

CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON PUBLIC APOLOGIES AMONG MALAYSIAN PUBLIC FIGURES: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract. Public apologies by Malaysian public figure such as political leaders, celebrities, internet influencers, and entrepreneurs have been under consistent scrutiny on digital platforms such as X, Instagram, Threads, and TikTok where audiences actively evaluate their sincerity and cultural appropriateness. Although apology communication has been widely studied in Western contexts, there remains a lack of systematic understanding of how Malaysia's collectivist and high context cultural norms can shape apology strategies and audience interpretations. This gap limits the applicability of the existing image repair theories to non-Western societies. To address this issue, this systematic literature review (SLR) examines how cultural factors influence the framing, expression, and public reception of apologies among Malaysian public figures guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. The review analysed studies published between 2020 and 2025 from two databases; Google Scholar and SCOPUS that explore the intersection of culture, communication, and public image repair. Findings reveal that Malaysian public apologies emphasize moral responsibility, respect for hierarchy, and face saving. This reflects a harmony-oriented communication deeply rooted in the nation's multicultural identity. However, empirical integration across studies remains limited. The review also highlights the limitations of Western-centric models, such as Benoit's Image Repair Theory, and proposes incorporating culturally grounded perspectives such as normology. Overall, this synthesis helps understand intercultural and crisis communication by offering a culturally informed framework for understanding apology practices in Malaysia's sociocultural landscape.

Keywords: *public apology, cultural influence, Malaysian public figures, framing, communication, normology*

Introduction

In contemporary societies, public apologies have become a crucial tool for restoring trust, repairing relationships, and demonstrating accountability. A public apology is a formal acknowledgement of wrongdoing expressed to a wider audience, intended to convey feeling of remorse and help rebuild moral and social credibility (Parker, 2022; Taft, 2000). An affective public apology goes beyond simple statements of regret as they require a clear acceptance of responsibility, sincerity, and effort toward reconciliation (Bryson and MacCarthaigh, 2021; Rushdy, 2018). Scholars have argued that public apologies serve multiple social and moral functions, which include promoting forgiveness, healing victims, and rebuilding public confidence in leaders and institutions (McAlinden, 2021; Schumann and Dragotta, 2020). However, the effectiveness of such apologies is not considered universal because it depends on the cultural norms, social values, and communication styles (Cohen, 2020). In Malaysia's multicultural and collectivist context, the act of apologizing carries distinctive meanings linked to harmony, social order, and community relationships. Malaysian public

apologies are deeply rooted in cultural values that prioritize reconciliation, group cohesion, and mutual respect (Isagozawa and Fuji, 2023). Public figures often employ apology strategies that combine direct acknowledgement of one's fault with culturally sensitive communication practices such as humility, politeness, and empathy (Ismail et al., 2022). The combination of sincerity and subtlety reflects a cultural orientation toward settlement rather than confrontation, where maintaining social balance outweighs individual vindiction. Malaysians are more likely to apologize when responsibility is evident to preserve harmony in interpersonal, workplace, and public interactions (Isagozawa and Fuji, 2023).

In Malaysia's rapidly evolving media landscape, public apologies by politicians, celebrities, influencers, and corporate leaders have become increasingly visible and widely scrutinised. Such apologies typically arise from controversies, moral misconduct, or public backlash and serve as moments where trust, accountability, and reputation are renegotiated. research supports that apologies typically arise from controversies, moral misconduct, or public backlash and serve as moments where trust, accountability, and reputation are renegotiated. This aligned with Yang et al. (2025) that finds that apologies are most often issued in response to crises, controversies, moral misconduct, or public backlash. These events typically involve violations of social, ethical, or organizational norms, prompting demands for accountability and public response. In a society that values harmony and collective responsibility, apologies are not merely communicative acts of remorse but also reflections of deeper cultural and moral expectations (Rahim et al., 2023). In recent years, several high-profile apology cases in Malaysia have gained public attention through digital platforms such as X, Instagram, Thread and TikTok where public figures' statements are widely circulated and dissected by online audiences (Rahim et al., 2023; Anuar and Azmi, 2022). These platforms have transformed apologies into public performances of accountability, where audiences actively judge sincerity, tone, and emotional expression. The viral nature of these apologies often intensifies public discourse, prompting debates over whether the statements were genuine or strategically motivated. As a result, apology communication in Malaysia operates not only within interpersonal and cultural boundaries but also within a broader media ecology that shapes how remorse and responsibility are perceived. This shift underscores the intersection between culture, technology, and public morality in shaping apology dynamics.

