Expressing Refusals in English: A Cross-Cultural Study of Invitation Responses amongst Malaysians

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Abstract

Malaysia is a multicultural country with diverse cultural groups, languages, social practices and norms. The Malays, Indians and Chinese are amongst the leading cultural groups, each with unique styles of expressing refusal when communicating in English. Refusal, or the act of saying 'no,' is inevitable in daily routines, often leaving a negative impression on both speaker and listener. This can be particularly challenging in multicultural context, whereby different cultures use language differently to express and interpret refusals in English. Such variations can lead to misunderstandings, especially in multilingual settings. This study examined how different cultural perspectives in Malaysia expressed refusals to invitations in English. To realise the study, a qualitative approach complemented by minor quantitative elements was adopted to provide an insightful understanding of the refusal strategies used by different cultures. The employed research design included Oral Discourse Completion Task (ODCT) and interviews. A purposive sampling technique was applied to select 16 Malays, 16 Chinese and 16 Indians who are proficient English speakers. The data obtained were analysed by using Beebe et al. (1990) Refusal Taxonomies framework to categorise refusal strategies and Hofstede (2011) Cultural Dimensions to interprete an in-depth insight into cultural influences in making refusals. The findings revealed that Chinese and Indians were comfortable to express direct negative willingness in English, while Malays tended to refuse indirectly, often showing gratitude in their refusals. Future research is recommended to explore refusal strategies in other speech acts and compare refusal styles between working adults and children in Malaysia to enhance generalisability.

Keywords: refusals; cross-cultural, invitation responses, politeness, indirectness

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a multicultural country with unique and diverse ethnicities. These ethnicities have their respective celebrated occasions (Zaman, 2024). Due to this, language is used differently to fulfil various communicative purposes which contributes to different ways of expressing and interpreting the appropriateness in language use (Rahma & Pradipta, 2022). For this matter, speakers should be aware of using the language righteously.

Refusal is one of the common speech acts used in everyday interactions, which is expressed directly or indirectly to convey the act of rejection through language (Bangun & Stevani, 2020). Since language and culture are inseparable to be considered within an interaction, Huneety et al. (2024) stated that incorporation of culture in the speech act of refusal contributes to different performing refusal styles. This matter often easily leads to misunderstanding and communication breakdown as members from different cultural backgrounds transfer their first-language norms and communicative practices into second-language interactions (Al-Sallal, 2024). Every culture has its way of doing refusals, which may cause misinterpretations towards understanding each other's cultural norms through indicators of one being rude, dishonest, unfriendly or impolite (Sartika et al., 2020). According to Yatim (2021), this example can be seen in the Malay culture in regard to the value of positive spirit. This further explains that the practice of a good virtue encourages the use of appropriate words and expression of any messages in a good manner. Therefore, if the language used is inappropriate or unpleasant for listeners, then the speaker is considered rude (Azman et al., 2020).

However, since making refusal is face-threatening which can affect one's relations no matter how close or distant ones' social distance could have with another interlocutors (Nurul, 2015; Rajchert et al., 2019) such an act appears to be contradictory to the Malay culture, and thus it is considered as an offensive act. When making refusals, most Malays are found to be less direct (Kamal & Ariffin, 2023). As for the rest of the leading cultural groups which are the Chinese and Indians, being direct in communication is their preferred way when making refusals (Saad et al., 2020). Generally, this shows that expressing refusals indirectly by the three leading cultures in Malaysia aims to avoid any potential misunderstanding when making refusals (Kuang, 2009). This reflects the notion of how "refusals can be culturally sensitive; hence, may affect cultural communication" (Al-Sallal & Ahmed, 2022). Therefore, this suggests that different interaction styles

may lead to miscommunication amongst members of different cultural groups.

To further understand the act of refusal in Malaysian culture, it can be explored and understood from Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions (2011). There are six important dimensions involved which are power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation versus short-term orientation and indulgence versus restraint.

From Hofstede's recent cultural dimension score, Malaysia is a collectivistic country, whereby refusals are mostly used with appropriate observation of manners since any offensive acts may affect group harmony. Therefore, the act of saying 'no' is more crucial than the answer to refusal itself since the misleading refusal is potentially offending the interlocutors (Maryam & Wu, 2012). Such condition can cause a speaker to impair his relation with the listener within a social interaction that may threaten the listener's face from the refusal (Krulatz & Dixon, 2020). However, it is a norm that individuals encounter refusals either directly or indirectly throughout their lives, so this act is hardly avoided (Bangun & Stevani, 2020). Besides, individuals have different interactional styles, implying that different cultures perform refusals by using their respective ways and thus reflecting the types of manners and words used. Therefore, this study aims to address these research questions:

1) What are the refusal strategies used by the Malays, Chinese and Indians in refusing invitations in Malaysia?
2) How do the Malays, Chinese and Indians in Malaysia perform refusals to invitations from the perspectives of cultural values and practices?

2. Literature Review

This section discusses the importance of the relation between language use and refusal across cultures.

