

# The Role of Communication in Family Dynamics

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates how communication practices shape family dynamics, emotional well-being, and relational cohesion in urban Malaysian families. Using Family Systems Theory and Family Communication Patterns Theory, the research analyzes the interplay between traditional cultural values and modern influences like digital communication. Findings suggest that while digital tools like WhatsApp enhance logistical connectivity, face-to-face interaction remains the primary driver of emotional security.

**Keywords:** Family Communication, Family Dynamics, Conflict Resolution, Emotional Well-Being, Urban Malaysia

## INTRODUCTION

Family communication is a vital ingredient that holds the family together, and it is through communication that feelings, thoughts, and emotions are expressed. The bond of trust, understanding, and closeness is created by effective communication, on the other hand, its absence often results in misunderstandings, emotional disturbances, and conflicts that tear the bond of family apart. Communication in families is multidimensional; there is both a verbal and non-verbal type. The nature of communication within a family is shaped by various factors, including cultural background, family organization, individual personality, and societal expectations. Family communication, though complex, must be effective for the family to function, communication encourages a helpful environment that family members can utilize when trying to express their concerns, needs, and experiences. According to McLeod & Renéau, 2022, it is in families where communication is either absent or ineffective that family members are likely to feel isolated and frustrated, which weakens familial bonds and family well-being.

The role of communication within families becomes all the more important in multi-ethnic societies such as Malaysia. The different ethnic and cultural backgrounds of Malaysian families have ensured different ways of communicating, shaped by the long-standing cultures and traditions. Malaysian families from a collectivist cultural background, for example, tend to be warm to any situation that promotes group harmony and therefore employs a variety of indirect strategies for communications that may be perceived to result in conflict (Ponte & Silva, 2020). Such families would, rather, not squabble over anything or open up specific subjects that could cause friction among family members. Instead, they may want to always keep peace and harmony even if this means compromising on many fronts when things become unfavorable. On the contrary, families from an individualistic cultural perspective, for instance, the Indian community, do encourage a kind of communication that is direct in approach, wherein freethinking and expression of personal opinions and emotions are welcomed. These cultural differences shape the way family members relate to one another in such dramatic ways, particularly when conflicts arise or sensitive topics need to be discussed (Azmi et al., 2023).

Communication patterns in a family do not remain the same; rather, changes occur in communication patterns with the progression of age and various transitions in life for individual members of a family. A classic example of how communication patterns change between parents and their children is when those children grow older and establish their individual identities (McLeod & Renéau, 2022). Initially, communication patterns within a family can relate to the control and guidance of parents, but with the transition to adolescence and eventually

entering adulthood, communication patterns may shift to more equal forms of communication between parents and their children. Such variations in communication patterns are imperative to the development of individual identity and healthy relationships within a family, but when changes in communication patterns do not occur among the various members of a family pertaining to changes in their life stages, misunderstandings and emotional separation may occur within a family (Zhou et al., 2023). Also, parents, when not changing with respect to their children's needs, may become frustrated or feel alienated with their children (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2015).

Furthermore, family communication has a significant impact not only on the relationships within the family but also affects the emotional and psychological health of the family members. Research indicates that families with effective communication skills have family members who also experience good emotional health and well-being because communication enables the individual to feel supported and understood in their experiences (Idlibi & Hatzakis, 2020). For example, effective communication in families enables the family members to communicate their feelings and reduce their stress in a healthier manner, leading to emotional resilience in the family members (Idlibi & Hatzakis, 2020). Conversely, a lack of effective communication within families has been shown to contribute to a wide range of negative emotional and psychological results for families, including higher levels of depression and anxiety, particularly in children and teenagers. Family members with poor communication in the family tend to develop negative emotional inner experiences in children, including emotional psychological impacts (Zhou et al., 2023).

The role of effective communication in the functioning of families has been acknowledged by different theories in the field of psychology and sociology. For instance, the Family Systems Theory argues that families function as a system of interrelated units, where the behavior of each of these units can affect others. All members in a family have roles to play, and communication is very important in ensuring that there is harmony in the entire family system (Beavin Bavelas & Segal, 1982). Dysfunctional communication can affect the whole system of the family, leading to difficulties in family relationships. The subject of Family Systems Theory gives families an understanding of how communication in families can affect their psychological well-being. It helps families understand that better communication can improve the functionality of families (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2015). Communication is more than the transmission of messages. It is the response of each of the members of the family in society, which can be helpful in building cohesion in families (Beavin Bavelas & Segal, 1982).

In addition, family communication is increasingly important in light of modern challenges like work-life balance, financial constraints, and technology. Given the fast pace of living, particularly in urban Malaysia, all family members may have multiple responsibilities, which could impact available time and resources for quality communication. This is an emerging strain on family communication, which could result in a breakdown of communication as family members may feel misunderstood or not understood at all. Moreover, modern technology like social media, which is an example of digital communication, has impacted the mode of family communication. Although the platform offers an important avenue for staying in touch, there is a strain on face communication as families might end up with mere superficial interactions as opposed to emotional ones, for instance, using text messages or social media as a platform for communication among family members, which eventually limits the quality of their interactions between each other since there may be a partial understanding between them as portrayed by Syahril, Amir, Ghafar, Wahab, & Ahmad, 2024).

With the numerous points mentioned above taken into consideration, the purpose of this study is to try and examine the role of communication and its impact and influence on the dynamics of family life. By recognizing the means of communication and the impact that poor and effective communication can have either a devastating or positive effect on family life being built and maintained, the ability to examine and shed light on the ways of improving the means and impact of family communication is a fundamental aspect of the purpose and goals of this study.

## **Problem Statement**

Effective communication helps in retaining the relationships among family members. However, due to improper and ineffective communication, families experience lots of stress and problems, especially in multicultural countries like Malaysia. Families where communication is ineffective create emotional distances,

misunderstandings, and unresolved disputes among their members. Members of families with ineffective communication may feel emotionally distant or misunderstood from others; this may affect the health status of the individuals. For instance, if issues affecting family members are not communicated effectively, problems persist and accumulate resentment or frustration (McLeod & Ren au, 2022). Inhibited communication affects conflict resolution but at the same time causes family members to fail to provide emotional support during hard times; thus, this exacerbates tension within the family relationships (Idlibi & Hatzakis, 2020). Poor communication erodes trust and makes it difficult to handle problems and maintain harmony in relationship transactions (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013).

This issue is even more pronounced in multicultural contexts, such as in Malaysia, where the diversity in ethnic backgrounds contributes toward differences in communication styles. For example, families from a more collectivist cultural background, such as the Malay and Chinese communities, adopt an indirect way of communicating to maintain group harmony and avoid conflict (Azmi, Ma'rof, & Abdullah, 2023). In contrast, families from cultures that uphold individualism, such as the Indian community, may prefer direct communication and openly sharing their opinions (Sumari et al., 2019). These cultures ensure confusion is created within families when the members do not recognize or adapt to these different ways of communicating, specifically when sensitive issues or conflicts arise. Where family members undergo a transition throughout their life stages, communication too must change. For instance, the communication between parents and an older child shift with time as children develop their identity, and the need is for parents to shift their style of communication to prevent frustration and emotional distance (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2015). When these changed styles of communication are not well managed, misconceptions arise, thus leading to a breakdown in family cohesion and emotional well-being (McDaniel & Radesky, 2018).

## Research Questions

Research questions guide the study and clarify its purpose. This research focuses on three main questions:

1. What communication practices help build and maintain positive family relationships?
2. How do this communication practices affect overall family dynamics?
3. In what ways can family communication be improved to support well-being?

## Research Objectives

The study has three main objectives aligned with the research questions:

1. To identify key communication practices that contribute to positive family relationships.
2. To understand how these communication practices can be improved.
3. To explore strategies for improving family communication to enhance well-being.

## Significance of the Study

One of the important aspects of the study is that it intends to reveal further understanding about the impact of communication on family dynamics, especially in a multicultural community such as Malaysia. Through the comprehension of communication that leads to effective relationships, the research work is expected to give effective recommendations to families regarding the improvement of communication between them. Communication plays a critical role in avoiding conflicts in families and improving emotional well-being. According to various studies, effective communication between families leads to increased emotional support, relationship satisfaction, and better emotional health outcomes (Idlibi & Hatzakis, 2020). Further, comprehension regarding the impact of communication between family dynamics can assist in developing strategies to alleviate communication gaps, especially in families that belong to a different culture, which in turn sometimes may act as a hindrance to effective communication, leading to conflicts in the family (Azmi et al., 2023). The research outcome of the study is expected to give effective knowledge to families regarding enhancing effective communication to increase trust levels between them to create a favourable family environment (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013).