Malaysia's multicultural identity, rooted in Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous traditions, shapes how public figures communicate remorse. In collectivist settings, harmony and respect for authority outweigh individual autonomy (Ting-Toomey, 2017; Hofstede, 2001), leading public figures to express humility, politeness, and moral restraint. Ting-Toomey (2017) Face-Negotiation Theory explains this preference for indirectness to preserve face and social equilibrium. Supporting this, recent studies show that Malaysian apology discourse employs soft linguistic strategies such as mitigators like 'kindly', 'please', flattery, and expressions of hope to ease confrontation and appeal to empathy (Taw-Turnbull, 2024; Al Afnan and Cruz-Rudio, 2023; Tanduk, 2023). Yet, research remains limited on how factors like gender, power distance, and the nature of the offence shape the effectiveness of these apologies. As Malaysia's digital media landscape evolves, understanding these cultural and contextual nuances becomes crucial for interpreting sincerity and accountability in public apologies across Southeast Asia. Previous Malaysian studies have often examined apologies through the lens of crisis communication or image repair strategies (Rahim et al., 2023; Anuar and

Azmi, 2022). Benoit (1995) Image Repair Theory (IRT) has traditionally guided such analyses, providing a foundational framework for understanding reputation management. However, this theory, rooted in Western individualism, may not adequately explain the dynamics of apologies in collectivist cultures where moral obligation and relational harmony are deeply valued. Recognising these limitations, recent research has adopted culturally grounded frameworks such as Normology and the Norm Dynamics Framework (Gelfand et al., 2023; Morris et al., 2015), which emphasise how social norms, moral obligations, and cultural expectations shape communicative behaviours and audience interpretations. Applying Normology within the context of public apologies enables a more nuanced understanding of how Malaysians perceive sincerity, respect, and moral accountability when public figures express remorse.

Despite these theoretical developments, Malaysian research on public apologies remains fragmented. There is no systematic literature review yet that consolidates how cultural values influence apology framing, audience interpretation, and sincerity assessments. Therefore, this review aims to consolidate and synthesise existing research on how cultural values shape Malaysian public apologies, identifying dominant themes, theoretical approaches, and research gaps between 2020 and 2025.

Materials and Methods

This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021) to ensure research transparency, replicability, and scientific rigour. Relevant studies were systematically identified, screened, and synthesised based on clear inclusion and exclusion criteria focusing on the influence of culture on public apologies in Malaysia. The PRISMA framework provided a structured and traceable process that reduced researcher bias and enhanced the reliability of article selection and synthesis. Although Scopus and Web of Science are widely recognised for their rigorous indexing standards, Google Scholar has been used as a main database as it was prioritised to ensure the inclusion of locally relevant and open-access materials that reflect Malaysia's cultural and contextual dimensions. The screening process was conducted independently and manually to ensure the selection of studies that align closely with the SLR objectives and to maintain consistency in evaluation. The screening process followed the four stages outlined in the PRISMA framework which are identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. During the identification stage, relevant studies were retrieved from selected databases. The screening stage involved the removal of duplicate records and the exclusion of studies based on title and abstract relevance, as well as paywalled or restricted-access articles. In the eligibility stage, full-text articles were evaluated to ensure alignment with the inclusion criteria. Finally, the inclusion stage consisted of selecting studies that met all quality and relevance standards.

Search strategy

A structured search was conducted using Google Scholar and Scopus to ensure comprehensive coverage of both local and international studies related to public apologies and cultural influences in Malaysia (*Table 1*). Boolean operators were employed to combine the main concepts of public apology, culture, and Malaysian

context systematically. The search strategy was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework to maintain methodological transparency and replicability. The final search string applied in Google Scholar and Scopus was as shown below.

Table 1. Search string used.

| Database | Search String | Search Period | Result Retrieved |
|----------------|---|---------------|--|
| Google Scholar | ("public apology" OR "apology communication" OR "image repair") AND ("cultural context" OR "cultural influence" OR "socio-cultural") AND ("Malaysia" OR "Malaysian public figures" OR "Malaysian politicians" OR "Malaysian celebrities") | 2020-2025 | 93 initial results, 8 retained after screening and 4 included at the end |
| Scopus | ("public apology" OR "apology" OR "image repair" OR "crisis communication" OR "image restoration") AND ("culture" OR "cultural" OR "society" OR "values" OR "norms" OR "religion") AND ("Malaysia" OR "Malaysian" OR "Southeast Asia") | 2020-2025 | 34 results, 13 after filtering and 4 included at the end |