2.1 Language and Speech Act of Refusal across Malaysian Cultures

Language is one of the significant means for communication, carrying various functions. One of the functions of using language is to be informative (Leech, 1974 as cited in Leony & Hamzah, 2019), which has set its ultimate use to assist speakers in disseminating messages and feelings to one another. In conveying and interpreting one's messages, language is utilised further to fulfil any particular communicative purposes, such as in apologising, requesting, questioning and many more. Language can also be expressed through actions (Yule, 1994) such as a speech act (Elbah, 2022). Doing a refusal is marked as one of the habitual speech acts to be experienced by individuals in their daily conversations (Dwiana et al., 2021). Refusal situations can occur at all levels of people from various cultures. For example, there will be a time when it leaves no choice for people to fulfil a request coming from a superior, celebrate your best friend's birthday party and other refusal occasions. This leads to using language in various ways to reject people for a certain occasion.

In Western culture, refusal is comfortably done to reject a certain occasion. Expressing a direct 'no' or a negative willingness like 'I cannot come' is easily uttered. Unlike Malaysian culture, the word 'no' usually indicates impoliteness or rudeness. For instance, German native speakers use direct negative willingness the most when refusing an invitation as compared to Malay native speakers (Mohd Jalis et al., 2019). A similar condition was discovered in a study by Al-Sallal & Ahmed (2022), whereby English native speakers were inclined to use direct refusals to requests, as compared to the Bahrainis and Indians, who were comfortable in using indirect strategies.

In Malaysia, expressing a direct 'no' is interpreted differently due to the cultural diversity. Even though Malaysia is known to be an indirect society, the different cultural groups, such as the Malays, Chinese and Indians, present various ways to perform refusals. Qadi (2021) mentioned that every culture had its creative ways of performing refusals. Therefore, when multicultural groups engage in a single social interaction, the comprehension of the refusals made by the speaker may be interpreted differently by the listeners. Consequently, it can easily lead to misinterpretations of the refusals made by different cultural group members.

Malaysia is dominantly led by three cultures: the Malay, Chinese and Indian. Culture can be understood as shared behaviours, values and social norms practised in daily routines. Since different cultures project different understandings in interpreting certain messages, the interactional styles also differ. If one culture fails to understand another culture's ways of using language, miscommunication is likely to happen more often in an interaction. Therefore, an intercultural understanding is indeed a crucial concern which should be upheld as it reflects "people's ability to understand, appreciate and be open to various aspects and cultural forms and social diversity" (Oxford & Gkonou, 2018).

2.2 Past Studies and Research Gaps in Refusal

Being the leading cultural group in Malaysia, the Malays are generally regarded as an indirect group since they are not used to doing direct refusal as compared to the Chinese and Indians. Most studies found that the Malays prefer to employ indirectness in their refusals, especially when giving reasons and apologising (Mohd Jalis et al., 2019; Raslie & Azizan, 2018; Saad et al., 2020; Sattar, Che Lah & Raja Suleiman, 2011; Amiruddin & Salleh, 2016). While these studies had mostly established general patterns of indirectness in making refusals amongst Malays, a limited insight remains from the other cultural groups in Malaysia, such as the Chinese and Indians. Also, the refusal strategies are restricted to understand how they operate in more specific interactional contexts or domains, such as academic settings or amongst different age groups.

Despite the limited studies that involved the Chinese and Indians, most studies were done comparatively between the Malay culture and other cultures. For instance, a comparative study on refusal strategies used between the Malay ESL students and native English speakers in rejecting a request, whereby these two cultures, respectively, opted for indirect strategies, especially when using reasons, apologising

and making alternatives (Saad et al., 2018). The findings showed that native English speakers frequently used direct strategies as compared to the Malay ESL students. Another study compared refusal strategies used between the Malays and Germans. It showed how the latter cultural group dominated the usage of direct refusal strategies, using negative willingness and expressing direct 'no' as compared to the Malays (Mohd Jalis et al., 2019). Besides looking at how the Malay culture differs from other cultures in making refusals, there are some refusal studies which compared the Western and Asian cultures. For instance, Guo (2012) observed that despite the Western and Chinese cultures used apologies, reasons and suggestions in their refusals, Americans preferred to be direct in making refusals more often than the Chinese. The indirectness in refusal presented by the Chinese from Guo's study was consistent with Zhang (2022). The research observed that the Chinese undergraduates particularly preferred to use reasons, apologising and providing alternatives when they made refusals. Regardless of the differences in preference for being indirect when refusing in Asian culture, the Western culture is not always in favour of being direct when making refusals. This is then incorporated into the important value of avoiding humiliation since the act of refusal is a face-threatening act, showcasing offensive manners. Therefore, individuals from two different culturesconsider maintaining one's face to be the top priority, which needs to be taken care of (Brown & Levinson, 1987, as cited in Yang, 2021).

From the studies discussed above, it can be seen that the studies mostly tackled at categorising the directness and indirectness of the refusal strategies used, rather than a thorough discussion which further looks at cultural differences. Furthermore, minimal attention is given to how cultural factors or other sociological factors of different cultures influence the choice of refusal strategies used .

Since Malaysian culture is represented by the three leading cultural groups, which are the Malays, Chinese and Indians, this paper explores further on the refusal strategies used by those leading cultural groups based on refusal taxonomies by Beebe et al. (1990). Following this, an in-depth discussion was pursued to have better insights into the choice of refusal strategies used from the perspective of each culture based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (2011). Further elaboration on these frameworks is provided in the methodology section.