The relevance of the study also reaches as far as its possible applications in the field of family therapy and social work. Since the study centers on the role of effective forms of communication in the successful functioning of families, the findings and conclusions of the study may be used in the development of family therapies that help families communicate in ways that increase emotional expression, conflict resolution, and general family cohesion (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2015). In addition, the study will contribute towards the increasing literature regarding the role of family dynamics and communications in the measurement of ways in which challenges in families may be overcome through enhanced communications practices (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994). The study will also prove useful in the various fields of work, including social work, counseling, and educational institutions, in the quest to help families in the promotion of healthy communications and, in the process, ensure improved emotional well-being of the families concerned, as cited in Ponte & Silva, 2020.

### **Scope and Limitation of the Study**

However, the research scope is mainly inclusive of understanding the significance of communication in the context of family dynamics in Malaysia, particularly in urban families of a mid-class setup. It is pertinent to mention here that the research will also determine the family communication patterns in Malaysia, majorly in the Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities. Therefore, the research study to a large extent intends to investigate the differences in communication styles of various cultures in Malaysia, particularly in resolving conflicts and emotional concerns (Azmi et al., 2023). Although the research findings will help in understanding the communication styles of these cultures, it is pertinent to mention here that the research study is in no way inclusive of rural families or families that belong to a different socio-economic background. Furthermore, the research is also mainly focused on nuclear families in Malaysia, excluding those that are considered to be part of an extended family, which may otherwise demonstrate unique communication styles in Malaysia (Omar et al., 2007).

The limitations of this study will be based on the qualitative methods that involve interviews and observational studies. These methods will, while providing deep insight into family communication, not fully capture the broader population due to the subjective nature of the qualitative study itself. As the research is premised on self-reporting by participants, there may also be bias in the perceptions of family members when reporting about their communication behaviors. Consequently, the research setting could be further constrained by the fact that any data on conflictive issues or those associated with emotional distress could be compromised in the authenticity of the contribution of the informants. The research also excludes factors from outside the family unit that would affect communication, such as work-related stress and pressure from society. According to McDaniel and Radesky, who investigated the impact of mobile device use on parent-child interaction, all these are beyond the scope of this research. Regardless of these limitations, the study will highlight the importance of communication in family dynamics through practical recommendations that improve communication within urban Malaysian families.

### **Keywords Definition**

#### **Family Communication**

Family communication is described as a process where members of the family exchange information, show emotions, and work out conflicts for the maintenance of relationships within the familial unit. Good family communication involves both verbal and non-verbal interactions through which feelings, problems, and experiences can be shared among family members. It has also been observed in research studies that good family communication helps in building an emotionally close and understanding approach, while defective communication may lead to misunderstandings, emotional isolation, and relational conflicts. For instance, openness in communication among families leads to reduced stress levels and increased emotional support due to freedom of expression without the element of judgment. Communication also resolves conflicts in a way that the issue does not persist and is resolved constructively before getting converted into ongoing emotional problems.

#### **Family Dynamics**

Family dynamics are the patterns of interactions that exist in a family that ultimately affect the overall functioning of that family. Family dynamics are seen as a result of the way that members of a family

communicate with each other to carry out duties or how they respond to conflict situations. Favorable family dynamics are built upon emotional attachment, respect, and teamwork to create a positive atmosphere. Conversely, unfavorable family dynamics that are a result of a lack of proper communication can result in conflict, lack of emotional attachment, or a lack of family unity (Sumari et al., 2019). Family dynamics can also be applied to how individual behavior influences a family as a whole. For example, a study shows that a family with proper communication lines has a stronger relationship (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2015). This means that family dynamics applied to communication are important for improvement in family functionality (Vangelisti, 2013).

### **Conflict Resolution**

Conflict resolution refers to the way through which family members resolve those disagreements that arise between them. It includes implementing appropriate communication skills, such as active listening, empathy, and negotiation, to find an acceptable solution for all those involved. Families who deal with conflict resolution positively are able to deal with conflict scenarios better and reduce tensions between them (Idlibi & Hatzakis, 2020). Families who deal with conflict scenarios negatively may result in prolonged feelings of resentment, anxiety, and irregularity between family ties (McLeod & Ren au, 2022). For instance, by allowing an open discussion between family members during conflict, there are reduced chances of conflict scenarios damaging an interpersonal relationship between them (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2015).

### **Emotional Well-Being**

Emotional well-being is the emotional health of the family members, which is largely impacted by the communication patterns that are followed in the family. Healthy communication is very helpful in ensuring that family members are able to tackle their emotional issues, handle stress, and support one another in their emotional needs. It has been witnessed that those families that follow emotional and supportive communication are likely to demonstrate high levels of emotional well-being, as the sense of understanding and appreciation is achieved (Zhou et al., 2023). On the other hand, those families that do not follow effective communication may be at a higher risk of stress, anxiety, and even depression, particularly in children and adolescents, who may feel ignored or misunderstood in their community (McDaniel & Radesky, 2018). Thus, the emotional well-being of family members is associated with effective communication patterns in the family, which are very essential for emotional resilience and good mental health (Ponte & Silva, 2020).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Family communication is an important factor in defining family dynamics and its impact on the emotional well-being, relationship quality, and overall family unit function is important. Poor family communication may result in emotional distress and estranged relationships within a family unit in addition to increased family conflicts and issues. Due to a huge increase in the number of multicultural families worldwide today, family communication has become a very important issue to consider in family units since differences in family communication may result in poor family relationships during conflicts in multicultural Malaysia today. Research has been done on why family communication is important in terms of family unit cohesion and resiliency against family disintegration in many aspects; this awareness gap shall be closed by this chapter in terms of family communication paradigms based on cultural differences in a multiculturally composed Malaysia today.

### **Family Communication**

Family communication serves as the bedrock of family cohesion, bonding, and development. In Malaysia, communication styles are mainly impacted by tradition, languages, and technology. Messages delivered both verbally and non-verbally, like tone of voice, silence, body language, and eye contact are essential in helping family members convey their emotions, handle conflicts, and build relationships.

Nasir and Adli (2023) investigated the effects of family communication patterns on youth development, specifically focusing on rural Malaysia. The study adopted the model of Family Communication Patterns (FCP)

and found that the orientations of these patterns were categorized primarily into the dimensions of 'conversations' and 'conformities.' When the level of conversation orientation was strong, children were more empowered to articulate their ideas and develop sound self-concepts. When the level of conformity was strong, children were less likely to show dissenting views against seniors.

Non-verbal communication is also common in Malaysian families. According to a study conducted by Zainudin and Omar (2011), adolescents tend to perceive their roles and expectations implicitly and not explicitly. For example, silence can mean disappointment, and looking at someone can mean disapproval and authority. The study mentioned that birth position in relation to others in the family and gender affect how family members decode these implicit signs to derive their perception of responsibilities.

Language is also an important factor. The multilingual society found in Malaysia, where some families speak a mix of Malay, English, Mandarin, and Tamil, has an impact on the effectiveness of communication for emotions and values from culture. The practice of code switching in the blending of languages in families is quite common, especially for families in cities. The transition for children to English when their parents communicate in their native language may result in the lack of emotional communication at times.

There are also technological developments that have shaped family dynamics in Malaysia. Today's family uses messenger apps like WhatsApp and Telegram to facilitate daily activities or events related to family life. Analyzing the impact of technological communication in interpersonal and teacher-parent relations, Khoo et al. (2024) found that while technology enhances accessibility, emotional intimacy in communication is lost. Converting this to real family life would mean that texting each other often is a replacement for an actual physical emotional conversation and hence an emotional absence even when physically present or present in a digital way. These elements combine to prove that Malaysian family communication occurs through cultural expectation, use, and behavior online. Understanding these different facets is vital to ensuring that emotionally intelligent family units are built.

### **Components Of Family Communication**

Family communication is a verbal and non-verbal communication process that helps in the exchange of feelings, beliefs, expectations, and values within the family. In Malaysia, these interactions are especially evident in their culture and tradition, especially within a collectivist family. In a family that is governed by the aspects of a collectivist culture, the process of communication does not only take place to exchange information.

In Malay families, communication patterns were studied using the FCP model by Zainudin (2015). The results highlighted a high degree of conformity orientation in which harmony in the family and respect for authority are underscored. In many cultures, it can be noted that young individuals tend not to openly disagree with parents and seniors in their family and adopt an indirect approach in expressing their views and opinions. Such cultural factors may lead to a lack of emphasis on emotional truth and may not give much opportunity to build assertiveness in young individuals to express themselves.

Jamaludin and Md Yusof (2010) analyzed non-verbal communication in a traditional Malay family setting. The study found that in a Malay family setting, silence, body language, and tone of voice are often more expressive and eloquent than verbal forms of communication. For instance, silence is used to indicate disapproval or disappointment without bringing up the subject for discussion. This is a gentle way of preventing a conflict and maintaining harmony but can often present an emotional quagmire for the young generation within a family setting because they are not yet competent in interpreting non-verbal communication.