Two databases, Google Scholar and Scopus, were selected to ensure both breadth and depth of coverage. Different search strings were applied to each database to account for variations in their indexing systems and search functionalities. The search was limited to publications from 2020 to 2025, written in English, and accessible in full text. This dual-database approach ensured that both internationally indexed studies and locally contextualised materials were represented, strengthening the comprehensiveness and cultural relevance of the literature pool. The detailed inclusion and exclusion criteria and screening and selection procedures are outlined below.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were formulated to ensure that only studies relevant to the research objectives and contextual focus were incorporated into the final synthesis. To maintain the quality and contextual accuracy of the review, only studies published between 2020 and 2025 were included, ensuring that the findings reflected recent developments and perspectives. The review focused on works situated within the fields of social sciences, arts and humanities, and psychology, particularly those examining communication, culture, or behavioural aspects related to apology, image repair, or crisis communication. Only articles written in English and available in full-text or open access formats and without payment were considered eligible for selection. In addition, priority was given to studies that explicitly investigated apology behaviour or image restoration strategies in the Malaysian cultural context or that were related to the issue of apology culture. Publications produced before 2020, studies that were not relevant to Malaysian culture or context, and that focused solely on Western or unrelated communication settings were excluded. Conceptual or theoretical papers that lacked empirical data were also excluded, as were works that were not in English and were not accessible. Duplicate records and off-topic studies identified during the title, abstract or full-text screening stages were removed to maintain the accuracy and relevance of the final data set. In total, 415 records were initially identified from both databases which are Google Scholar and Scopus. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria across the screening and eligibility stages, eight studies were retained for the final synthesis.

Screening and selection process

For the Google Scholar, search initially generated 381 results, which were reduced to 142 results after applying the publication year filter 2020-2025. The results were further refined to 93 open-access studies after manual screening for accessibility and relevance. Through manual screening based on alignment with the research objectives that focusing specifically on the Malaysian context and cultural influence and apology behaviour, four studies were selected for final synthesis. Google Scholar was considered appropriate as the main database because it provides broad and diverse coverage of journal articles, theses, and conference papers, including locally published and open access works that are often underrepresented in indexed repositories such as Scopus or Web of Science. Empirical research supports this approach, as recent comparative studies have confirmed that Google Scholar consistently offers the widest and most inclusive range of scholarly materials, especially within the social sciences and regional research domains. These studies also indicate that while Scopus and Web of Science provide highly curated and selective indexing, they tend to underrepresent non-Western, non-English, and open-access publications, which are essential for understanding Malaysia's socio-cultural communication landscape. For Scopus, a similar search was conducted using database specific syntax to focus the search within titles, abstracts, and keywords. This search initially yielded 34 results, which were reduced to 13 results after limiting the publication period to 2020–2025 and refining the subject areas to social sciences, arts and humanities and psychology, restricted to the English language. After screening for relevance and methodological suitability, four studies were retained for the final analysis. While Scopus produced a smaller number of papers due to its selective indexing and peer-review standards, it contributed methodological rigour and academic credibility to the review. The combination of both databases enhanced the comprehensiveness, validity, and contextual depth of the literature selection process. Scopus contributed high-quality indexed research, while Google Scholar captured a wider range of local, open-access, and context-specific studies. Together, these databases provided a balanced and contextually grounded foundation for analysing cultural influences on public apologies in Malaysia. The entire process is visually summarised in the PRISMA flowchart (*Figure 1*).