2.3 Hofstede's (2011) Cultural Dimension in Refusals

Refusals are inherently a challenging, face-threatening act to navigate, which significantly requires culture-specific knowledge and a high level of pragmatic competence to sustain interpersonal relations and promote social harmony (Tak & Lyuh, 2024). This further explains the need to understand how refusals are done differently due to cultural variations. Therefore, Hofstede's (2011) Cultural Dimensions Theory is one of the influential frameworks in understanding such cultural differences.

Based on theory, Hofstede (2011) identified six cultural dimensions which influenced one's social behaviour. These are power distance, individualism vs collectivism, masculinity vs femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation and indulgence vs restraint (Table 3). These cultural values stand as important factors in developing behaviours, especially in collectivist societies like Malaysia (Hofstede, 2020). Malaysians prefer to be indirect in their communication because a collectivist society is more likely to showcase an introverted and reserved behaviour, whereby being humble and polite are significant in social interactions (Ng & Suner, 2024).

Several studies incorporated Hofstede's framework to explain variations in refusal strategies across cultures. For instance, Saad et al. (2020) discovered a collectivist culture portrayed by Malay Speakers of English (MSE) in refusing a request, whereby the inclusion of family-related reasons reflects Eastern values, showing how family is pivotal when making refusals, as noted by Omar (2002). She further explains that the Malay culture centralises the group over the individual, and people are expected to care for their extended family before themselves. This aligns with collectivist values. Hofstede (2011) stated so in one of his cultural dimensions, whereby loyalty to the group is more valuable than individual needs.

Another study by Al-Shboul et al. (2012) compared Jordanian and Malay cultures belonging to a collectivist society with a preference for making refusals. Based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions, the Jordanians' preferred indirect refusal strategies across all social statuses may reflect a higher level of power distance and collectivism in Jordanian culture. Such indirectness further helps to preserve social harmony and avoid confrontation, which is valued in the collectivist societies and cultures, whereby hierarchical relations are emphasised. Conversely, the Malay participants' choice for direct refusal strategies when addressing individuals of equal or higher status may suggest a relatively lower power distance in specific contexts and a more pragmatic or task-oriented communication style. This directness could also resemble a shift towards more individualistic tendencies in professional or peer-level interactions within Malaysian society.

Preference in making refusals from the Malaysian cultural studies shows an indirect manner of expressing 'no', especially from the Malays and Indians, as compared to Chinese. Most cross-cultural studies did not incorporate Hofstede's cultural values as part of understanding how refusals were done. However, the general observation on Malaysian culture indicates how refusal is done indirectly, and such a value is crucially aligned with Hofstede's values on power distance and collectivism. According to Hofstede's cultural insights, power distance and collectivism scores are high, representing a social hierarchy and group-oriented values. These values have significantly shaped characteristics that are expected to influence the preference for indirectness, use of apologies and avoidance of open disagreement in refusal situations, especially amongst Malays, the dominant cultural group. Even so, given Malaysia's multicultural setting, differences may arise amongst other cultural groups, offering a rich context for further analysis.

As mentioned previously, while Hofstede's cultural dimensions have been widely used to comprehend a general communicative behaviour, relatively few studies had specifically applied them to analyse the refusal strategies in Malaysia's multilingual and multiethnic contexts . This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how Hofstede's dimensions manifest in the refusal strategies employed by Malaysian

participants across different cultural groups.

3. Methodology

This section details the methodological procedures and instruments employed to facilitate data collection.

3.1 Research Design and Instruments

This study employed a qualitative research design by using Oral Discourse Completion Task (ODCT) and followed by in-depth interviews to ensure rich and specific contextual data. Although the primary research design was qualitative, a minor quantitative component was incorporated to support the presentation of findings derived from the verbatim data. Initially, the use of Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was criticised in questioning its effectiveness in analysing the structure of natural interactions of certain studies (as cited by Golato, 2003 in Demirkol, 2019). Therefore, the idea of role playing was included in this study, modifying its mode to an oral form of executing the DCT, which resulted in ODCT. The incorporation of role play enabled the participants to produce rich data in pragmatics and sociolinguistic discourses, such as power, social distance and the level of imposition (Kasper, 2000). The ODCT **boosts** face validity by showcasing realistic refusal scenarios that reflected the participants' everyday university experiences. The participants were more likely to perceive the tasks as authentic, which supported more genuine and spontaneous responses. In addition, language validity was ensured by permitting participants to respond in the language(s) they preferred and were natural to them, which were Malay, Cantonese/Hokkien/Mandarin, or Tamil. Therefore, this can avoid linguistic constraints that could limit their expression or accuracy in pragmatic performance. As for construct validity of the instruments, it was established through appropriate alignment with theoretical concepts, such as Refusal Taxonomies (Beebe et al., 1990), Model of Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and Cultural Dimension Theory (Hofstede, 2011). Therefore, in ODCT the content validity was supported through the formation of six refusal scenarios that comprehensively reflected a range of common interactional situations encountered by higher education students (Table 1.0). The tasks were reviewed by two subject experts to confirm their relevance and appropriateness for the study goals.

To have a better understanding of the relation between cultural influence and refusal strategies from ODCT, this was then assisted by the in-depth interview, which was conducted one-on-one, enhancing dependability by reducing social influence and allowing for deeper, more personalised insights. The interview helps to generate wider data due to its nature in establishing interaction between the interviewer and interviewee as well as interpreting perceptions from the participant's knowledge. This was necessary as interaction, comprehension and interpretation of participants' perceptions from the interview were crucial aspects in qualitative research (Shoozan & Mohamad, 2024). Besides, the interview strengthened comprehensive responses, which might help to recognise subtle distinctions and potential contradictions, based on the participant's experiences, feelings and opinions (Mack et al., 2005).