This dynamic nature of family communication in Malaysia is a reflection of societal changes in education exposure, technological exposure, and changing roles with respect to gender and economics. However, societal norms rooted in tradition remain a powerful draw in this respect, especially in rural Malaysia where keeping quiet and submissive is still considered a good manner to display respect. Thus, family communication in Malaysia needs to be conceptualized not on a dichotomous level, in terms of being traditionally hierarchical or

predominantly equal in nature, based on societal evolution, rather than a pure emphasis on tradition or modern societal dynamics.

A slow but noticeable changeover in communication patterns, particularly in middle-class city families, has been noted by Ismail and Fong (2018). These authors have found that young parents, especially in two-income families, are increasingly resorting to dialogical modes of communication. In such families, children are given an opportunity to express their own emotions and ideas and take part in decision-making processes. The impact of this changeover in communication styles, which otherwise points to a shift from an authoritative family model, is patchy and restricted mainly to highly educated sections and people living in cities who are exposed to global cultural patterns.

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### **Language Use and Multilingualism in Malaysian Families**

Sociolinguistic complexity in Malaysia adds an extra layer of complexity to family communications. The use of various languages, such as Malay, English, Mandarin, or Tamil, in a family may depend on the familial members' ethnicities, occasions, and personal language choices. Mixing language proficiency and language choices in a family may help families cope with the cultural environments of living. It also adds complications to family communications, mainly when the language choices of the generations in the family contradict each other.

For instance, a study by Khoo (2021) among Mandarin-speaking families showed a remarkable preference among the younger generation to converse in English. The children's preference for English was seen by their parents as an alienating force that threatened their cultural identity and closeness as a family. The lack of emotional connection when children were either unable or unwilling to talk in terms of affection or personal issues in Mandarin was particularly significant since older generations linked their emotional honesty and cultural connection to the language they used to communicate emotionally. Therefore, language choice symbolically represented not only proficiency but also emotional connection and respect.

In a similar manner, a study conducted by Ramasamy (2017) on Tamil-speaking families portrayed that the decreased use of Tamil among Malaysian youth led to a sense of cultural and emotional disconnection among family members. This is due to the fact that Tamil parents observed a lack of understanding regarding religious stories, cultural practices, and familial jokes among their children when these were relayed in Tamil.

This debate was further expanded upon by Lee and Ramli (2020) as they analyzed the emotional expression that could be done using the English language for multilingual households. This study identified that even as the English language brought many households closer to education and career success, the emotional significance that was always present in the mother tongue was actually absent in the English language. This posed many issues, especially while dealing with situations like conflict resolution, bereavement, and emotional talk, that required the accurate expression and understanding of emotional cues that could not be accomplished without the help of the mother tongue.

Taken together, these studies illustrate the double-edged phenomenon presented by multilingualism for Malaysian families. In a positive manner, multilingualism enables members of a family to communicate effectively within the global setting that they are living in. However, multilingualism can also bring about emotional as well as cultural disconnections if the transition between these different languages is well planned. The preservation of bilingual competence while mastering all these different heritage languages seems to have a crucial task to perform for multilingual Malaysian families.

## Digital Communication and Its Impact on Family Interaction

The digital revolution has significantly altered the way families in modern Malaysia communicate. The widespread use of smartphones and social platforms has made connectivity a common practice, while at the same time bringing along the challenges in emotional communication.

A study by Lim (2020) investigated the two-fold impact of technology on family relationships. While technology such as WhatsApp and Telegram allowed for instant updates and helped keep distant family members in touch, Lim discovered that such technology was contributing to a superficial form and pattern of communication. Instead of holding substantial levels of communication, there was a trend of exchanging a series of quick, formal messages.

Cheong and Nair (2022) concentrated on the impact of digital devices within family bonding activities such as eating and celebrations. The observation indicated a negative impact of screen usage during meals, which reduced conversation and emotional availability quality. The teenagers were also seen to prefer digital interactions to those within their families, an aspect that raised complaints from their parents regarding a lack of attentiveness and respect.

Tan & Idris (2019) delved into the mental effects of being close in the digital realm, compared to the emotional connection that exists. They highlighted that in families that spent most of their time utilizing digital technology, a misleading sense of togetherness was common. Although messages were being sent frequently, the emotional connection was inadequate to substitute the needs met by actual interactions.

In conclusion, although digital communication increases logistical efficiency and connectivity flexibilities, it may impede a meaningful familial tie if not combined with deliberate face-to-face interaction. Malaysian families today need to strike a balance between digital ease and meaningful connection.

## Communication's Roles in Family Dynamics

Communication also plays a critical role in the way in which families organize themselves, support each other, and manage processes of change. For a culturally diverse country like Malaysia, the quality of family communication will thus determine the pace of role adaptability, the strengthening of emotional ties, and the crossing of inter-generational divides in family relationships, no matter the settings of family residence whether rural or urban.

A Malaysian study involving young people from rural areas emphasizes the significance of communication styles to the emotional and identity development of the younger generation. In a study that involved 315 young individuals, Nasir and Adli (2023) found that the relationship between the “conversational” family communication style and positive aspects of self-concepts like emotional or personal identity has a strong correlation. However, family styles that value conformity demonstrated minimal progress regarding physical or social self-esteem.

Likewise, studies conducted on Malaysian adolescents living in boarding institutions showed a positive correlation between positive parent-child communication and self-concept. Nuredayu Omar, Mustaffa, & Zariruddin (2007) found that students who perceived a positive quality of communication within their families achieved significantly on emotional as well as spiritual competencies, which exceeded those of institutional caregivers.

Interestingly, unlike many other positive psychology constructs, personal strengths and values mentioned by individuals tend to correlate positively with positive feelings, whereas those of others generally negatively correlate, as found by Linley & Lewis (2010). In the context of family, positive feelings, qualities, and relations

Communication is also an important factor to be considered in the solution to inter-generational and emotional-related issues. In a study by Nasir Johari in 2022 of Malaysian teenagers, one of the sources of „family stress“ is „communication gaps“ that can be described in terms of unspoken assumptions of silence. Interviews of high

school students showed that unexpressed concerns can cause relationships to „drift apart“; emotional misunderstandings can intensify. Better counseling and active listening skills can improve trust within families.

More importantly, a national digital survey of parents in Malaysia reveals that regular face-to-face and digital family dialogues can reduce stress among adolescents. However, extreme use of messaging apps with incompasible interaction gives way to a "digital gap" in which communications are frequent though emotionally shallow and unsatisfactory, highlighting the value of quality over quantity in family communication.

Together, these studies illustrate that communication in Malaysian families is more than a conduit for information; it forms the backbone of family dynamics, social roles, and emotional well-being. When families communicate openly, listen attentively, and engage with each other, they solidify their relationships and nurture emotional resilience. In contrast, silence, rigid hierarchy, or digitally mediated distance can weaken family cohesion and spark conflict. In rapidly changing society like Malaysia, empathetic, inclusive, and emotionally honest communication becomes a tenet to foster healthy family functioning.

### **Communication As a Regulator of Family Roles**

In family systems, communication plays a regulatory function in defining and negotiating roles and expectations. Conspicuously, the relational roles in Malaysian households are often determined by age, gender, and socio-economic position.

Yusof and Samad (2016) noted that mothers usually take on the role of emotional moderator and informal decision-maker in the family. Through actions like subtle hints, reminders, and listening with empathy, they are responsible for structuring the family's emotional climate and providing family interactions with a framework. More often than not, these styles of communication are conveyed indirectly but prove effective, particularly in maintaining harmony and directing behavior with no need for authoritative compliance.

Rahim (2018), on the other hand, researched communication in dual-income families and concluded that open negotiations about the sharing of roles as a way to avoid conflict. In those families where spouses communicated effectively about monetary responsibilities, childcare, and household chores, there was a greater sense of respect for each other and lesser feelings of resentment. Communication redefined traditional roles in such a manner that they could comfortably fit into each other's professional as well as personal lives.

Chong (2017) examined the importance of storying and ritualistic communication, especially during periods of merriment such as festivities and familial gatherings. He highlighted that grandparent utilized storying as a means of not only entertaining but also teaching morality, historical knowledge, as well as obligations between families through intergenerational ties, particularly for the younger generation.

In conclusion, communication functions as a tacit as well as explicit way to sustain order as well as continuity for family roles. This makes it possible for families to adjust to new situations while still upholding core values.

### **Communication And Emotional Support in Malaysian Families**

One such life-enriching function in the realm of communication in families, and at the same time a most neglected one, is the offering of emotional support. The practice in Malaysia differs because the culture shapes the intensity and way of emotional expressions.

The results of a study by Ng & Yeo (2020) revealed that teenagers who grew up in families which supported openness of emotions had better emotional well-being compared to others. This is because those families create an enabling environment for emotional expression, as well as resolving personal matters, thereby decreasing anxiety levels and boosting their esteem.

Ariffin (2019) has pointed out that many Malaysian families of Malay ethnicity display their emotional support in terms of doing things rather than saying words. For instance, parents can cook their children's favorite foods.