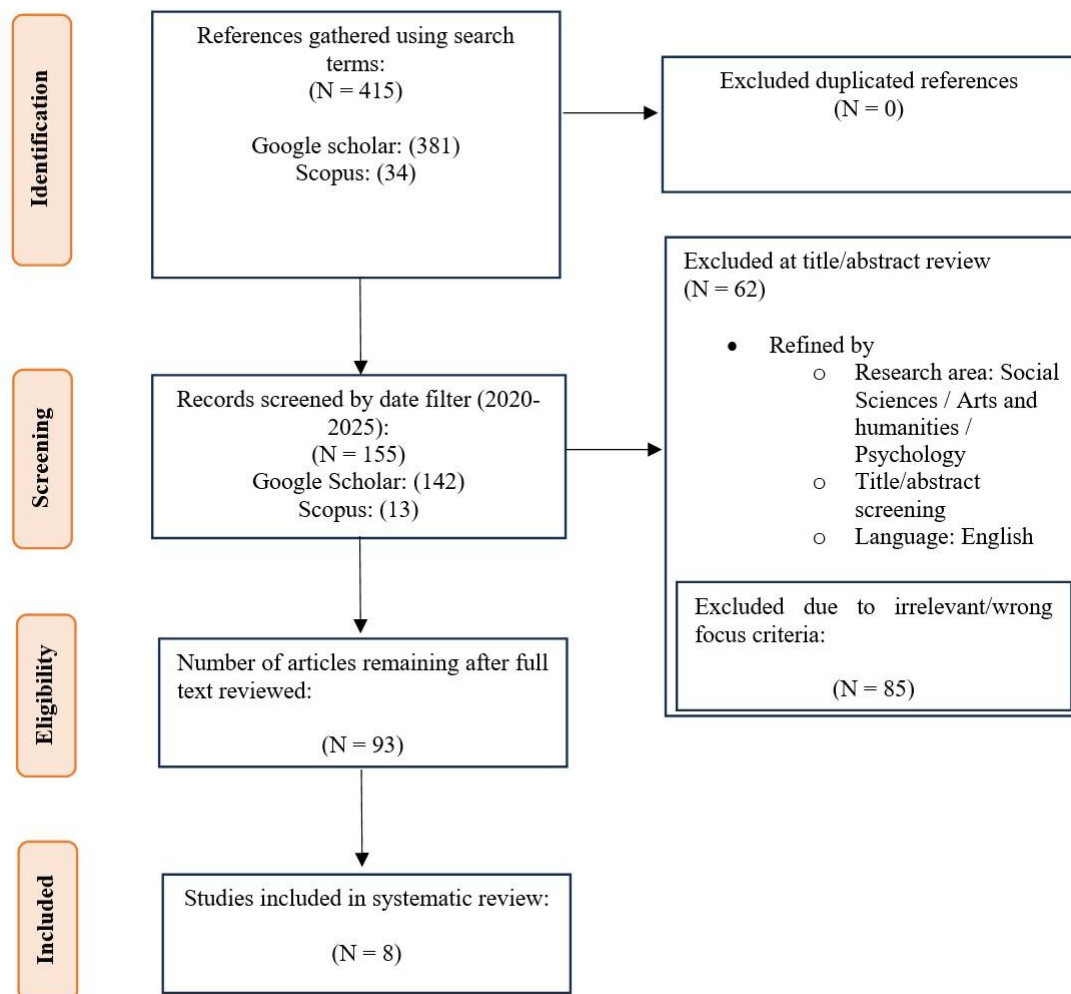


Figure 1. Flow diagram of the systematic review of literature.

Data extraction and synthesis

After the final screening, data from the eight selected studies were systematically extracted to allow for thematic comparison and synthesis. A data extraction table was developed to capture key information from each study, including the title, authors, year of publication, research objectives or purpose, key findings, and the main components or themes identified in the articles that can be related to the SLR title. This structured extraction ensured that relevant details were recorded consistently and transparently across all studies. Each article was fully reviewed in full, and the extracted information was analysed thematically to identify patterns related to cultural values, linguistic expressions of apology, and contextual influences on image repair strategies. The process involved repeated reading and coding to group similar findings under broader conceptual themes, allowing for structured comparisons of the similarities and differences observed across the selected studies. This comparative synthesis provided deeper insight into how various cultural dimensions influence the ways individuals express remorse, responsibility, and image repair across Malaysian, intercultural, and Southeast Asian contexts. A qualitative thematic synthesis approach was employed, allowing for the integration of diverse findings while maintaining the contextual

nuances of each study. Through this synthesis, the review illustrates how cultural frameworks, social values, contextual norms shape public apology behaviours, offering a coherent and contextually grounded understanding of the intersection between communication, culture, and responsibility.

Quality assessment

The credibility and reliability of the systematic review depend on the quality of the included studies. To ensure robustness, all studies were subjected to a rigorous quality assessment process, such as evaluating the clarity of research objectives, logical coherence of arguments, relevance to the research objectives, validity of findings, and alignment with the review’s cultural context focus. Empirical studies were examined for research transparency and consistency, including the appropriateness of their data sources, analytical approach, and interpretation of findings. In contrast, conceptual and discourse-based studies were assessed in terms of arguments clarity, theoretical depth, and contribution to the understanding of cultural and communicative phenomena. Although Google Scholar was used to capture a wide range of sources, and open-access sources, only peer-reviewed and academically credible studies were included in the final synthesis to maintain academic quality. Studies failing to meet these criteria were excluded from the synthesis to maintain the integrity of the review. By applying these stringent quality standards, the review minimized bias, enhanced the reliability of interpretation, and ensured that only studies offering substantive analytical or theoretical insight contributed to the understanding of cultural influences on public apologies among Malaysian public figures.