To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, besides giving full autonomy in choosing the language of expression, no time restrictions were imposed on the participants. This flexibility enabled more detailed and culturally grounded responses, enriching both the pragmatic and sociolinguistic dimensions of data. The combination of ODCT and interviews offered methodological triangulation, reinforcing the robustness of findings and contributing to a holistic understanding of refusal strategies amongst multilingual speakers.

3.2 Participants and Refusal Situations

A total of 48 participants from a Malaysian higher education institution were selected for this study by using purposive sampling. This non-probability sampling technique was employed to ensure participants had met specific characteristics relevant to the study objectives. The inclusion criteria required participants to be Malaysian undergraduates aged between 19 and 25 years, who had resided in Malaysia for a minimum of 10 years, ensuring adequate cultural exposure and linguistic familiarity. Participants were also required to be fluent in English and Malay to participate in the tasks involving pragmatic language use. The exclusion criteria ruled out students who had lived abroad for extended periods (over six months) or those with formal education outside Malaysia, as such experiences may influence their sociopragmatic competence. The sample was balanced in terms of gender and cultural representation, comprising eight males and eight females from each cultural group under study. To approach the participants ethically, this study obtained the approval from the university's research ethic board in accordance with Personal Data Protection Act 2010 (PDPA). Table 1 provides a summary of the refusal situations examined in the study, including the roles of speakers and hearers in each interactional scenario.

Table 1. Summary of refusal situations

No.	Situation (invitation)	Speaker's status	Hearer's status	Power	Distance
1	A wedding	Best friend	Best friend	Equal	Close
2	A convocation	Senior	Junior	Equal	Familiar
3	A society's club annual grand dinner	Senior	Junior	Equal	Distant
4	Research participant	Lecturer	Student	Higher	Close
5	Academic talk	Lecturer	Student	Higher	Familiar
6	Seminar	Programme coordinator	Student	Higher	Distant

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

Table 1 illustrates the situation whereby participants who played a role for a speaker's status needed to refuse a wedding invitation for the first situation from his best friend. The same pattern was applied to the rest of the situations. When the participants verbally refused, the

responses were recorded and all recordings were transcribed later. From the transcribed verbatim data, findings were analysed based on the Refusal Taxonomies by Beebe et al. (1990). There were three main refusal strategies under this framework which were direct, indirect and adjunct to refusals. Each of these three refusal strategies had further sub-categories. Table 2 displays the complete framework of refusal strategies for each category in the following section.

Table 2. Refusal taxonomies (Beebe et al., 1990)

No.	Refusal Strategies
	INDIRECT
1.	Statement of regret
2.	Wish
3.	Excuse, reason and explanation
4.	Statement of alternative
5.	Set condition for future or past acceptance
6.	Promise or future acceptance
7.	Statement of principle
8.	Statement of philosophy
9.	Attempt to dissuade interlocutors
	i. Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester
	ii. Guilt trip
	iii. Criticise the request/requester (statement of negative feeling or opinion; insult/attack)
	iv. Request for help, empathy and assistance by dropping or holding the request
	v. Let interlocutor off the hook
	vi. Self-defense
10.	Acceptance that functions as a refusal
	i. Unspecific or indefinite reply
	ii. Lack of enthusiasm
11.	Avoidance (Verbal)
	i. Topic switch
	ii. Joke
	iii. Repetition
	iv. Postponement
	v. Hedge
DIRECT	
1.	Use performative verbs
2.	Non-performative statement
	i. No
	ii. Negative willingness/ability
ADJUNCTS TO REFUSAL	
1.	Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement
2.	Statement of empathy
3.	Pause/fillers
4.	Gratitude/Appreciation

In analysing the verbatim data from the cultural perspectives, the theoretical framework of Cultural Dimension by Hofstede (2011) was used. In this framework, six important dimensions were involved, which could be referred to in Table 3.

Table 3. Cultural Dimension Hofstede (2011)

No.	Cultural dimensions
1	Power Distance: related to the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality
2	Uncertainty Avoidance: related to the level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future
3	Individualism versus Collectivism: related to the integration of individuals into primary groups
4	Masculinity versus Femininity: related to the division of emotional roles between women and men
5	Long Term versus Short Term Orientation: related to the choice of focus for people's efforts: the future or present and past.
6	Indulgence versus Restraint: related to the gratification versus control of basic human desires related to enjoying life

3.3.1 The Role of English in Doing Refusal in Malaysia

During the data collection process, the participants predominantly employed English as the primary linguistic medium for expressing refusals. Instances of code-switching were infrequent, limited to the use of the particle 'lah' and brief phrases in Bahasa Melayu. For example, a refusal response was recorded as, *'I cannot go. Lagipun, I sibuk lah. Sorry!'* To ensure data consistency, all non-English linguistic elements were translated and integrated into complete English sentences, resulting in *'I cannot go. Besides, I'm busy. Sorry!'*

The participants' preference for English, despite their diverse mother tongues, was attributed to their educational environment, which was characterised by a dominant English-language setting. Consequently, English was the preferred mode of communication in their daily interactions, particularly when engaging with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, surpassing the use of Bahasa Melayu and other languages.

