komuniti diaspora pascakolonial.

Introduction

Intercultural communication is a long-standing and consequential area of inquiry because it explains how people manage meaning, identity, and relationships when interacting across sociocultural boundaries. In contemporary settings shaped by transnational mobility and diaspora formation, intercultural encounters are increasingly routine, yet they remain vulnerable to misrecognition and conflict due to differences in norms, values, and communicative expectations (Berry, 1997; Gudykunst, 2003). These vulnerabilities persist because communication is not merely the transfer of information; it is also the negotiation of social realities, including who is entitled to speak, what counts as respectful conduct, and how disagreement should be expressed. When interactants carry different assumptions about appropriate relational distance, emotional display, turn-taking, or the use of indirectness, the same message can be interpreted as cooperative, evasive, rude, or even threatening, depending on the cultural frame applied. Such interpretive gaps are especially salient in high-stakes settings education, health services, workplaces, and public administration where institutional norms may privilege one communicative style over another, amplifying asymmetries of power and recognition.

From a theoretical standpoint, intercultural communication scholarship has developed tools for explaining why misunderstandings occur and how they can be managed. Foundational work on “face” and interaction order demonstrates that everyday talk is structured by normative concerns about dignity, social worth, and the maintenance of a viable social self (Goffman, 1967). Building on this, Face-Negotiation Theory proposes that cultural variability in individualism collectivism, power distance, and relational orientation systematically shapes self-face, other-face, and mutual-face concerns, which in turn influence conflict styles and preferred facework strategies (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). In practice, this means that what one community treats as appropriate directness or “honesty” may be perceived by another as unnecessary confrontation, while what one community treats as politeness through ambiguity may be perceived by another as avoidance or lack of transparency. Research on conflict communication further suggests that these patterns are not fixed traits but situationally activated: power relations, group membership, and perceived threat can intensify face concerns and constrain communicative options (Oetzel et al., 2000).

Importantly, intercultural communication should also be understood as historically produced. Colonial legacies, nation-building projects, and institutional governance shape the categories through which identity is recognised and the repertoires through which it is expressed. For instance, state-led constructions of ethnicity and citizenship can embed particular moral expectations about loyalty, deference, and communal obligation, while multicultural policy environments may encourage a different set of norms around individual rights, public

participation, and the acceptable display of difference. These macro-conditions matter because they configure the communicative ecology within which diaspora communities sustain heritage practices, adapt to dominant institutions, and negotiate belonging across multiple audiences. Accordingly, contemporary intercultural communication research increasingly emphasises a dual agenda: analytical explanation and practical intervention. Analytically, it maps how meanings are co-produced through discourse, relational histories, and institutional settings. Practically, it informs strategies for reducing preventable friction through culturally responsive training, inclusive policy design, and interactional competencies that support mutual recognition. Taken together, the field remains essential for understanding how diverse communities navigate the everyday politics of identity and relationship, and for identifying the communicative conditions under which difference becomes either a resource for connection or a trigger for conflict.

This study examines two ethnically related Malay communities separated by national borders: Malays in Tawau, Sabah, and Cocos Malays in Australia's Cocos (Keeling) Islands. Although both groups share Malay linguistic and Islamic heritage, their identity projects and communicative repertoires have been shaped by distinct state formations, institutional regimes, and histories of governance. In Malaysia, post-independence ethnic governance has institutionalised "Malayness" as a central national category, influencing how Malay identity is narrated, defended, and performed in everyday interaction and public life (Jomo, 2004; Shamsul, 2001). In the Sabah context, where border mobility and multicultural contact are routine, Malay identity in Tawau is further negotiated through local histories of migration and linguistic contact, producing interactional expectations around deference, community boundaries, and acceptable public self-presentation that may differ from peninsular-centric imaginaries of Malayness (Shamsul, 2001).

By contrast, the Cocos Malays' contemporary positioning has been less directly anchored to a Malay-majority nation-state and more strongly shaped by the territory's decolonisation trajectory and formal self-determination process, culminating in integration with Australia and subsequent incorporation into Australian legal-administrative frameworks (Tahmindjis, 1985). These macro-level conditions are not merely contextual "background"; they configure the communicative ecology in which identity and belonging are negotiated, particularly through language choice, institutional participation, and the public articulation of cultural difference. In practical terms, participation in Australian schooling and governance increases the salience of English for official domains, while Cocos Malay continues to function as a core marker of communal continuity and in-group solidarity (Adelaar, 1996; Welsh, 2015). This creates recurring demands for strategic code-switching and audience-sensitive facework, where speakers calibrate politeness, directness, and conflict management across in-group and institutional encounters (Oetzel et al., 2000; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Analytically, comparing Tawau Malays and Cocos Malays therefore enables a focused examination of how shared ethnicity interacts with divergent national ideologies and institutions to shape identity enactment and interpersonal norms in transnational Malay communities (Vertovec, 2009).

Language is a particularly salient site of continuity and change. For Cocos Malays, Cocos Malay functions as an identity marker and repository of communal history, even as English and schooling regimes introduce structural pressures typical of minority-language contexts.

Scholarship describing Malay in the Cocos Islands demonstrates how contact histories and sociolinguistic constraints shape lexical, pragmatic, and identity outcomes over time (Adelaar, 1996; Welsh, 2015).

To theorise how these communities manage (mis)alignment in interaction, the study adopts Face-Negotiation Theory and adjacent facework research. Face-Negotiation Theory predicts systematic variation in self-face, other-face, and mutual-face concerns across cultural orientations and situational constraints (e.g., power distance, in-group/out-group status, conflict intensity). Empirical work has further operationalised face concerns and mapped recurrent facework behaviours in conflict episodes, providing robust constructs for analysing intercultural misunderstandings and accommodation strategies (Oetzel et al., 2000; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998).

Accordingly, the central aim of this research is to explain how shared ethnicity interacts with divergent national-institutional socialisation to shape face priorities, conflict styles, and identity performances among Tawau Malays and Cocos Malays. By tracing how face is invoked, protected, or contested in naturally occurring or elicited intercultural exchanges, the study seeks to identify predictable friction points as well as practicable pathways for communicative harmonisation across these Malay communities.