They can even help their children with their homework. But this could be very confusing to children who want their parents to express their emotions clearly.

Tee and Abdul Rahman (2021) pointed to emotional suppression among women in traditional families. Their research findings showed that suppression of emotional needs is common for women in order to maintain family harmony during instances of conflict or personal turmoil. This often leads to psychological strain over time and reduces emotional availability to other family members.

These studies collectively support the need for culturally sensitive yet emotionally transparent communication strategies that will meet the changing emotional needs of the family members.

### Communication In Interfaith or Intercultural Malaysian Marriages

Multicultural society in Malaysia has also contributed to an increase in interfaith and intercultural marriages, which are very informative regarding the role of communication in bridging cultures for relationship durability.

In the case of Muslim-Christian marriages, the study conducted by Raja & Pereira in 2018 highlighted the significance of religious dialogue and acculturation. Successful couples in the study engaged in conversations regarding their religious beliefs, which allowed both of them to trust each other despite cultural differences.

Chan (2020) studied Chinese-Indian marriages and found many misunderstandings occurred due to differences in communication style, such as direct communication, the use of silence, and body language. When the power gap was narrowed by adapting to communication differences, the couples increased their intimacy and reduced their conflicts.

Ismail and Thomas (2021) coined a term known as “third-culture communication,” whereby couples from different cultures established their own culture by communicating in a specific way. This included code switching in terms of communicating through language, ritual integration, and mutual empathy.

This data implies that communication plays an integral role in a cohesive household even if it comprises different cultures. Through openness, flexibility, and respect, an accommodating and inclusive atmosphere can be devised despite cultural differences.

### Theory

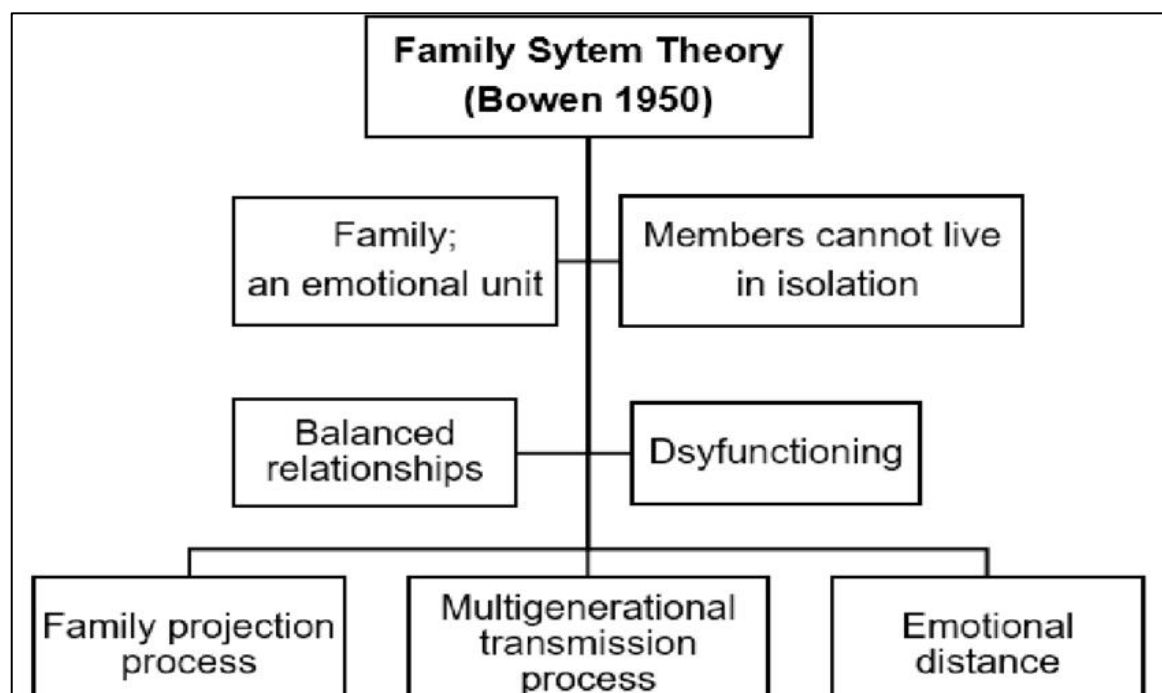


Figure 2.1: Family System Theory (Ashfaq, 2020)

Family Systems Theory by Murray Bowen helps us to understand how the family works as a team. According to Bowen, if one member of the family is stressed or struggling, then everyone else in that family is affected. It signifies the central role of communication in handling conflict, maintaining harmony, and providing emotional support among family members. If family members communicate well, it strengthens them together, whereas poor communication leads to misunderstandings and emotional turmoil.

The differentiation of self within Family Systems Theory means the ability to maintain one's separate identity while maintaining a connectedness emotionally with the family. Well-differentiated individuals will be able to communicate clearly and better regulate their feelings, even during challenging situations. People who are poorly differentiated might have a much more difficult time controlling their emotions; when this occurs, emotional reactions can take precedence, leading to less than good communication. In many families, especially those in Malaysia where respect for elders and harmony is valued, lower differentiation might imply an avoidance of direct conflict or suppression of feelings, which could lead to problems down the line. It is here that Family Systems Theory can help highlight the necessity for healthy communication that will maintain relationships.

In the article "Family Systems Theory: Background and Implications" by Beavin Bavelas & Segal (1982), the authors go on to describe how communication patterns affect families. They describe how Self Differentiation can improve communication patterns within a family and prevent emotional overreacting. The authors also go on to describe Triangulation, when two people in a family find a third person to come into a dispute and make things worse, rather than better. According to Beavin Bavelas & Segal, recognizing such problems within a family can repair communication problems and restore peace within a family. The article proves how poor communication problems such as emotional overreacting and triangling can affect the family unit, but correcting such problems can make a difference within a family.

Another concept that should be understood when it comes to Family Systems Theory is multigenerational transmission. This relates to how family behaviors and communication patterns are passed from generation to generation. This idea may explain why certain methods of communication, such as conflict avoidance, are continued from generation to generation. In their article "Family Therapy: An Overview," Goldenberg & Goldenberg (2013) describe how family communication may be impacted by these patterns passed down from generation to generation. They describe how understanding these patterns allows families to change their behavior from dysfunctions to effective communication. Goldenberg & Goldenberg further describe how families may benefit from therapy through better understanding of emotion management and communication when different behaviors, such as triangulation or differentiation differ.

The family systems theory can help us understand the processes of communication in a family, its importance, and the reasons for its importance. The articles offered by Beavin Bavelas & Segal in 1982, as well as Goldenberg & Goldenberg in 2013, can help us understand how these theories can help us in improving family relationships. Differentiation of Self, triangulation, and the concept of multigenerational transmission can definitely help a family communicate in a better way and can thus help the family relationships in a positive way.

### **Framework of the Study**

This study will apply the Family Systems Theory (FST) which argues that members of a family have emotional ties, and whatever happens to any member of the family as a result of either stress or change affects the emotional well-being of the entire family. Family communication plays very significant roles, as outlined by the theory, which assists in the management of roles, conflict resolution, and maintaining harmony. This paper will apply FST to investigate how both verbal and non-verbal communications as well as digital communications affect the relationship between the multicultural urban Malaysian family. Different cultures, ideals, and languages exist within the multicultural urban Malaysian family.

The study examines three crucial areas that impact family communication. First, aspects of family communication are discussed, whereby direct speech, indirect communication, silence, and digital communication are considered. For families in Malaysia, communication transcends mere speaking because

silence can be very meaningful, especially where families choose to avoid conflict in order to maintain harmony. Digital communication, such as that taking place via WhatsApp, has become an important part of families because it enables families to maintain an emotional connection even if they cannot physically meet. Hopkins and Tan (2021) indicated that families utilize WhatsApp services to both deal with daily chores and to maintain an emotional connection, which presently portrays digital platforms as important in families for maintaining connection in this modern world.

The second aspect that we would like to discuss is the cultural factor that contributes to the process of communication. Malaysia is a multicultural country with various cultures, and the culture of the members in the families also affects the way in which members of the family communicate. In the Malaysian family, for that matter, the values of respecting the older generation and preserving harmony are of great significance, and thus the members of the family communicate in a roundabout way. Often, this contributes to a gap in communication between the older and the younger generation, who tend to be influenced by the global trend of direct communication. This is supported by Azmi et al. (2023).

The third dimension is relational outcomes. These involve the study of the impact of communication on emotional adjustment, role satisfaction, and family cohesion. With effective communication in a family, for instance, there is emotional support, clarity in family roles, and bonding. With poor communication in a family, the consequence may be confusion, tension, and reduced bonding in the family. According to Ray (2018), when communication is ineffective because of repression of emotions, over-reliance on electronic communication, and cross-cultural communication, the consequence is the formation of a third individual in the midst of a conflict in a family, thus making the conflict even more complex.