The consistent use of English throughout the data collection facilitated the data analysis, particularly in the categorisation of refusal strategies. Table 4 presents the significant findings pertaining to the refusal strategies employed by the Malay, Chinese and Indian participants in response to invitations.

4. Findings

This section provides significant data obtained from the Oral Discourse Completion Task (ODCT) in regard to the use of refusal strategies based on Beebe's et al. (1990) by each leading cultural groups in Malaysia.

4.1 Refusal Strategies by the Three Leading Cultures in Malaysia

To have a holistic view on refusal strategies used by each group, Table 4 summarises the refusal strategies used by the Malays, Chinese and Indian. This section discusses the first research question which further lists the preference of doing refusal from the three leading cultures.

Table 4. Findings of refusal strategies used by the three leading cultures

Refusal Strategies/Cultural Group		**Malay**		**Chinese**		**Indian**		**Total**
		Frequency (N) / Percentage (%)						
		N	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	
Direct	Negative willingness (NW)	46	30.3	53	34.9	53	34.9	152
Indirect	Apologise (AP)	56	35.2	52	32.7	51	32.1	159
	Excuse or reason (ER)	66	27.4	86	35.7	89	36.9	241
	Avoidance (AC)	36	38.7	24	25.8	33	35.5	93
Adjunct to refusal	Gratitude/appreciation (GA)	30	53.6	17	30.4	9	16.1	56

The findings of this study revealed a nuanced understanding of refusal strategies amongst the three major cultural groups in Malaysia—Malays, Chinese and Indian. The data showed distinct patterns that reflected cultural norms and values. The Malays predominantly used indirect strategies, such as apologising (35.2%) and gratitude (53.6%), aligning with their cultural emphasis on politeness and harmony. Interestingly, the Malays also demonstrated the highest frequency in using hedging phrases (e.g., "I don't think") as a form of verbal avoidance (38.7%). These findings indicated that the Malay community's preference for face-saving mechanisms, rooted in their collectivist cultural orientation.

The Chinese and Indian participants showed similar tendencies towards indirect strategies, but with significant differences in style and structure. Both groups frequently provided reasons or excuses, with Indians leading slightly (36.9%) as compared to the Chinese (35.7%). However, the Chinese refusals were concise and often included compensatory actions like sending money or gifts. In contrast, Indian responses were markedly verbose, reflecting a strong emphasis on justifying refusals and addressing relational dynamics, especially with close interlocutors.

These variations in refusal strategies underscored the cultural influence in communication styles. While direct refusals were less common across all groups, the Chinese and Indians were more likely to use negative willingness statements (e.g., "I cannot come"), with both groups recording the highest frequency (34.9%) as compared to the Malays (30.3%).

Overall, results highlighted the interplay of cultural norms and communication strategies in shaping how refusals were articulated, particularly in the context of invitations, whereby social harmony and relational considerations were pivotal. Table 5 shows the sample of refusal strategies elicited by participants from each group.

4.2 Doing Refusal from the Perspective of Malaysian Cultures

This section provides thorough findings of the second research question, which centralises the act of doing refusal from the landscape of different cultures.

4.2.1 Refusal in the Malay Culture

The Malay culture has always upheld the strong value of *adab* and *budi* (virtue or politeness), which connotes practising a righteous manner. To note further, an ethical individual is seen as a man of culture (*berbudi bahasa)* and polite (Che Mahzan, 2019, as cited in Ramli, 2013). From the Malay culture's perspective, members need to portray and behave appropriately and be cautious when speaking to one another. Using a harsh word or simply being offensive is usually considered rude or impolite. Therefore, it is common to see the Malays apologise and often give reasons for impoliteness. Reflecting from high uncertainty avoidance, the Malays avoid doing direct refusals or blunt statements since it may create potential and undesirable conflict and ambiguity. By using apologies, reasons and expressions of appreciation, individuals minimise the risk of disrupting social harmony and maintaining a sense of stability. The Malays are also observed to express appreciation and uncertainty when stating the reasons for not attending an invitation. Those two strategies are commonly employed when the refusals are made from those with high social status and equal social distance, for example, a best friend and a close lecturer. Integrating from Hofstede's cultural dimension, Malaysia is a high-power distance culture, which is usually associated with a hierarchical society, providing a clear gap between different social statuses. Then this encourages the Malays to always

show respect through expressing gratitude or appreciation and mindfulness when engaging with superior individuals.

Even though gratitude is sometimes seen as 'culturally constructed as forms of return' (Noor et al., 2018), in the scope of doing refusals, it is seen as a withdrawal of an invitation, while gratitude becomes one of the softeners to minimise the offense made from the refusals. Meanwhile, the use of hedges by the Malays reflects a very soft 'refusal'. *'I don't think', 'perhaps'* or '*maybe'* are preferred to be tagged along with apologising and explaining. Lakoff 1975) was a pioneer in suggesting the use of hedges as a word or phrase used with a vague meaning, further explaining the functions of hedges in expressing uncertain meanings and a symbol of insecurities (Lakoff, 1975, as cited in Sommurland, 2017). However, in the Malay culture, hedges do not provide an unclear message. When making a refusal, hedges reflect an act of saying 'no' with minimal risk of offending an interlocutor. Aligning with the collectivism dimension, the Malays are strongly rooted in preserving social harmony, which further explains their consistency in making indirect refusals.