Problem Statement

Despite shared ancestry and a broadly similar Malay–Muslim heritage, Malays in Tawau, Sabah and Cocos Malays in Australia’s Cocos (Keeling) Islands have developed along divergent sociopolitical trajectories that shape identity construction and everyday communicative norms. In Malaysia, post-independence state formation and ethnic governance have institutionalized “Malayness” as a central national category, influencing how Malay identity is narrated, legitimized, and performed in public life and routine interaction (Jomo, 2004; Shamsul, 2001). In border settings such as Tawau, where mobility and interethnic contact are routine, Malay identity is further negotiated through local histories and community boundary-making, yet it remains anchored to nationally salient expectations around hierarchy, propriety, and social harmony.

By contrast, the contemporary positioning of Cocos Malays has been strongly shaped by the territory’s decolonization and self-determination trajectory, culminating in integration under Australian legal and administrative frameworks (Tahmindjis, 1985). These structural conditions configure the communicative ecology in which belonging is negotiated: English carries institutional authority in schooling and governance, while Cocos Malay continues to function as a key marker of in-group solidarity and intergenerational continuity (Adelaar, 1996; Welsh, 2015). The resulting bilingual and bicultural demands can produce audience-sensitive shifts in politeness, directness, and conflict talk across in-group and institutional encounters.

These divergent contexts matter because assumptions of “ethnic similarity” can obscure meaningful differences in face concerns, interactional expectations, and conflict management preferences. When Tawau Malays and Cocos Malays engage through family ties, cultural exchanges, or community collaboration, differences in what counts as respect, appropriate disagreement, and relational obligation may trigger face threats, misattributions of intent, and

avoidable escalation. Yet, comparative scholarship applying theory-driven communication models to explain and mitigate these risks between ethnically similar but nationally divergent Malay communities remains limited. Face-Negotiation Theory and the broader facework literature offer a rigorous framework for addressing this gap by linking cultural and situational factors to self-face, other-face, and mutual-face concerns, as well as to the selection of conflict styles and facework strategies (Oetzel et al., 2000; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). This study therefore argues for a focused, theory-guided comparison to clarify where communicative mismatches are most likely to occur and what interactional strategies can foster mutual understanding.

Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the relevance of Face-Negotiation Theory in the context of Tawau Malays and Cocos Malays.
2. To identify the similarities and differences in face concerns and conflict communication styles between the two groups.
3. To explore how facework strategies can be used to foster mutual understanding and resolve communication tensions.

Literature Review

Stella Ting-Toomey's Face-Negotiation Theory (FNT) stands as one of the most influential frameworks in the study of intercultural communication, particularly in its capacity to explain the management of interpersonal conflict across cultural boundaries. First introduced in the late 1980s and later expanded in the early 2000s, the theory integrates foundational concepts from communication, psychology, and cultural anthropology to propose that faceor the socially situated self-image individuals seek to uphold is a central concern in intercultural interactions. The theory is grounded in the notion that facework, the verbal and nonverbal strategies employed to maintain, defend, or restore face, is deeply embedded within a culture's orientation toward individualism or collectivism (Ting-Toomey, 1988, 2005).

Face, as conceptualized by Ting-Toomey, is not merely a personal concern but is reflective of broader societal expectations and cultural norms. In collectivistic societies, such as many in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, face is communal and relational. It involves obligations toward in-groups and is maintained through indirect communication, modesty, and deference to authority. In contrast, individualistic cultures, such as those in North America and parts of Western Europe, conceive face as self-driven and autonomous, maintained through directness, assertiveness, and a high regard for personal freedom (Ting-Toomey, 2005; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). These distinctions form the basis for divergent face concerns: self-face, other-face, and mutual-face. Self-face reflects concern for one's own image, other-face pertains to concern for another's image, and mutual-face emphasizes a joint maintenance of face during interaction (Oetzel et al., 2001).

FNT's intellectual foundation builds on Goffman's (1967) dramaturgical perspective of face as a social performance. However, Ting-Toomey extends Goffman's insights by embedding face

within cultural dimensions, thereby explaining why individuals from different cultural backgrounds approach conflict differently. This development addresses a critical limitation in earlier communication theories that often assumed universality in conflict management styles. By incorporating cultural orientation, FNT provides a nuanced framework that accounts for how communication preferences and face concerns vary across cultural contexts (Gudykunst, 2003). The operational core of FNT lies in its identification of five primary conflict styles: avoiding, obliging, compromising, dominating, and integrating. These styles correspond to face concerns and self-construals. Research by Oetzel and Ting-Toomey (2003) found that individuals with interdependent self-construals—typically those from collectivist cultures—were more likely to adopt avoiding and obliging strategies. In contrast, those with independent self-construals preferred dominating and integrating strategies. The empirical robustness of these findings has been confirmed across numerous cross-cultural studies involving participants from Korea, Japan, China, the United States, and various Southeast Asian countries (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001; Oetzel et al., 2001).

Recent research continues to support and refine FNT's central claims. Similarly, Liu and Ting-Toomey (1998) noted that overseas Chinese in the United States demonstrated adaptive facework styles depending on context, a phenomenon known as cultural frame switching. These insights suggest that FNT can be fruitfully applied to understand communication in increasingly multicultural and globalized societies, where identity and face are negotiated fluidly.

The relevance of FNT has also been observed in institutional and educational settings. A study by Matsumoto, Yoo, and Nakagawa (2008) analyzed how students from Japan, the U.S., and Mexico dealt with face-threatening scenarios in classroom environments. The findings indicated that students from collectivistic cultures preferred conflict avoidance and sought teacher validation as a way to preserve mutual-face, while students from individualistic cultures were more inclined toward open confrontation to assert self-face. Such studies provide concrete evidence of the theory's applicability beyond dyadic interpersonal interactions, extending into organizational, pedagogical, and diplomatic domains.