The conceptual framework of this study will examine how communication in families is impacted by cultural considerations and in what ways this impacts the emotional wellness and cohesion of a family. Through an understanding of communication in families, this study will aid in recognizing ways in which multicultural families in an urban city in Malaysia can improve their communication techniques to ultimately enhance their emotional wellness and ensure a sense of family oneness in a multicultural family setup.

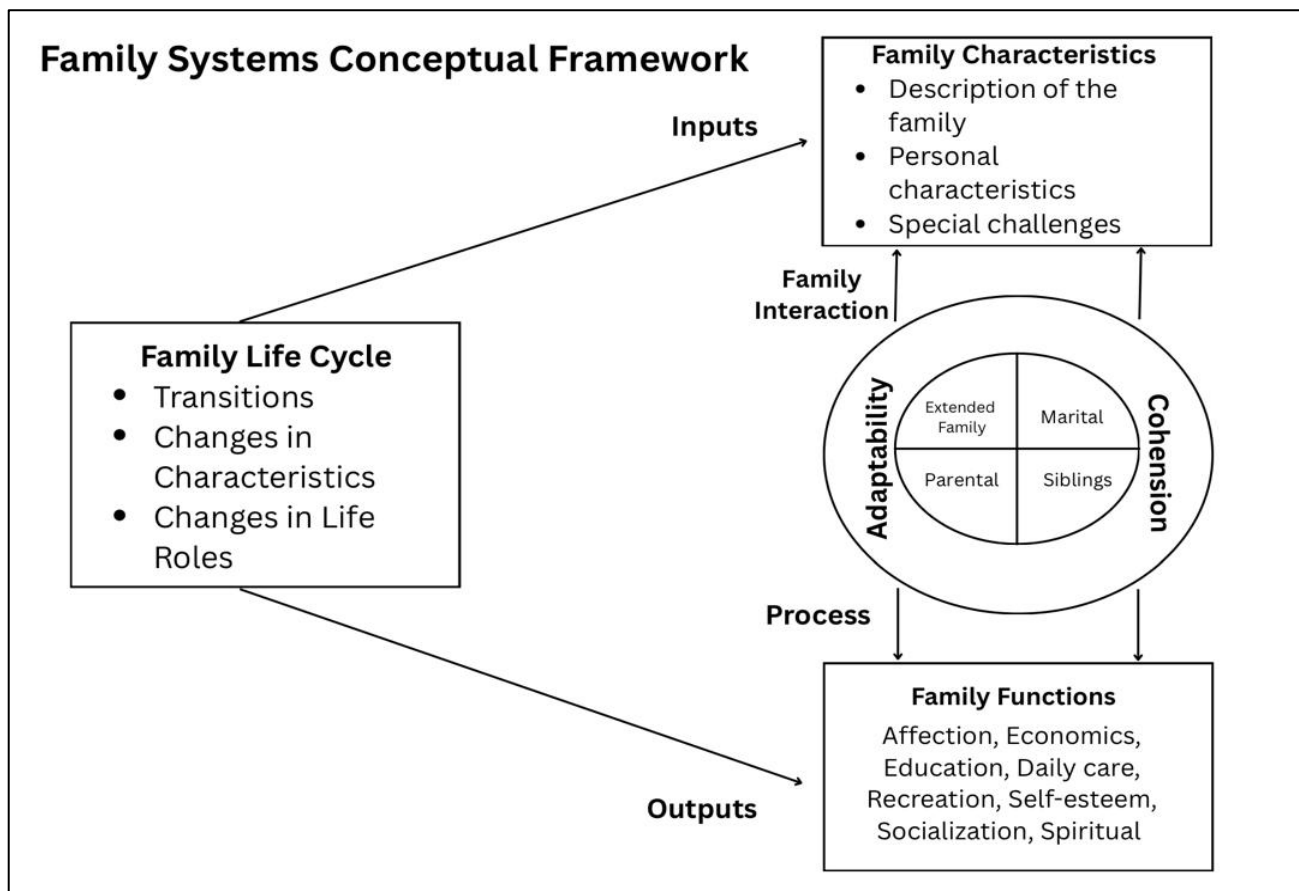


Figure 2.2: Family System Conceptual Framework (Naomi Risher, 2015)

## METHODOLOGY

This chapter highlights the methodology adopted in this research to further elaborate on its design and tools in detail. This particular study aims to identify the influences of family communication patterns on emotional well-being, role perception, and family cohesion in Malaysian families residing in urban Malaysia. This particular chapter will cover a brief introduction to the methodology used in this current research to carry out its objectives in effectively addressing each question in this particular topic.

### Research Design

For this research, a qualitative research paradigm is employed to analyze family communication patterns in urban Malaysian families and their impact on their dynamics and cohesiveness. The study is conducted using a case study method that will facilitate a comprehensive and in-depth study of a particular urban Malaysian family comprising people from a variety of cultures and backgrounds. The aims and objectives of this study will be fulfilled through conducting semi-structured interviews among different family members that will help in gathering much more in-depth and qualitative data regarding their experiences and perceptions about family communication (Creswell, 2014). The best method for conducting an interview for a research study is a semi-structured interview because of its flexibility in terms of allowing the interviewer to cover personal or informal aspects while questioning and staying focused on a particular subject or line of questioning. This will also help in collecting data about non-verbal aspects of communication in a family through observation while doing an interview (Silverman, 2016).

A purposive sampling technique will be employed with families chosen that come from a variety of ethnic origins such as Malay, Chinese, and Indian, and family forms such as nuclear and extended families to ensure a good variety of communication experience (Palinkas et al., 2015). This will help the researcher select the targeted family members for the research that can offer important information regarding the impact of cultural and generation differences on communication. Both the interview and observation will also help the researcher to gain a good understanding of the communication pattern of urban Malaysian families and the effects of those communication patterns on the emotional well-being of families and family cohesion (Yin, 2018).

### The Researcher as an Instrument

For a qualitative study, the researcher is more than a data collector; instead, they are involved in the process as they utilize their skills to interpret the information. For this research, the researcher has the task of carrying out semi-structured interviews to listen to the experiences of the family members as they analyze communication patterns between each of the family members. For a researcher to interpret information from the research questions or aims effectively, they need to reassure the participants to feel comfortable to express their thoughts and emotions.

As Maxwell (2013) puts it, "The inquirer's task is more than simply posing questions; they are also tasked with interpreting those answers and making sense of the data." This is quite an important aspect for the researcher because they need to exercise reflexivity. This basically implies being conscious of their backgrounds and their influences in interpreting the data. This is in accordance with Creswell (2014), which states that reflexivity is an extremely integral part of doing qualitative research because of its capacities to recognize and reduce biases in research outcomes.

Moreover, it can be noted that active listening needs to be practiced by the researcher in an interview if effective results are to be achieved. This becomes particularly important in a family study since emotions play a crucial role in contributing to responses in a study. A family study can involve emotions, and a safe space needs to be provided to participants to share their views in an interview. This helps in developing a connection with them and understanding their responses with keen attention by the researcher, according to Silverman (2016).

Ultimately, although the background knowledge of the researcher in strategic communication is beneficial for understanding family interaction subtleties, it is necessary for the researcher to maintain an openness and not impose personal ideas on the respondents. This aims at attaining an interpretation based on the data that accurately represents the voice of the respondents, irrespective of the personal interpretations.

## Researcher Reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity is a critical component of qualitative inquiry, as it acknowledges the influence of the researcher's background, perspectives, and assumptions on the research process. In this study, the researcher's academic and professional background in strategic communication provided valuable insights into interpersonal dynamics and communication patterns within families. However, this expertise also posed a potential risk of interpretive bias, particularly in emphasising certain communication constructs over others.

To minimise such bias, several reflexive strategies were employed throughout the research process. First, the researcher engaged in continuous self-reflection by maintaining reflective notes during data collection and analysis. These notes documented personal assumptions, reactions, and emerging interpretations, allowing the researcher to critically assess how their perspectives might shape the analysis.

Second, during interviews, the researcher adopted a neutral and non-directive approach, ensuring that participants' voices and experiences were prioritised over preconceived expectations. Open-ended questions were used to encourage authentic responses, and probing was conducted carefully to avoid leading participants. Third, in the data analysis phase, a systematic thematic analysis was applied, where codes and themes were derived inductively from the data rather than imposed from existing theoretical frameworks. This approach helped ensure that findings were grounded in participants' lived experiences.

Finally, where possible, the researcher revisited the data multiple times to check for consistency in interpretation and to reduce the likelihood of selective bias. These reflexive practices enhanced the credibility, transparency, and trustworthiness of the study, ensuring that the findings more accurately represent the perspectives of the participants rather than the predispositions of the researcher.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research method to explore the influence of communication practice on family dynamics, emotional well-being, and relational cohesion in urban Malaysian families. Data collection used a semi-structured survey form with closed-ended and open-ended questions. This method is chosen to allow participants to describe personally experienced events and their perceptions of family communication in their own words, yet still maintains consistency across responses to ensure that the response addresses the research objectives.