4.2.2 Refusal in the Chinese Culture

From the obtained findings, there were not many significant gaps between the Chinese and Malays in terms of refusal styles. However, from the interview session with Chinese participants, they had particular styles in making refusals to invitations. The majority of Chinese participants performed refusals quite easily and directly as compared to Malay and Indian participants. The frequent refusal responses *'I cannot go', 'I cannot attend',* and *'I'm busy'* were elicited together with the expression of apologies and supported with some reasons, which could be seen from this evidence, *'I'm sorry, I cannot attend because I'm busy'.* This observation aligned with Kuang's (2009) discovery on the Chinese ways of interacting directly. While traditional Chinese culture is collectivist, there is a growing influence of individualism, leading to a greater comfort with directness in certain contexts in the present Malaysia's Chinese society . It explains the frequent use of apologies and reasons within the same refusal, as it demonstrates the continued importance of maintaining harmony. However, the Chinese still incorporate indirectness in refusals, as none of the Chinese participants elicited a flat 'no'. Therefore, this can be said that the Chinese culture still instills collectivistic values when doing refusals. The findings indicated that the refusals made were much shorter than the Malays and Indians, and a refusal was not taken as a burden to be done. They were comfortable to state their absence from attending the invitations, even with their close ones, especially with a best friend or a close lecturer. For example, the consistent pattern discovered when refusing a brother's best friend's wedding invitation is the expression of regret, followed by the negative willingness and reason *('I'm so sorry I cannot come because of work').* This condition does not signify how the Chinese simply refuse without considering the offense made to their interlocutors. The nature of Chinese refusals and their ease in declining invitations, even from close persons, presents a lower level of uncertainty avoidance as compared to cultures that heavily rely on elaborate indirectness. They are comfortable with a certain degree of directness, as long as it is accompanied by polite markers. Similar to Malays and Indians, the Chinese do not perform refusal, which can seriously damage the interlocutor's face. In some situations, instead of providing an apology or a reason, the Chinese compensate through wedding money or a gift and express compliments to excuse their absence. Such strategies are obtained due to the reflection of using compensation in the Chinese norms, serving as a token of regret for the inability to fulfil the invitation.

4.2.3 Indian Culture

In Indian culture, they prefer lengthy explanations and apologies more than the Malays and Chinese. The pattern of saying 'no' by the Indians is much more similar to that of the Malays than the Chinese. Apology and reason are the prior refusal strategies employed by the Indians, along with making a promise or future acceptance. Making a promise usually stands as a form of obligation for the individuals who made it, which must be fulfiled (Molina, 2023). Yet, in this study, the Indians used promise rather as a future acceptance in another time. For instance, a refusal response like *'maybe I would join for next annual dinner'.* This strategy enlightens the idea that the speaker does not directly and entirely refuse to fulfil the invitation made. Besides, it also implies that the speaker still shows his or her interest in such an invitation. From the findings, most Indian participants admitted that making a refusal is always hard, especially to the close ones and despite having particular reasons for it. From the responses, they frequently apologised and gave more than one reason which caused them their inability to fulfil the invitations. From Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory, the ways Indians refused reflected on high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance. The detailed explanations and promises served to mitigate the potential face threat and demonstrated deference. Applying these strategies could secure better social harmony between interlocutors. As for high uncertainty avoidance, maintaining an open possibility for future involvement mitigated the uncertainty and potential discord that a firm refusal might generate. This results in a lengthy refusal through apologies and reasons.

Table 5 provides some samples of elicited responses from different cultures when refusing invitations to a best friend's wedding.

Table 5. Samples of refusal strategies elicited by participants of different cultures

Participant	**Responses**	**Situation**
Female Chinese **1** (FC1)	*I'm sorry* (AP) *I cannot make it, but I send you the money. I'm so sorry I cannot come* (NW) *because of work. I hope you understand.*	Rejecting to a best friend's wedding.
Female Malay 5 (FM5)	*I'm so sorry* (AP) *Leeya but I don't think* (AC) *I can make it to your brother's wedding on Saturday because I have to attend the 'KPP ceramah' (an academic talk) this Saturday for me totake the driving license with my mom and my sister*I so *I can't make it*(NW). *Please send my wishes to him.*	
Female Indian 8 (FI8)	*I'm sorry* (AP) *that I can't make it to your brother's wedding on Saturday because I have my family occasion that I can't avoid*I.	

4.3 Indirectness of Refusals between Different Cultures in Malaysia

Malaysian culture employs an act of indirectness in certain communicative purposes, particularly when requesting, suggesting and negotiating a certain matter. Similarly, in most Asian communities, indirectness strategies are centralised to one of the common refusal strategies employed in Asian culture (Raslie & Azizan, 2018). The ways of saying 'no' to an interlocutor are usually 'soft' through the appropriate words used with the right tone. Therefore, most of the time, incorporating indirectness eventually instills politeness in communication to minimise the possibility of offending other people, especially when receiving a flat 'no' in any refusals. Politeness is then seen as a presupposition required in communication (Li, 2016). Despite having reasons provided along with the refusal, the acceptance of the refusal interpreted by the hearers is still potentially negative, and thus appropriate strategies are highly in need to minimise damage done from the refusals made. The variety of manners of saying 'no' from different leading cultures in Malaysia reflects some cultural dimensions as outlined by Hofstede (2011).