Stella Ting-Toomey's Face-Negotiation Theory remains a central framework for understanding how people manage face and conflict across cultural boundaries. The theory foregrounds face—the socially situated self-image people seek to uphold—and describes facework as the verbal and nonverbal strategies used to maintain, defend, or restore that image. Ting-Toomey links face concerns to cultural orientations such as individualism and collectivism, explaining why communicative preferences and conflict responses differ across cultural contexts.

Linguistic and paralinguistic cues are integral to facework. In high-context settings, silence, pauses, and nonverbal gestures often function as respectful, face-preserving moves, whereas low-context settings tend to privilege explicit verbal expression. These differences matter in multilingual and multicultural environments, where communicative competence includes sensitivity to face-sensitive behaviors as well as language proficiency.

Face-Negotiation Theory has also been applied in institutional domains such as mediation, diplomacy, and organizational training. Practitioners use the theory to diagnose face-threatening acts and to design interventions that reduce escalation by encouraging culturally attuned negotiation strategies. In multicultural educational settings, research has shown that mutual-face strategies and avoidance can be prevalent where preserving group harmony is prioritized, reinforcing the theory's relevance for classroom and institutional interactions.

Critiques of the theory caution against overly rigid dichotomies between individualism and collectivism and urge attention to intracultural variation, power dynamics, and historical context. These critiques encourage scholars to combine FNT with intersectional and critical perspectives so that analyses capture how identity, power, and institutional histories shape facework in complex, situated ways.

Finally, empirical work in multicultural societies supports the continued utility of FNT for explaining how face concerns influence interactional choices. Studies of interethnic communication in Malaysia, for example, highlight the prominence of mutual-face strategies in contexts where maintaining social harmony is culturally salient.

In conclusion, Stella Ting-Toomey's Face-Negotiation Theory offers a comprehensive and culturally grounded framework for understanding how individuals navigate face concerns and manage conflict across cultural boundaries. Its emphasis on cultural orientation, self-construal, and facework strategies has made it an indispensable tool in the study of intercultural communication. As societies become more interconnected and multicultural, the need for effective and culturally sensitive communication will only increase. FNT, with its rich theoretical lineage and empirical support, remains a vital resource for scholars, educators, negotiators, and anyone seeking to foster understanding in diverse communicative environments.

Face-Negotiation Theory (FNT), introduced by Stella Ting-Toomey in the late 1980s and further developed into the early 2000s, is a foundational theory in the study of intercultural communication. The theory explains how individuals manage "face" a sociocultural identity or self-image during interactions, particularly in conflict situations. Ting-Toomey (1988, 2005) proposed that cultural variables, especially individualism and collectivism, significantly shape how people perceive face concerns and enact facework strategies in interpersonal and intercultural settings. In collectivist cultures, which are often relationally oriented, communication strategies prioritize preserving group harmony, mutual respect, and saving face, while individualist cultures tend to encourage self-expression and direct confrontation to maintain individual autonomy (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

The concept of face is deeply embedded in social and cultural norms, making it a dynamic mechanism through which identity is constructed and negotiated. Understanding face in its cultural context provides a lens through which communication behaviors can be interpreted, particularly in environments where cultural overlap or disparity exists.

Malaysia, a multicultural and multilingual society, provides a fertile ground for studying face negotiation. The Malaysian cultural fabric is primarily collectivistic, especially within the Malay community, where values such as respect, modesty, and relational harmony are emphasized. Malaysians generally adopt indirect communication strategies, such as avoiding confrontation and using euphemisms, to protect face and maintain social harmony. These strategies reflect high-context communication where meaning is often derived from implicit cues and shared cultural knowledge, aligning closely with Ting-Toomey's observations on collectivist cultures.

Further research by Mahbubani (2001) and Hofstede et al. (2010) affirms that Malaysians, particularly ethnic Malays, prioritize mutual and other-face concerns over self-face. Mahbubani emphasizes that in Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia and Singapore, communication is strategically used to avoid shame and embarrassment not only for oneself but also for others. Hofstede's cultural dimension analysis places Malaysia high on the collectivism index, indicating a cultural emphasis on in-group loyalty and respect for hierarchy, which correlates with face-saving behaviors during interpersonal conflicts.

In the specific context of the Cocos Malays in Tawau and Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Australia, the interplay between face concerns and cultural orientation becomes particularly significant. While both communities share a common ethnic heritage, they have been shaped by different sociopolitical and cultural environments. The Cocos Malays in Tawau operate within a Malaysian national framework that promotes Malay-Muslim cultural values. This environment encourages collectivism and the reinforcement of ethnic identity through language, religion, and traditional practices (Kassim, 2014). In contrast, the Cocos Malays residing in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands navigate their identity within an Australian multicultural society that values individualism, secular governance, and social inclusivity (Mandal, 2005).

This divergence influences communicative behavior, particularly in how face is perceived and negotiated. Studies on diaspora and transnational communities reveal that identity is both retained and adapted through communication practices (Vertovec, 2009; Hall, 1990). Kassim (2014) observes that Cocos Malays in Australia maintain strong religious and linguistic ties to their Malay heritage, but their interaction styles reflect a hybrid of collectivist and individualist norms. For example, while religious events and community gatherings still emphasize relational cohesion, younger generations are increasingly influenced by Australian norms of direct communication and individual agency.

Welsh (2012) and Adelaar (1996) further contribute to understanding the Cocos Malays' linguistic landscape. They describe the Cocos Malay dialect as a Malay-based creole influenced by Javanese, Sundanese, and English. This hybrid linguistic identity serves as both a marker of ethnic belonging and a mechanism for cultural negotiation. Language, in this context, becomes a key site for face negotiation. The use of Malay affirms group identity and mutual-face concern, while the incorporation of English reflects adaptation to the dominant culture and may involve more self-face assertiveness, especially in intergenerational communication.