The survey instrument was designed to reflect both the research questions and the theoretical framework of Family Systems Theory. The survey contains five major sections. Section A establishes demographic data: age, gender, ethnicity, family structure, household size, and languages spoken at home. Section B establishes family communication practices: frequency of communications, type of communication employed (verbal, non-verbal, and digital), and participants' comfort in expressing emotions within the family. Section C examines family dynamics and conflict resolution strategies, including how disagreements are processed and how respect for authority/elders is communicated. Section D examines emotional well-being through perceived emotional support, levels of stress, happiness, and the impacts of using digital communication tools on family relationships. Lastly, Section E invites participants to suggest ways to improve family communication and offer advice that may help someone else maintain healthy family relationships.

The structured questionnaire used in the survey had a mix of both closed and open questions. The closed questions in the questionnaire were useful in pinpointing the general patterns of communications, while the open questions allowed the respondents to shed more information regarding the aspects of emotional expression, conflict resolution, and the influences of the respective cultures on communications. This was useful in providing a well-rounded perspective on communications in families.

A total of 25 responses were initially gathered using the survey. Nevertheless, using the guiding principles of purposive sampling, the researcher chose to analyze a total of 20 responses. The criteria used in selecting the responses to be analyzed were based on the quality and depth of the responses, their relevance to research questions, and the degree with which the responses were more specific and detailed regarding their

communication experiences within their families. Responses with more detailed communication experiences and with diverse ethnicity, family structures, and communication patterns were preferred.

The data was analyzed using thematic data analysis, which involved reading the data multiple times for the purpose of finding recurring themes, patterns, and meanings that relate to family communication patterns. Themes such as openness, indirectness, use of digital media communication, support, and conflict resolution methods were deemed acceptable for classification. The participants' data was coded using numbering, with all participants being given pseudonyms P1, P2, P3, up to P20, which assisted the researcher in establishing links between the individuals' experiences regarding the topics of interest for the investigation.

### **Location And Subject of the Study**

The present study is conducted in Malaysia, which is a diverse country in the Southeast Asia region. Malaysia is a multiracial country, that is, the population comprises a diverse mix of races, which include the Malay, Chinese, and Indians, aside from the indigenous races. The study will be concentrated on families residing in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, and Kuching, Sarawak. These places are excellent locations for the study of families in terms of family communications. The cities have diverse traditions with both modern and traditional influences (Khoo et al., 2024).

The research is concerned with the way in which communication takes place between the families in these urban settings. It is also concerned with the way in which communication takes place between the family members through verbal communication, non-verbal communication, as well as digital communication through platforms such as WhatsApp. Despite the presence of modernization through urbanization and digital platforms such as WhatsApp, which has influenced the way in which families communicate, there are values such as respect for elderly parents and family togetherness that are still practiced in modern families (Ray, 2018).

Families consisting of diverse cultures, including indigenous families, Malay families, and Chinese families, would be considered for the study. Moreover, families of varying compositions, consisting of nuclear families as well as extended families, would be taken into consideration in the context of varying patterns of communications among the families, aiming to comprehend the effects of such communications on the emotional well-being, role satisfaction, as well as the unity of the families, within the context of a fast-changing society like East Malaysia (Azmi et al., 2023).

### **Selection Of the Informants/Respondents**

In this study, the participants will be selected by a purposive sampling method; that is, the researcher will purposively select the families who can adequately provide information and facts relevant to the communication practices within their family. The selected families come from urban East Malaysia, such as Kota Kinabalu and Kuching, which are cities with a rich culture and diverse ethnic groups like Malay, Chinese, and Indian. The purpose of this is to capture various family experiences emanating from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Participants will be chosen based on a few key criteria. Firstly, age groupings are of essence as the study intends to include family members across generations; that is, children, parents, and even grandparents. This helps in probing how communication changes between younger and older generations. Both nuclear and extended family structures shall be included in this study, as each offers different aspects of communication. Selection for all families is done to ensure representative families cover several ethnicities, languages, and communication practices. This includes Malay speaking, English speaking, Mandarin speaking, or Tamil speaking families, as well as those who have integrated digital tools such as WhatsApp into family communication (Khoo, 2021).

Through the inclusion of families with diverse backgrounds, the research hopes to capture a wide array of experiences on the cultural and familial roles and their impact on communication in families in an urban environment (Azmi et al., 2023).

## Criteria of the Informants/Respondents

For the purpose of conducting this research, participants will be selected in a way that the data obtained is significant and diverse. The main way of carrying out selection will be by using a purposeful sampling technique where the individual will identify participants, he or she can utilize to gain more light about communication within a family setting. The setting that will mainly consist of is in urban families in East Malaysia, in towns such as Kota Kinabalu and Kuching, where various ethnic groups will be found intermingled with each other and other native tribes. This will mainly target towns where various ethnic groups are found in a large number and are suitable to gain more light about family communication in a modern setting (Azmi et al., 2023).

These families will be selected on a number of criteria to help in having a varied experience. First, the research will use participants of different ages, such as parents, children, and grandparents. This is to help in understanding the difference in communication between the various ages. Secondly, the research will use nuclear families as well as extended families that may involve grandparents, uncles, aunts, and so on. To be able to understand a variety of communication between families, both nuclear and extended families may be used. Finally, families that use digital communication methods such as WhatsApp or Telegram communication may also be involved in the research. These digital communication methods are very central in the way that families interact in today's digital era (Khoo, 2021).

Finally, the families need to be eager to take part in the research. This implies that they need to have an openness to sharing their experiences as well as their communication processes with members of the family. Since this study selects its families from diverse environments, it ensures that the research sheds light regarding the impact of communication processes from different cultures and technological aids on family dynamics for urban Malaysia (Ray, 2018).

## Population and Sampling Procedures

This study will involve only families from urban areas in East Malaysia, particularly from the city of Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, and the city of Kuching, Sarawak. The cities were chosen for their heterogeneous population with varied ethnic groups, including Malay, Chinese, Indian, and the indigenous group, to make for an ideal setting for a multicultural family communication study.

The study will apply purposive sampling in selecting participants, where the researcher will select the most suitable families based on careful judgment to achieve the objectives of the study. The sampled families should come from varied ethnic backgrounds, family composition, such as nuclear families and extended families, and the type of communication the families engage in. The study shall include families using face-to-face communication along with digital tools such as WhatsApp. This will enable the research to examine the influence of traditional and digital forms of communication on family relationships, emotional well-being, and family cohesion.

The families themselves must also meet some criteria, and they should comprise people belonging to various generations such as parents and children, and perhaps grandparents in order to see how communication patterns differ among them. A sample of 10 families, or a total of 20 participants, will be used in the study, and this is a small sample used for qualitative research. Families belonging to various backgrounds will be used for the study in an bid to capture in-depth information regarding how families in Malaysia communicate in an urban setting (Ray, 2018).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter will offer a close examination of the data obtained from 20 participants who completed a survey to explore the impact of communication styles upon family dynamics, emotional well-being, and relationships in urban Malaysian families. The examination of the data has been informed by the questions posed in Chapter 1, as well as by the theories of Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978) and Family Communication Patterns

Theory (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). These theories emphasize that communication is a systemic phenomenon that affects emotional functioning, roles, and relationship stability.

The methodology used to analyze the open-ended questionnaires collected from the survey is thematic analysis. This type of analysis enables themes to be extracted from the collected data to identify common themes or patterns from individual experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reading through the responses collected from the survey, themes were developed to convey communication patterns, emotional expressions, conflict resolution, respect for authority, as well as digital communication technologies. The themes covered to date are all relevant to their everyday impact on communication patterns, which ultimately affect family functioning within a multicultural setting.

### **Demographic Profile of Respondents**

This study was conducted among 20 respondents from the urban areas of East Malaysia, specifically from Kuching and Kota Kinabalu. The subjects were well-represented from a gender point of view and belonged to different age groups from early to mid-adult life. Culturally, the subjects came from a mix of ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese, Indians, as well as from indigenous cultures. This is representative of Malaysia's diversified culture. This was done to ensure that the study taps a wide spectrum of family communication experiences influenced by culture.

Most respondents had nuclear family structures, in which parents and children resided in a household. A rather small percentage had extended family structures, in which grandparents or other extended family members resided in their households. The size of the family members residing in a household could range from three to seven individuals. The language spoken in each household also differed from one household to another, with a rather high percentage having more than one language spoken in each household, namely Malay and English, and others speaking both Chinese and English.