The study generally showed how Malaysians were indirect in refusing invitations. However, differences were discovered in terms of the saying 'no' manner and their preferences in refusal strategies in the Malay, Chinese and Indian groups. In one's daily life routine, refusal is executed either in a minimal imposition or rather a great one. This is because the refusal complexity is essentially determined by their status as face-threatening acts (FTAs) that increase the probability of a positive or negative face interlocutor (Al-Sallal, 2024).

The same condition was observed in this study. In conveying direct refusal, the Chinese were found to be very comfortable in expressing the refusal through direct negative willingness. It showed that they directly decided on the inability to fulfil the invitations and the length of refusal responses. This finding was opposite to a study by Guo (2012) as it was observed that the Chinese frequently used indirect strategies by apologising and giving reasons, and thus elucidated that the variation could be partially explained by the individualism and collectivism dimensions. Although Chinese culture is traditionally collectivist, increasing exposure to Western individualistic values may lead to a greater acceptance of direct communication in certain contexts. However, the use of apologies and compensation, as observed, still aligned with the collectivist emphasis in maintaining harmony.

Even though the Indians shared the same frequency of employing such a strategy, they would rather elicit a lengthy response for each situation. The Chinese often initiated refusals by apologising and offering a short excuse, coupled with additional compensation. Sometimes, there was no excuse given at all as illustrated by this response of refusing a convocation invitation by a close senior, '*I'm sorry, I can't make it*. *Congrats on your graduation la*'. Throughout the study, it could be gathered that despite the Chinese using fewer words when making a refusal, they made it clear to the interlocutors. Unlike the Indians, the responses to making reasons were longer than the Malays. Also, they liked to address each interlocutor with their respective titles. This observation was parallel to the power distance dimension proposed by Hofstede (2011), whereby speakers were encouraged to be formal and use titles when addressing their interlocutors. By using the same refusal situation for Chinese participants, a sample of refusal by one of the Indian participants was as follows,

> "*Hi brother. I heard that you are inviting me for your convocation. So I just want to say this that I don't think I can make it to your convocation because I was a bit like so…seemed to attend to your convocation because I felt like, I was supposed to graduate together with you even though I did not manage to pass certain subjects. So I feel shame to come to your convocation ceremony, so sorry."*
>
> (An excerpt from one of the transcribed interviews with Indian Participant 3, Situation 2)

Besides that, the Indian participant also expressed his guilt for not attending the convocation invited by his close senior, contributing to a lengthy refusal. This was similar to the Malay culture that preferred to express indirectness in refusal. The common strategies employed by the Malays were when apologising and giving excuses (Al-Sallal & Ahmed, 2022; Mohd Jalis et al., 2019; Saad et al., 2020), similar to the other two cultural groups. However, the indirectness conveyed by the Malays expressed positive remarks, such as compliments or gratitude and used hedges more than the other cultural groups. The expression of gratitude was frequently communicated by the Malays when refusing an invitation. The use of hedges, such as *'I don't think'* and *'I think'* was embedded as well in making refusals. The sample of refusal to the same situation was as follows:

> '*Thank you for inviting me. I may not be able to come as I may have duty on convocation*.'
>
> (An excerpt from one of the transcribed interviews with Malay Participant 6, Situation 2)

The Malays' refusals use uncertain phrases to convey indirectness quite often and more than the Chinese and Indians. The refusals made were lengthy but less elaborate than the Indians' because the former cultural group tended to be equipped with a single explanation given along with an apology, gratitude and hedging phrases. Therefore, the Malays were selective in using lengthy explanations only in some situations.

5. Discussion

This section provides an indepth discussion on the use of refusal strategies by the three leading cultural groups in Malaysia.

5.1 Interpreting Refusals in Malaysian Culture through Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

The findings of this study highlighted the nuanced interplay between cultural norms and communication strategies in refusal acts, particularly in the context of invitations. The use of Hofstede's cultural dimensions provided a valuable theoretical lens to understand

these cultural variations, while practical implications underscored the importance of intercultural competence in Malaysia's diverse society.

Hofstede's dimensions of collectivism and power distance were pivotal in explaining the refusal strategies employed by the three cultural groups. Malaysia's collectivist culture emphasized in maintaining harmony and prioritising group interests, which influenced the preference for indirect refusal strategies. Amongst the Malays, for instance, the frequent use of gratitude and hedging reflected a strong commitment to preserve interpersonal relations and avoid face-threatening acts. Similarly, the high-power distance in Malaysian society highlighted the importance of respecting hierarchical relations, which was evident in the respectful and softened refusals directed at interlocutors with higher status.

The Chinese participants displayed a pragmatic approach to refusals, combining directness with culturally sensitive strategies. While prior studies (Guo, 2012) emphasised a stronger reliance on indirect strategies amongst Chinese speakers, this study found that Chinese participants in Malaysia often employed concise refusals paired with compensatory actions, such as offering gifts or money. These strategies reflected a balance between clarity and maintaining relational harmony, demonstrating adaptability within Malaysia's multicultural context.