Bunce (2020) documents the cultural practices of the Cocos Malay community in Australia and notes how religious rituals such as zikir, Quran recitations, and nasyid performances play a role in sustaining collective identity and face norms. These practices function as communicative events where facework is performed collectively, reinforcing group values and maintaining intra-community harmony. However, when members of the diaspora interact with Malays from Malaysia, tensions may arise due to different expectations regarding politeness strategies, expressions of disagreement, and authority structures. This phenomenon echoes findings by Matsumoto et al. (2008), who emphasize that intercultural conflicts often emerge not from overt hostility but from misaligned facework expectations.

Applications of FNT in multicultural settings support this observation. Liu and Ting-Toomey (1998) found that overseas Chinese in the U.S. adopt flexible conflict styles, switching between avoidance and confrontation depending on context. Similarly, Oetzel and Ting-Toomey (2003) confirm that self-construal, individualism-collectivism, and face concerns jointly predict preferred conflict styles. These findings are echoed in recent research by Bailey et al. (2021), who demonstrate that hybrid identity individuals in diaspora communities often exhibit bicultural facework strategies that blend both heritage and host cultural norms.

Despite the richness of existing literature on face negotiation, there remains a notable gap concerning its application to intra-ethnic yet cross-national communication. The interaction between Tawau Malays and Cocos Malays of Australia is not just a cultural dialogue but also a negotiation of hybrid identities and face expectations shaped by their respective national affiliations. Research that focuses explicitly on this intersection is limited, although it holds significant implications for understanding how communication theories can be adapted to explain nuanced, intra-ethnic intercultural exchanges.

This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by applying Face-Negotiation Theory to examine the communicative dynamics between these two Cocos Malay communities. It explores how face concerns are prioritized, how facework strategies are enacted in cross-border interactions, and how cultural orientation mediates these processes. By doing so, it aims to contribute not only to theoretical advancement in intercultural communication but also to practical efforts in fostering mutual understanding and cohesion among culturally affiliated yet nationally distinct communities.

Malays in Tawau and Cocos Islands

The study of intercultural communication among diasporic communities continues to highlight the complex dynamics between cultural retention and adaptation, particularly in the context of identity negotiation and communication styles. This is especially true for ethnically homogeneous groups that have been shaped by differing national contexts, such as the Malays in Tawau, Sabah and the Cocos Malays of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Australia. Although both communities share deep ethnic, religious, and linguistic roots, their socio-cultural evolution diverged significantly due to distinct colonial legacies, national ideologies, and institutional frameworks. This literature review explores how these differences shape communication styles, face concerns, and identity management, particularly within the scope of Face-Negotiation Theory (FNT), a theoretical

framework proposed by Stella Ting-Toomey (1988, 2005) to explain how individuals manage conflict and relational harmony in intercultural contexts.

The Malays in Tawau are embedded within Malaysia's national ideological framework, which privileges Malay-Muslim identity as the cultural and political mainstream. The Constitution of Malaysia, along with affirmative policies like the New Economic Policy (NEP), has reinforced a hegemonic Malay-Muslim identity that pervades everyday communication and social interaction (Shamsul, 2001). In this setting, collectivist cultural norms are deeply entrenched, shaping interpersonal relationships, public discourse, and community expectations. As a collectivist society, Malays in Tawau are socialized into values that prioritize group harmony, respect for hierarchy, and the avoidance of direct confrontation. These values are manifested in communication styles that emphasize politeness, indirectness, and face-saving strategies, which align with what Ting-Toomey (2005) describes as mutual-face and other-face concerns in conflict situations.

Kim and Sharkey (1995) examined communication preferences among Malaysians and found a strong preference for conflict avoidance and accommodation, particularly among ethnic Malays. These findings reinforce the idea that Malaysian collectivism fosters communication behaviors aimed at preserving social cohesion and relational harmony. Hofstede's (2010) cultural dimensions also position Malaysia as a high-context, high power-distance society, where meaning is conveyed through implicit cues, and respect for authority and tradition is paramount. Such cultural settings are conducive to face-saving behaviors, especially in contexts where interpersonal harmony is valued above individual assertiveness. These behaviors have been widely documented in Malaysian communities, suggesting that facework is not merely an individual strategy but a socially sanctioned practice rooted in cultural expectations (Mahbubani, 2001).

In contrast, the Cocos Malays of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, while sharing a similar ethnic and religious background, have developed under an Australian multicultural framework that emphasizes individual rights, secular governance, and egalitarian values. Since the formal integration of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands into the Australian Commonwealth in 1984, the Cocos Malays have navigated a dual identity maintaining their Malay-Muslim traditions while also adapting to the norms of a predominantly individualistic society. According to Bunce (2020), Cocos Malays have retained many aspects of their cultural heritage, including religious practices such as zikir, nasyid, and Quranic recitations, which continue to play a central role in community life. These practices function as mechanisms for cultural continuity and collective identity formation. However, interactions with broader Australian society have introduced communicative norms that are more assertive, direct, and centered on self-expression.

Linguistic studies provide further evidence of this adaptive duality. Welsh (2012) and Adelaar (1996) note that the Cocos Malay dialect, a creole with Javanese and Betawi influences, serves as both a marker of ethnic identity and a practical tool for community cohesion. Yet, the increasing influence of English, especially among younger generations, signifies a shift toward the linguistic and communicative norms of the host society. Language, in this case, becomes a site of negotiation between heritage preservation and cultural adaptation. The ability to code-switch

between Malay and English reflects a form of hybrid identity that mirrors the dual face concerns balancing self-face needs in the broader Australian context and mutual-face obligations within the ethnic community.

Diaspora and transnational identity studies offer a broader theoretical lens to understand these dynamics. Kassim (2014) and Mandal (2005) document how diasporic Malay communities, including those in Singapore, Indonesia, and Australia, maintain strong ties to their cultural roots through religious practices, kinship networks, and language. At the same time, these communities exhibit variations in interactional styles, conflict management, and public discourse, shaped by their respective national environments. This hybridity is not a sign of cultural dilution but rather an adaptive strategy that allows individuals to navigate multiple social worlds. Hall's (1990) concept of cultural identity as a "production" rather than a fixed essence underscores this fluidity, suggesting that identity and face are continually negotiated in response to shifting sociocultural conditions.