### **Frequency and Modes of Family Communication**

Analysis of the data showed that face-to-face communication was still the dominant form of communication among family members. Most people reported conducting face-to-face communication with their families on a daily basis or occasionally several times in a week. This was evident in the responses, which indicated the significance and importance of conducting frequent face-to-face communication, which provided the opportunity for emotional expression and mutual understanding (Vangelisti, 2013). For example, 70% of respondents reported conducting daily face-to-face communication with their families, which signifies the significance and importance of conducting face-to-face communication on a daily basis, which creates an opportunity for emotional expression and mutual understanding among family members. One respondent indicated, "For us, sitting down at the dinner table together is more than just eating; it's where we talk about our day, share experiences, and just connect with one another."

Aside from verbal communication, another area that respondents valued in their family communication processes is non-verbal communication through tone of voice, Facial Expression, or Body Language. Silence is also a significant aspect of communication in a family or any interpersonal relationship, especially during moments when disagreements or tension arise between family members. These observations conform to Family Communication Patterns Theory in terms of communication being much broader than words and contains implicit meanings that affect family relationships (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Some respondents also emphasized that in some instances, Non-verbal Communication often portrayed emotions such as love, concern, anger, or discomfort better than words. As one respondent noted, "My mother does not need to say anything to me to let me know what's going on in her feelings. Her eyes tell me everything."

Digital means of communications, most importantly WhatsApp, were extensively used among the respondents in staying in touch with family members. Many of the respondents stated that they used messaging apps in order to exchange daily updates and schedules. Digital means of communications were helpful in improving the convenience of communications, though many respondents considered the app a supplementary means of communications. Around 75% of the respondents stated that they used digital communications in order to stay

in touch or share updates. A respondent said: "Since I am in a different city, WhatsApp is a must for staying in touch with my family. It is not the same as meeting, but it is helpful in staying in touch, most importantly in times of something significant happening."

It also, however, found that dependence on digital communication sometimes resulted in a lowered level of emotional depth in interactions. For instance, 30% of all the respondents felt that face-to-face conversations provided emotional warmth, which the use of digital tools alone could not replace. This, one respondent claimed, "We are always texting, but it isn't the same thing as looking at someone in the eye and really hearing them. Sometimes, I think digital tools make us more distant than connected."

### **Emotional Expression and Openness**

In Family Respondents exhibited different levels of comfort in sharing their emotions with their families. Respondents who described their families as open access cultures expressed comfort in discussing personal issues, emotions, and concerns. These Respondents described their families in terms of openness to emotions. Communication in these families can be described by the concept of conversation-oriented families. In such families, communication can be seen in the discussion of emotions (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). In fact, 50% of Respondents described their families as supportive environments where emotions, although perceived as vulnerability, were not just tolerated but rather advocated. These families provided their members with opportunities to talk about their emotions, both positive and negative, without fearing being judged. One of the Respondents expressed this concept by saying, "In my family, emotions can be discussed. For instance, I can talk to my parents if I feel upset. I do not feel awkward. They listen to my problems. They help me feel better."

In the structuring of Family Respondents, the levels of comfort that the Respondents had in sharing and talking of emotions with their families were observed. The Respondents who described their families as access-open culture were able to express comfort in talking of personal issues, emotions, and concern. The information of the Respondents portrayed the description of the families of the Respondents based on openness of emotions. The portrayal of the nature of the communication in the families of the Respondents is depicted by the concept of conversation-oriented families. In the families of the Respondents, the nature of the communication is depicted in the discussion of emotions, as cited in Koerner & Fitzpatrick (2002). In fact, 50% of the Respondents described the families of the Respondents as supportive environments where emotions, though described as vulnerability, were not only tolerated in the families but were also advocated. In one of the descriptions of the concept, one of the Respondents cited, "In my family, emotions can be discussed. For instance, I can talk to my parents if I feel upset. I do not feel awkward. They listen to my problems. They help me feel better."

On the flip side, some respondents had problems in expressing their emotions in their families. Among them were fear of not being understood and cultural values that emphasized reserve in emotions. Others felt that asking for support could be seen as an offense or a sign of weakness in their culture and societies that valued hierarchies.

The findings underscore further that emotional openness is a prerequisite to building a strong family unit with supportive family ties. Families that encourage such openness in relationships contribute to a healthy environment characterized by a sense of security and well-being on emotional levels.

### **Conflict Resolution Practices**

When describing how conflicts were handled, participants outlined a variety of strategies. Some families favored open discussion: air any misunderstandings and try to get the opposite party to understand through calm talk and by listening to each other's perspective. Participants from such families indicated that conflicts are generally resolved faster and with a higher understanding among family members. Open communication in times of conflict is also consistent with research showing that constructive dialogue undergirds healthier familial relationships (Schrodt et al., 2008). In fact, 40% of the respondents stated that their families resolve conflict by discussing calmly. Every member in such a family is allowed to state their worries and opinions, which creates a higher level of mutual understanding and compromise. As one respondent simply put it, "When

we argue, we sit down and talk about it. We listen to each other's points of view and try to understand where the other person is coming from. It's not always easy, but it helps us move forward together."

On the contrary, there were expressed feelings of avoidance and silence from families that emphasize respecting the elderly and harmony. This is because the elderly had a tendency towards causing conflict due to the decisions they made during a conflict. For example, the elderly had the power to make the final decisions during a conflict. This may seem to solve the conflict and maintain harmony; however, there existed feelings of underlying emotional conflict. To begin with, about 30% of the participants expressed feelings about families that avoid conflict altogether. For example, there were families that ignored disagreements and swept them under the rug. A participant also expressed, "In my family, we don't argue; we don't talk about things either. We just avoid the issue, and we don't ever solve anything." According to Family Systems Theory, unresolved conflict affects the family system's balance and all the parties to the conflict. These effects are centered on the family's emotional balance.

Another 25% said that in their families, elders are always involved in conflict resolution situations. This implies that in their families, there was a high sense of hierarchical authority, with the ability to make decisions in situations where other people could be in conflict with each other. This worked in promoting harmony, but at the same time led to a feeling of not being taken seriously by a young member in a family because, as a young member in a family said, "I know my parents mean well, but sometimes I feel like my voice does not count in family matters."

It also shows that families who value communication and listening tend to have an easy time resolving their conflicts, making them a healthier place for emotional well-being, while families who do not have such communication tend not to have easy times dealing with their issues.

### **Respect for Elders and Authority in Communication**

Respect towards elders became a dominant theme across the responses. Many participants described communication practices that were polite, indirect language, and deferential towards the older members within their family. Most participants avoided direct confrontation with parents or grandparents. Instead, participants remained silent or in disagreement, subtly showing it. This is not surprising, since in many cultures, respect for elders is deeply imbued in their cultural values that shape how families communicate and interact with one another. Indeed, the study found that elders held important authority in 65 percent of the families, especially when decisions were concerned. Younger family members were expected to show deference to the wisdom and authority of older generations, contributing to family cohesion and stability. As one participant explained, "We respect our elders because they have more life experience. They've been through a lot, so their opinions are valued in our family."

While this helped in nourishing the cultural beliefs in power and harmony, the younger lot sometimes also experienced this drawback, where they felt their opinions were not being heard, thus creating a dilemma between being part of the larger family and expressing their personal opinions and beliefs. Differentiation of self, according to Bowen (1978), also becomes an issue in this regard, where an individual finds it difficult to differentiate his/her identity while trying to connect emotionally with family. Major findings indicated by 25% of respondents revealed the idea, "We respect the elders, but sometimes we don't get a chance to share our opinions. It's like their word is final, and we just have to accept it."

Issues of money, marriage, and family problems were also left entirely to the elders of the family to decide upon. Although the practice ensured that family decisions were made with the collective good in mind, it sometimes created a sense of power imbalance where youngsters within families often felt disempowered. One participant shared, "My parents make all the decisions, and we just go along with them. I wish we could have more of a say, but it's always been this way."

### **Digital Communication and Emotional Well-Being in Malaysian Families**

Digital communication technologies have become deeply embedded in Malaysian family life, reshaping interaction patterns, emotional expression, and relational dynamics. Platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram

serve as essential tools for maintaining connectivity, particularly among geographically dispersed or time-constrained family members (Hopkins & Tan, 2021; Khoo et al., 2024). These tools facilitate rapid information exchange, coordination of daily activities, and continuity of familial contact in increasingly urbanized and fast-paced environments.

However, despite these functional advantages, a growing body of literature highlights the limitations of digital communication in fostering emotional depth. Studies consistently indicate that while messaging platforms enhance accessibility, they often promote brief, task-oriented exchanges that lack the richness of face-to-face interaction (Lim, 2020; Cheong & Nair, 2022). This shift towards efficiency-driven communication can result in reduced emotional engagement, particularly during shared family moments such as meals or gatherings, where device usage may disrupt meaningful interaction.

Scholars conceptualize this phenomenon through the notion of “technofinance,” defined as technology-induced interruptions in interpersonal relationships that diminish emotional availability and attentiveness (McDaniel & Radesky, 2018). In the context of Malaysian families, technofinance manifests in subtle yet significant ways, including divided attention, reduced eye contact, and the replacement of in-depth conversations with fragmented digital exchanges.