The Indian participants stood out for their verbosity and emotional engagement in refusal strategies. Their responses were marked by repeated apologies, detailed explanations and future-oriented promises ("Maybe next time"). This approach reflected a cultural inclination towards relational depth and a heightened sense of obligation to justify refusals thoroughly, especially in interactions with close acquaintances. The frequent use of promises as partial refusals also highlighted their commitment to preserve relational ties while soften the impact of their decisions.

The findings underscored the importance of intercultural competence in navigating refusal acts in multicultural settings. Differences in refusal strategies—such as the Malays' emphasis on indirectness, Chinese's pragmatic yet concise responses, and Indians' elaborate explanations—can lead to misinterpretations if not understood within their cultural contexts. For instance, direct refusals by Chinese speakers might be perceived as impolite by the Malays or Indians, while verbose refusals by Indian speakers could be seen as excessive by others. Awareness of these cultural variations can foster mutual understanding and reduce the risk of conflict in diverse interactions.

The practical implications of this study are significant for education, workplace communication, and community engagement. It should be understood that acknowledging and educating on the appropriateness of doing refusal across different cultures can be challenging. This is because interpreting politeness and indirect refusals varies across cultures. Factors like cultural beliefs, practices and languages are influential towards understanding the concept of doing refusals with manners. Therefore, some initiatives can be employed by tackling from a lower level of education like school students and then scaled to higher education students. For instance, training programmes can be designed to enhance intercultural communication skills which incorporate insights from the present study to address the nuances of refusal strategies. Role-playing exercises and case studies, for example, can help individuals practise culturally sensitive ways of refusing invitations, equipping them with strategies to navigate face-threatening acts while maintaining positive relations. Additionally, policymakers and organisational leaders can laverage these insights to design communication protocols that are inclusive and sensitive to cultural diversity.

In summary, to state the Malaysians' refusal styles to invitation, understanding from the concept of Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory (2011) cultural value, Malaysia lies in a collectivist culture, whereby its overtness of language expression commonly happens indirectly. Most Malaysians would always take safe precautions whenever they want to express something. In the case of doing refusals, it can be observed that multi-refusal strategies are used, combining direct, indirect and adjunct to refusal strategies when doing refusals to invitations. For this matter, it is very uncommon to see refusal done with a very simple response or just a mere 'no' amongst Malaysians, but rather an explanation of their situations towards the invitation will be given. Apart from using implicit language expression in conveying refusals, Malaysia is a collectivist society which encourages its members to always feel and become inclusive. Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimension on collectivism further highlights that causing offense to the other members contributes to an embarrassment and a face loss. This matter further explains that refusals are done in a very soft manner by being cautious in words and not too direct.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study possess significant implications for English language communication, pedagogy and learning, particularly within the diverse educational landscape of Malaysia. Given Malaysia is recognised as a multicultural composition, individuals are frequently exposed to variations in cultural practices, encompassing linguistic, situational and general lifestyle differences. The principal cultural groups in Malaysia exhibit distinct patterns in the utilisation of refusal strategies within English communication. Specifically, the Malay participant'' prevalent use of gratitude and hedging underscores the necessity for pedagogical strategies that mitigate face-threatening acts, emphasising the role of language in fostering social harmony. Conversely, the pragmatic balance of directness and compensatory actions observed amongst Chinese participants highlights the importance of learners comprehending how cultural sensitivity integrates with clear communication, particularly in contexts, whereby conciseness is valued. In contrast, the verbose and emotionally engaged refusal style of Indian participants necessitates the inclusion of instruction on managing emotional expression and providing detailed justifications in English communication. Consequently, educators must integrate culturally sensitive pedagogical approaches, focusing on both linguistic proficiency and pragmatic awareness, to equip students with the skills required for effective and respectful communication in multicultural

settings. Such approaches can be incorporated as part of teaching and learning sessions within classrooms, aiming at practising English as the main language of communication.

Despite the inherent diversity, all members of society should value and celebrate the existing cultural differences. Variations in refusal expressions invariably contribute to divergent interpretations; however, pragmatic knowledge, acquired through cultural understanding, can minimise misinterpretations and promote receptiveness to diverse interactional styles. Therefore, the comprehension of refusal strategies within different cultures, as illuminated by this study, contributes to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals related to cultural diversity. This facilitates the recognition of cultural uniqueness, thereby mitigating discriminatory or judgemental attitudes towards direct (perceived as rude or impolite) versus indirect (perceived as less rude or more polite) cultural expressions. Such understanding necessitates individual revision. Consequently, the key to achieving harmonious refusals lies in mastering appropriate modes of expression in various situations.

The primary limitations of this study pertain to the transcription process and the employed instruments. The Oral Discourse Completion Task (ODCT) and interviews generated substantial verbatim data, posing considerable transcription challenges. Furthermore, the absence of a time constraint during interviews resulted in extended participant responses, significantly prolonging transcription time. To address these limitations in future research, enhancements in data collection tools and processes are recommended. For instance, utilising software such as Atlas.ti could streamline the transcription of extensive datasets, irrespective of participant numbers. Additionally, implementing a maximum time limit for interview responses could optimise data collection efficiency while maintaining focus.

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Authors' contributions

Nur Asyrani was responsible for data collection and the write-up of the Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, and Discussion sections. Dr. Nur Rasyidah contributed to data analysis, as well as the writing of the Discussion and Conclusion. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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