Face-Negotiation Theory offers a particularly useful framework for analyzing these dynamics. Ting-Toomey (2005) posits that face concerns self-face, other-face, and mutual-face are deeply influenced by one's cultural orientation and self-construal. In collectivist cultures, individuals are more likely to adopt interdependent self-construals, which prioritize relational obligations and group harmony. This leads to the preference for facework strategies such as avoidance, obliging, and compromising. In contrast, individualist cultures foster independent self-construals, emphasizing personal autonomy and direct communication, thereby favoring dominating and integrating conflict styles. Oetzel et al. (2001) further elaborate on these preferences, showing that collectivist individuals employ more avoiding and obliging strategies, while individualists are more likely to engage in dominating and integrating behaviors.

Applying this framework to the communication between Malays in Tawau and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands reveals an underexplored yet theoretically rich area. While both groups may exhibit collectivist values at the level of ethnic tradition, the national contexts in which they are situated introduce different social expectations and institutional pressures. For instance, a Cocos Malay who has internalized Australian norms may exhibit more self-face concerns and a direct communication style, especially in conflict situations. In contrast, a Tawau Malay would likely prefer indirect strategies and prioritize mutual-face or other-face concerns. Such differences can lead to miscommunication or interpersonal tension, even when both parties share a common language and religious affiliation.

The literature suggests that diasporic individuals often develop bicultural competencies, allowing them to navigate these divergent face expectations. Liu and Ting-Toomey (1998) found that overseas Chinese in the United States could switch between facework strategies depending on the cultural context, a phenomenon they termed "cultural frame switching." This capacity enables individuals to modulate their communication style based on situational demands, audience expectations, and relational goals. Such findings underscore the importance of cultural adaptability in intercultural communication and suggest that Cocos Malays may similarly navigate between facework strategies depending on context.

Despite these insights, there remains a significant research gap in applying FNT to intra-ethnic, cross-national communication among Malay communities. Most studies focus either on interethnic or international interactions, often overlooking the nuanced challenges faced by culturally similar groups operating in different national and ideological environments. The interaction between Tawau Malays and Cocos Malays presents a unique case where shared ethnicity intersects with divergent sociopolitical conditioning, creating a fertile ground for both harmony and misunderstanding. Understanding how face concerns are negotiated in such contexts can illuminate broader issues of identity, belonging, and intercultural competence.

Furthermore, this case study challenges the binary classification of cultures as either individualist or collectivist. The lived experiences of the Cocos Malays illustrate that cultural orientation is not static but is mediated by factors such as education, migration, policy, and intergenerational transmission. For example, younger Cocos Malays educated in Australian schools may adopt more individualistic communication styles, while elders may retain collectivist norms rooted in their Malay-Muslim upbringing. This intragroup variation complicates the application of FNT and calls for a more nuanced understanding of how face concerns evolve within diasporic and multicultural settings.

In conclusion, the communication patterns of Malays in Tawau and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands offer a compelling context for examining the interplay between cultural identity, face concerns, and conflict management. While both communities share a common ethnic and religious foundation, their divergent national contexts have shaped distinct communicative norms and facework strategies. The application of Face-Negotiation Theory to this setting reveals how face concerns are culturally mediated and dynamically negotiated, providing valuable insights into the complexities of intercultural communication among intra-ethnic but nationally differentiated groups. Future research should delve deeper into this intersection, employing empirical methods to capture the lived realities of these communities and to refine theoretical models for greater intercultural applicability.

Methodology

Stella Ting-Toomey's Face-Negotiation Theory (FNT) stands as one of the most influential frameworks in the study of intercultural communication, particularly in its capacity to explain the management of interpersonal conflict across cultural boundaries. First introduced in the late 1980s and later expanded in the early 2000s, the theory integrates foundational concepts from communication, psychology, and cultural anthropology to propose that face or the socially situated self-image individuals seek to uphold is a central concern in intercultural interactions. The theory is grounded in the notion that facework, the verbal and nonverbal strategies employed to maintain, defend, or restore face, is deeply embedded within a culture's orientation toward individualism or collectivism (Ting-Toomey, 1988, 2005).

Face, as conceptualized by Ting-Toomey, is not merely a personal concern but is reflective of broader societal expectations and cultural norms. In collectivistic societies, such as many in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, face is communal and relational. It involves obligations toward in-groups and is maintained through indirect communication, modesty, and deference to authority.

In contrast, individualistic cultures, such as those in North America and parts of Western Europe, conceive face as self-driven and autonomous, maintained through directness, assertiveness, and a high regard for personal freedom (Ting-Toomey, 2005; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). These distinctions form the basis for divergent face concerns: self-face, other-face, and mutual-face. Self-face reflects concern for one's own image, other-face pertains to concern for another's image, and mutual-face emphasizes a joint maintenance of face during interaction (Oetzel et al., 2001).

FNT's intellectual foundation builds on Goffman's (1967) dramaturgical perspective of face as a social performance. However, Ting-Toomey extends Goffman's insights by embedding face within cultural dimensions, thereby explaining why individuals from different cultural backgrounds approach conflict differently. This development addresses a critical limitation in earlier communication theories that often assumed universality in conflict management styles. By incorporating cultural orientation, FNT provides a nuanced framework that accounts for how communication preferences and face concerns vary across cultural contexts (Gudykunst, 2003). The operational core of FNT lies in its identification of five primary conflict styles: avoiding, obliging, compromising, dominating, and integrating. These styles correspond to face concerns and self-construals. Research by Oetzel and Ting-Toomey (2003) found that individuals with interdependent self-construals typically those from collectivist cultures were more likely to adopt avoiding and obliging strategies. In contrast, those with independent self-construals preferred dominating and integrating strategies. The empirical robustness of these findings has been confirmed across numerous cross-cultural studies involving participants from Korea, Japan, China, the United States, and various Southeast Asian countries (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001; Oetzel et al., 2001).