Importantly, the literature does not present digital communication as wholly detrimental. Rather, it underscores its dual role as both an enabler of connection and a potential barrier to emotional intimacy. For instance, digital platforms are particularly valuable in sustaining intergenerational ties and maintaining relationships across distances, yet they cannot fully replicate the affective qualities of physical presence and non-verbal communication cues.

This dual-edged dynamic suggests that the impact of digital communication on family well-being is contingent upon usage patterns and intentionality. Families that consciously integrate digital tools while preserving dedicated time for face-to-face interaction tend to report stronger emotional bonds and higher relational satisfaction. Conversely, overreliance on mediated communication may contribute to emotional distancing, misunderstandings, and weakened family cohesion.

In sum, the literature converges on the need for a balanced communication ecology within Malaysian families one that leverages the convenience of digital technologies without compromising the emotional richness of direct interpersonal engagement. Such balance is critical for sustaining both connectivity and emotional well-being in contemporary family life.

### **Suggestions For Improving Family Communication**

To this end, the respondents were able to proffer a few practical suggestions pertaining to communication. Overall, a few respondents recommended the setting up of dedicated family time. This entails setting up family time that is distraction-free from work or technology-related issues. One interviewee shared: "We try to have dinner as a family. It's the only time we can all sit down together and talk without distractions." Additionally, close to 50% recommended that dedicated family time should involve a family meal or a family outing.

Another significant recommendation was the adoption of active listening, where the members of the family would engage actively in the conversations with one another, providing each other with the full attention, and being empathetic towards one another. The lack of active listening was also mentioned by 30% of the respondents as a reason that led to poor communication in the families. The respondents noted the significance of creating a platform where the members of the families feel free to express their emotions without the danger of being judged.

Lastly, others proposed suggestions that parents and elders should be willing to listen to the younger generation's point of view as well. 20% proposed that there is a need to create mutual respect and understanding between the younger generation, which is likely to positively impact communication between family members as well as create emotional bonds between them. Creating mutual respect and understanding between the younger generation is a crucial factor that would positively impact family relations. The suggestions proposed

adhere to the guidelines of positive family communication as discussed in literature, which include openness, empathy, as well as mutual respect between family members as discussed by Vangelisti, 2013.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This chapter examined how family communication practices shape family dynamics, emotional well-being, and relationships among urban Malaysian families. The study concluded that family communication is an important factor in shaping emotional well-being, familial relationships, and general family dynamics. The findings indicate that the more frequent and open one is in communicating, especially face-to-face, the more emotional bonding occurs, the clearer the understanding, and the higher emotional support there is. Face-to-face interactions, associated with open communications, were found to strengthen emotional bonds and foster emotional security. Verbal and non-verbal communications-such as tone, gesture, and silences-play an important role in showing respect within culturally hierarchical family structures.

Findings disclosed that families that utilized discussion as a means of conflict resolution had more healthy relationships, while for families that avoided conflict by keeping quiet, healthy relationships were unattainable. Elders played a crucial role as leaders of these families. However, differences were also noted regarding the manner in which younger family members expressed themselves. Some families exhibited positive aspects of egalitarianism. Additionally, findings have disclosed the dramatic impact of digital communication as a means of family interaction. Though digital communication has played a crucial role for families by connecting them through WhatsApp, it has also adversely impacted family relationships.

This is due to a greater need to foster an environment based on open dialogue in which each person in a family feels comfortable to express his or her emotions and thoughts and contribute to decision-making in a family. All in all, those families in which openness in terms of emotions, listening to others, and respect for others were encouraged developed better family relationships in terms of emotions. This is a significant foundation on which to discuss further in the next chapter these findings in terms of a connection to previous theories and studies conducted in this field.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study sought to find out how communication within a family influences its dynamic, emotional, and relational patterns, with particular emphasis on urban Malaysian families. The findings in the study clearly indicate the significance of communication in developing and fostering good emotional relationships within a family, with all parties feeling supported. Face-to-face communication was found to be dominant and preferred in most families, a clear indication of its importance in fostering and developing harmonious relationships within a family setup. Face-to-face communication is instrumental in developing a sense of emotional security within a unit or a system, and such emotional intelligence is key in developing harmonious relationships within the family setup.

Similarly, the non-verbal means of communication, e.g., body language, face, and tone, have also depicted the same level of significance for the process of communication as maintained in the case of the family. For instance, the process of non-verbal communication holds immense significance for the social setup of the family wherein the culture promotes the value of regard for seniors and the adherence to the hierarchical system of the family setup. These are some of the situations that favor the argument that the process of communication is as relevant with regard to how it is done as such with regard to the verbal expression of the matter at hand.

The current research also highlighted the increased importance of digital communication tools in maintaining family relationships, especially WhatsApp. These tools have become crucial for families who live far away from each other or who have busy schedules and are unable to communicate as regularly as they may like. However, while these digital means provide easier and more accessible avenues of communication, this study also determined that reliance on them leads to less emotional depth within the interactions themselves. More often than not, digital communication is a quick and effective way to pass on information, but it requires little emotional exchange compared to face-to-face conversations. This paper emphasizes the fact that though digital

tools can enhance connectivity, they should not replace face-to-face interactions, which are basic ingredients toward developing more profound emotional connections.

Additionally, based on the findings, it was discovered that families that enjoy open communication regarding their differences are more likely to have more healthy relationships. These kinds of families are able to communicate regarding their differences calmly and can therefore comprehend each other's differences more effectively. This leads to a strong emotional bonding between family members. When a family enjoys open communication during conflict resolution, members of that family are able to communicate freely regarding their differences by expressing their issues with each other for a solution to a conflict. However, a family that does not enjoy open communication regarding its differences may find its members emotionally separated from one another as a result of unresolved issues.

In summary, the value of the findings of this study lies in the fact that it emphasizes the significance of well-balanced communication in enhancing emotional well-being and strong relationships within the family as they encounter the challenges that life throws their way. The significance of effective communication cannot be overemphasized as far as the building of strong and healthy families is concerned. Effective communication is the bedrock upon which healthy and strong families are founded. This study emphasizes the need for each and every family to build a platform that allows for the value of communication and the expression of emotions with the aim of enhancing the emotional well-being and relationships of the individuals involved, ultimately building a strong and harmonious family unit.

## RECOMMENDATION

Therefore, the improvement of family communication is of particular importance if a family is to develop a closer emotional connection as well as develop healthy family relationships. In order for families to develop healthy communication, there is a need for families to seek healthy ways of promoting positive communication through a dedicated time of interaction, without other competing factors such as work duties or usage of electronic gadgets that may interfere with communication during the dedicated time of interaction. By dedicating quality time without distractions, families are able to develop closer emotional bonds as all family members engage in meaningful interaction, discussing their experiences with the aim of strengthening family bonds

Besides these aspects, families also need to take care of digital and physical communication balance too. While digital technologies such as WhatsApp are helpful in staying in touch with one another and are even inevitable in today's busy world, they will not provide the emotional depth that physical discourse can facilitate. Families will need to pay attention to their digital discourse and successfully limit their usage of phones in family gatherings or during their meals so that they are not emotionally disengaged from each other while they are physically together but perhaps distracted by their digital devices in their hands. This way, they can make sure their family members are emotionally present while physical and digital discourse occurs.

Furthermore, the importance of active listening should not be underestimated in improving family communication. This is where family members are obliged to ensure they give full attention to each other during communication in order to avoid situations where family members claim they are not being understood or where they feel they are not being listened to. This can also promote better communication in that if every family member is felt and understood in a family, conflicts can be taken care of in a much more efficient and emotional manner.

Other important aspects that may help enhance family dynamics include cultural sensitivity in communication. Families in multicultural settings such as Malaysia often need to communicate through generational shifts, with varying cultural nuances. Such may bring misunderstandings around emotional expressions. Building an atmosphere that respects members allows the family to promote more culturally sensitive communication, where all family members, old or young, feel free to express themselves. This helps bridge generational divides and enables family members to communicate more openly and supportively, promoting family unity.

Lastly, emotional expression and sharing must also be promoted and supported within a family or group of people. This is because when a family promotes an environment where emotional expression is made possible,

they will be able to prevent frustrations and feelings of loneliness within their family or group of people. For those people within a family or group of people who might feel reluctant or uncomfortable when it comes to sharing their emotions or feelings with others within their particular group or family, it must also be validated so that they can feel secure and comfortable sharing their emotions or feelings so that they can promote their emotional wellness and reduce feelings of loneliness within their particular group or family of people.

In conclusion, through implanting and adopting this strategy, which entails open dialogue, synergy in both communication and face-to-face communication, active listening and embracing cultural sensitivity, as well as expressing emotions, instances in which communication dynamics can be boosted in families will be enhanced not only in terms of emotional value but also in a value system in which every member feels valued and connected.

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