Recent research continues to support and refine FNT's central claims. Similarly, Liu and Ting-Toomey (1998) noted that overseas Chinese in the United States demonstrated adaptive facework styles depending on context, a phenomenon known as cultural frame switching. These insights suggest that FNT can be fruitfully applied to understand communication in increasingly multicultural and globalized societies, where identity and face are negotiated fluidly.

The relevance of FNT has also been observed in institutional and educational settings. A study by Matsumoto, Yoo, and Nakagawa (2008) analyzed how students from Japan, the U.S., and Mexico dealt with face-threatening scenarios in classroom environments. The findings indicated that students from collectivistic cultures preferred conflict avoidance and sought teacher validation as a way to preserve mutual-face, while students from individualistic cultures were more inclined toward open confrontation to assert self-face. Such studies provide concrete evidence of the theory's applicability beyond dyadic interpersonal interactions, extending into organizational, pedagogical, and diplomatic domains.

Another area where FNT has proven instructive is in conflict mediation and international diplomacy. Ting-Toomey (2015) argued that successful negotiation in intercultural settings requires awareness of differing face concerns and the ability to adapt one's communicative behavior accordingly. This has practical implications for peacebuilding, multinational business

negotiations, and humanitarian diplomacy, where cultural sensitivity is essential. The theory has been used as a diagnostic tool for training diplomats and cross-cultural negotiators, enhancing their competence in managing face-threatening acts (FTAs) and minimizing conflict escalation.

Linguistic and paralinguistic cues also play a significant role in facework. In high-context cultures, face maintenance often involves silence, pauses, and nonverbal gestures that signify respect and deference (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). In contrast, low-context cultures rely heavily on explicit verbal expressions. Such distinctions are essential when applying FNT to real-world settings, especially in multilingual societies where communicative competence involves more than just language fluency it includes an awareness of face-sensitive behaviors and their cultural meanings.

Moreover, FNT contributes to understanding digital and mediated communication in intercultural contexts. With the proliferation of online communication platforms, facework strategies are now enacted in virtual spaces. Lo and Leung (2019) explored how Chinese and American social media users managed face on platforms like Facebook and WeChat. The study found that while Americans used direct language to manage self-face, Chinese users preferred indirect and implicit facework, reflecting traditional Confucian values. This adaptation of FNT to computer-mediated communication (CMC) underscores its theoretical elasticity and ongoing relevance in contemporary communication research.

In the Malaysian context, several studies have explored how facework operates in a multicultural society. Ting-Toomey's theory has been applied to understand conflict in Malaysian classrooms, ethnic group interactions, and even political discourse. Noor and Leong (2013) analyzed interethnic communication among Malay, Chinese, and Indian students in Malaysian universities and found that mutual-face strategies were predominant, especially in conflict-avoidance situations. The findings aligned with FNT's assertion that collectivistic orientations favor mutual and other-face maintenance, reinforcing the theory's cultural predictions.

Despite its wide applicability, Face-Negotiation Theory is not without its critiques. Some scholars argue that the dichotomy between individualism and collectivism is overly simplistic and fails to account for intracultural variation and the fluidity of identity in diasporic and global contexts (Morris et al., 1998). Others have noted that the theory may underplay the role of power and historical context in shaping facework behaviors, particularly in postcolonial or minority-majority interactions. These critiques suggest that while FNT provides a valuable framework, it must be employed alongside other perspectives, such as intersectionality and critical intercultural communication, to fully capture the complexities of intercultural conflict.

Nonetheless, ongoing scholarship continues to expand and refine the theory. Researchers like Park and Guan (2006) have integrated emotion into FNT, arguing that emotional arousal plays a mediating role in face-threatening encounters. Similarly, Ting-Toomey herself has advocated for a contextualized application of the theory, encouraging scholars to examine how local norms, institutional settings, and historical relationships shape facework strategies. This evolution

speaks to the adaptability and resilience of FNT as a conceptual model that continues to inform both theoretical inquiry and practical applications in a globalized world.

In conclusion, Stella Ting-Toomey's Face-Negotiation Theory offers a comprehensive and culturally grounded framework for understanding how individuals navigate face concerns and manage conflict across cultural boundaries. Its emphasis on cultural orientation, self-construal, and facework strategies has made it an indispensable tool in the study of intercultural communication. As societies become more interconnected and multicultural, the need for effective and culturally sensitive communication will only increase. FNT, with its rich theoretical lineage and empirical support, remains a vital resource for scholars, educators, negotiators, and anyone seeking to foster understanding in diverse communicative environments.

Findings

This literature-based study synthesizes findings from comprehensive academic sources to illuminate intercultural communication behaviors, identity perceptions, and face concerns among the Malays in Tawau, Sabah, and the Cocos Malays in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Australia. Using Stella Ting-Toomey's Face-Negotiation Theory (FNT), the findings presented here draw from over 200 studies published in reputable intercultural communication journals, reflecting diverse but interrelated insights.

A key finding across numerous studies (Lin, Tan, & Chang, 2022; Mehellou, 2019) indicates the predominance of collectivist facework strategies among Malaysians, particularly avoidance and accommodation, to maintain relational harmony and mutual-face. Lin et al. (2022), through their study on intercultural conflict between international students and Malaysian instructors, illustrate how Malaysian collectivist cultural norms lead to conflict avoidance and indirect communication to preserve group harmony. Similarly, Mehellou (2019) emphasizes how Malaysian-Arab intercultural exchanges reveal Malaysians' prioritization of mutual-face, reinforcing indirect conflict styles that minimize confrontation.

The diasporic experience of the Cocos Malays, as documented by Welsh (2015), Bunce (2020), and Irving (2020), highlights the adaptive nature of facework in multicultural contexts. Welsh's (2015) ethnolinguistic analysis underscores how the Cocos Malay dialect functions as both a medium of identity maintenance and face negotiation amidst Australian multicultural assimilation pressures. The retention of linguistic practices, as further supported by Irving's (2020) anthropological examination of Cocos Malay musical traditions, signifies strategic facework aimed at communal cohesion and collective identity preservation in a diasporic context.

Bunce (2020) contributes to this discourse by analyzing religious rituals and communal practices, revealing how the Cocos Malay community utilizes mutual-face strategies to foster social unity and communal identity. These practices provide both cultural continuity and mechanisms for adapting to external societal norms. Thus, facework strategies among the Cocos Malays are characterized by a nuanced hybridization, blending collectivist face concerns from their ethnic heritage with more assertive, individualistic strategies influenced by the Australian societal context.

An essential observation from intercultural communication studies (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Wu & Ting-Toomey, 1996) is the potential for intercultural tensions arising from contrasting facework expectations. The direct communication style and assertive conflict management typically observed in Australian societal interactions contrast sharply with the indirect, harmonious approaches of Malaysian Malay communities. This mismatch, documented by Oetzel and Ting-Toomey (2003), is particularly pronounced during conflict situations, where direct confrontation may be perceived as disrespectful by Malaysians, while indirectness could be seen as evasive or ambiguous by Australians. These intercultural tensions underscore the necessity of the cultural frame switching concept extensively discussed by Liu and Ting-Toomey (1998) where individuals adjust their facework strategies based on context, audience, and cultural expectations.

Further evidence from diaspora and multilingual communication studies (Khattab, 2010; Cheng, 2018) reveals that Cocos Malays frequently engage in bilingual and multilingual practices as strategic facework mechanisms. Language switching, especially between Cocos Malay and English, is not merely a linguistic choice but a deliberate act of face negotiation, enabling the simultaneous maintenance of ethnic identity and successful navigation of broader Australian societal contexts. Cheng's (2018) exploration of diaspora engagement in Australia elucidates how such multilingual capabilities facilitate intercultural communication effectiveness, enhancing intercultural competence and adaptability.

Lastly, insights from broader intercultural diaspora studies (Hussain et al., 2020; Ansaar, 2003) illustrate that hybrid facework strategies significantly shape intercultural interactions within and across diasporic Malay communities. Hussain et al. (2020) highlight the identity maintenance challenges faced by Malay-Muslim communities in Perth, Australia, suggesting parallels to the experiences of the Cocos Malays. The study confirms that religious and cultural practices provide stable foundations for communal identity, even as interactional styles evolve in response to host society influences. Ansaar (2003) similarly highlights how intercultural communication within Malaysian multicultural contexts involves strategic facework adjustments aimed at minimizing conflict and maximizing relational harmony.

In summary, the extensive literature underscores the complexity of face negotiation among the Tawau Malays and Cocos Malays. Collectivist cultural orientations prominently shape communication behaviors, yet intercultural contexts necessitate hybridized facework strategies. Linguistic and cultural practices remain central to identity negotiation, serving both communal cohesion and individual adaptation. Intercultural tensions arising from differing face expectations highlight the critical need for cultural adaptability and frame switching. These synthesized findings contribute significantly to the theoretical and practical understanding of intercultural communication, facework, and identity management in diasporic and multicultural contexts.

Limitation of the study

This research draws on a critical synthesis of established scholarship to theorise how Face-Negotiation Theory (FNT) can illuminate interactional dynamics between Malays in Tawau, Sabah

and Cocos Malays in Australia. Conceptually, the analysis treats “shared Malayness” as an insufficient predictor of communicative alignment, because identity enactment and interactional expectations are shaped by different national and institutional histories. In Malaysia, the state’s historical institutionalisation of “Malayness” structures how Malay identity is legitimised and performed in everyday life, with implications for norms of hierarchy, politeness, and social harmony (Shamsul, 2001). In the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, the community’s contemporary positioning has been strongly influenced by decolonisation and self-determination processes that culminated in incorporation under Australian governance, thereby reconfiguring the institutional settings in which belonging is negotiated (Tahmindjis, 1985). Linguistic scholarship further indicates that Cocos Malay operates as a salient marker of community continuity and identity, highlighting the role of language maintenance and contact histories in shaping communicative repertoires (Adelaar, 1996). Against this background, FNT provides a coherent explanatory framework by linking cultural and situational conditions to self-face, other-face, and mutual-face concerns, and by predicting patterned variation in conflict styles and facework choices (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Importantly, empirical tests of FNT support the claim that face concerns function as a mechanism through which cultural orientations influence conflict behaviour, strengthening the theory’s utility as an analytic lens for comparative intercultural contexts (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003).

At the same time, the study is inherently constrained by its reliance on secondary sources and the unevenness of the available literature across the two communities. Because the argument is built through theoretical integration rather than direct observation, the findings should be interpreted as propositions about likely interactional risks and potential harmonising strategies, not as definitive descriptions of lived communicative practice. Explicitly acknowledging these limitations is essential for situating the contribution of this work: it offers a theoretically grounded roadmap for subsequent empirical research that can test the proposed mechanisms using interviews, discourse analysis, or conflict-episode elicitation across Tawau Malay and Cocos Malay interaction settings.

Dependence on Secondary Literature

A primary limitation lies in the exclusive reliance on published academic sources. Despite rigorous selection from over 200 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, the authenticity and representativeness of these materials are intrinsically bounded by prior scholarly focus and availability. Notably, there is a paucity of studies directly engaging with Cocos Malay communication behaviors within an FNT framework. Most available sources emphasize sociolinguistic, historical, or religious aspects rather than conflict negotiation. Consequently, interpretations are necessarily inferential, derived from analogous studies such as Malaysian undergraduates or diaspora communities as opposed to direct evidence from the focal populations (Lin et al., 2022; Mehellou, 2019; Welsh, 2015).

Theoretical Framing Limitations

While Face-Negotiation Theory has proven robust in cross-cultural studies, its theoretical limitations must be noted. FNT is primarily designed for individualistic vs. collectivistic cultural comparisons (Ting-Toomey, 2005) and may not fully capture the complexities of hybrid or

layered identities, such as those observed among Cocos Malays who simultaneously experience heritage Malay-Islamic values and Western individualism (Bunce, 2020). Furthermore, the theory does not account sufficiently for postcolonial identity dynamics, institutional power relations, or socioeconomic factors that may influence communicative behavior beyond face concerns (Hall, 1990).

Lack of Empirical Verification

Owing to its critical nature, this study lacks empirical validation. The main assertion that divergent national socio cultural forces shape differing facework strategies among Tawau and Cocos Malays Remains untested through interviews, surveys, or observational methods. While theoretical extrapolation is strengthened by prior empirical literature (e.g., Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Liu & Ting-Toomey, 1998), these studies do not involve either specific community. As such, recommendations such as promoting mutual-face strategies in intercultural programs are theoretically plausible but lack real-world verification.

Selection Bias Toward Published Works

The study's credibility is influenced by publication bias. Predominantly, it scrutinizes accessible, English-language, peer-reviewed literature, likely excluding grey literature, local reports, theses, or community-specific studies (Mehellou, 2019; Hussain et al., 2020). This reliance can skew representations toward dominant discourses, potentially overlooking cultural variations within each Malay subgroup. For example, intra-community differences linked to age, gender, education, or socioeconomic status may remain obscured.

Static vs Dynamic Cultural Analysis

The literature reviewed offers cross-sectional snapshots rather than longitudinal insights into evolving communication styles among Cocos Malays, especially across generations. Rapid social change, technology access, educational pathways, diaspora networks likely influence facework styles in real-time. Without longitudinal studies or multi-generational perspectives, the analysis cannot fully capture shifting identity negotiations or evolving face concerns over time.

Overemphasis on Malay vs Australian Dichotomy

Though analytically convenient, the framing of Tawau Malays as collectivist and Cocos Malays as influenced by individualistic Australian norms risks simplifying complex identities. Within Australia, the Cocos Malays do not constitute a homogeneous group. Some retain strong collectivist values, while others adopt hybrid practices. Equally, Malays in Tawau may engage in individualistic or direct communication in specific contexts, such as business or academia. As such, both categories may contain ambivalent communication patterns that generic labels may obfuscate (Hussain et al., 2020; Cheng, 2018).

Absence Of Context

Critical contextual variables religious variation, education policy, migration history, ethnic relations have complex roles in shaping communication and identity. While the literature alludes to these factors (Shamsul, 2001; Bunce, 2020), the analysis lacks systematic treatment of how these contextual dynamics might moderate face concerns or influence conflict styles. For

instance, how might religiosity intersect with face orientation among Cocos Malays? These nuances remain unexplored.

Limited Consideration Of Intersectionality

The study approaches both communities as monolithic cultural units and does not examine how intersectionality the interplay of gender, class, age, or rural-urban background affects face negotiation. Previous FNT research indicates that factors like self-construal, power distance, and relational status mediate conflict styles (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Wu & Ting-Toomey, 1996). Without this lens, interpretations risk oversimplifying the cultural mechanisms at play.

Implication For Future Research

The limitations identified in this study highlight several promising avenues for future scholarly inquiry. As this research has primarily relied on a critical synthesis of existing literature, empirical validation remains a crucial next step. Conducting in-depth case studies particularly through ethnographic observation or in-depth interviews with members of both the Cocos Malay community in Australia and the Tawau Malays in Sabah could provide vital experiential insights. Such fieldwork would serve not only to confirm or challenge the theoretical claims advanced through Face-Negotiation Theory (FNT), but also to refine the theory in light of nuanced cultural realities.

Additionally, longitudinal approaches should be considered to examine how face negotiation practices evolve across generations within diasporic and home-based communities. Migration trajectories, shifting sociopolitical landscapes, and intergenerational acculturation are likely to impact identity performances and conflict management styles over time. A diachronic lens would help capture the dynamic interplay between heritage and adaptation in intercultural communication.

Future research should also adopt a more intersectional perspective. While this study has treated the two communities as relatively cohesive entities, intra-group differences related to gender, age, education level, religious observance, and socioeconomic status are likely to shape communicative behavior in important ways. An intersectional design would allow researchers to trace how such variables mediate or compound face concerns and negotiation strategies, offering a more granular understanding of communication within and between these subgroups.

Methodologically, scholars would benefit from employing mixed-methods research designs. Surveys could quantify face concerns and communication styles across larger samples, while focus groups or narrative interviews could reveal the subjective meanings, tensions, and cultural scripts embedded in facework practices. This triangulation of data would enhance the robustness of findings, mitigate the limitations of relying on a single methodological approach, and allow for a more holistic picture of the communicative dynamics in question.

Theoretical expansion also holds promise. While FNT provides a solid foundation, integrating complementary frameworks could produce more contextually rich and historically informed analyses. For instance, Cultural Frame Switching (Liu & Ting-Toomey, 1998) may explain how

individuals adapt their facework behaviors depending on situational cues and cultural context. Postcolonial Theory (Hall, 1990) might illuminate the residual effects of British and Australian colonial policies on communicative norms and identity politics among the Cocos Malays. Additionally, the inclusion of Institutional Analysis could help unpack how governmental, educational, and religious institutions shape or constrain face negotiation across the two national contexts.

Another critical area for expansion lies in the diversification of sources. Much of the current research relies heavily on English-language academic publications. The inclusion of local-language texts Malay, Javanese, or Cocos Malay Alongside oral histories, community records, and indigenous forms of knowledge would not only decolonize the research process but also provide a more authentic and representative account of community-specific communication practices. Engaging with vernacular archives would thus enrich both the empirical and cultural dimensions of the research.

In conclusion, while this study offers a theoretically driven exploration of face negotiation among ethnically related yet nationally divided Malay communities, it also underscores the need for future research to move beyond secondary literature and engage more directly with lived experiences. Recognizing the constraints of theoretical abstraction and limited cultural granularity, future scholars are encouraged to adopt empirically grounded, methodologically pluralistic, and theoretically integrative approaches. In doing so, the study of intercultural facework within diasporic and transnational Malay communities can progress toward greater analytical depth, cultural sensitivity, and scholarly relevance.

Declaration of AI Use

This article was written with the assistance of artificial intelligence, which was used to support language editing, structural refinement, and clarity of expression.

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