Results and Discussion

The synthesis of the eight studies included in this review highlights the central role of cultural influences in shaping public apologies among Malaysian public figures between 2020 and 2025 (*Table 2*). Key factors such as cultural cognition, moral and ethical expectations, collectivist values, religious sensitivities, and timing were found to influence how apologies are framed, delivered, and interpreted by audiences. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that effective public apologies in Malaysia are not determined solely by the content of the message, but also by its alignment with societal norms, cultural expectations, and audience perceptions of sincerity, responsibility, and social harmony. The following sections will elaborate more on these cultural dimensions on their similarities and differences on eight article that relates to public apology practices in more detail.

Table 2. Matrix table for extracted studies, n=8.

| Title | Author (s)/Year | Objective / Purpose | Key findings | Components / Theme / Identified |
|--|---------------------------|--|---|--|
| Knowledge types and presuppositions: An analysis of strategic aspects of public apologies. | Navera and Gustilo (2022) | The study examined how shared knowledge and audience assumptions shape the construction and effectiveness of public apologies. | Public apologies are not only culturally embedded but also strategically constructed based on the speaker’s assumptions about audience knowledge and social expectations. | Strategic use of knowledge types and presuppositions in framing public apologies, influence shared knowledge and cultural cognition on message construction and audience interpretation. |
| A Comparative Study of | Jawad et al. | To compare how | The study found that Iraqi | The research highlights |

| | | | | |
|---|-----------------------------|---|---|--|
| Apology Speech Acts Between Malaysian and Iraqi Undergraduate University Students | (2024) | Malaysia and Iraqi university students perform apology speech acts across different cultural contexts, focusing on linguistic strategies, politeness norms, and cultural values influencing apology expression. | students used more direct apology strategies with explicit acknowledgement of fault, whereas Malaysian students tended to employ more indirect and polite forms consistent with high-context and collectivist cultural norms. | how cultural context, collectivist vs low-context cultures influence apology formulation, indicating that in Malaysian culture indirectness, politeness and mitigation align with public expectations of apology expression. |
| Corporate Crisis Communication on Twitter: Exploring the Role of Affiliation in Image Repair Strategies | Chen (2023) | To examine how corporations employ crisis communication strategies on Twitter to repair their image and negotiate social affiliation with audiences using multimodal discourse, through two case studies involving Uber and Starbucks. | The study found that Uber and Starbucks mainly used corrective strategies on Twitter, with Starbucks showing stronger remorse and accountability both struggled to regain trust, highlighting the importance of shared values and moral alignment for effective image repair. | The study used IRT, SCCT, and the Affiliation Framework to analyse corporate crisis communication, focusing on response strategies, audience reactions, and social media interactions. |
| Framing the Crisis: A Comparative Analysis on News Coverage of Cadbury Porcine DNA Crisis in Malaysiakini and The Star Online | Bhullar (2021) | To compare how Malaysiakini and The Star Online framed and reported the Cadbury Porcine DNA crisis in Malaysia, focusing on differences in tone, slant, and framing categories related to responsibility, morality, conflict, and public confidence. | Both Malaysiakini and The Star Online used similar frames, with responsibility attribution dominant, but Malaysiakini employed a more persuasive, emotional tone while The Star Online remained neutral, reflecting how Malaysian media navigate cultural and moral values in crisis reporting. | The study highlights how cultural and religious contexts shape media framing of public crises in Malaysia, offering insights into communication norms and accountability relevant to public apology practices. |
| An Exploratory Study of Cultural Differences in Behaviour and Intentions in Workplace Apologies: With the Perspective of Responsibility | Isagozawa (2025) | The study examined cultural variations in workplace apology behaviour and intentions, providing insights into how culture influences public apology practices and responsibility perceptions. | The study showed that culture plays a key role in determining workplace apology behaviour and intentions, emphasizing how responsibility perspectives affect apology strategies, which can inform public figures' apology practices. | The study highlights components such as behavioural responses, intention to apologize, and cultural expectations of responsibility, showing their role in shaping apology strategies. |
| Global Brand Narratives Amidst Pro-Palestinian Boycotts: A Critical Discourse Analysis in Southeast Asia | Andriani and Himawan (2025) | The study examined brand narratives amidst pro-Palestinian boycotts, highlighting how cultural and contextual factors shape messaging and audience reception, providing insights applicable to understanding public apology behaviour among Malaysian public figures. | Brand narratives were shaped by cultural and contextual factors, highlighting the role of culture in communication and its relevance to public apology behaviour in Malaysia. | The study highlights components such as message framing, socio-political context, and cultural alignment, illustrating the role of culture in guiding communication and public perception. |
| Speech Acts of Apology and Request by Arab Postgraduates with Malaysian Supervisors | Elasfar et al. (2023) | explored speech acts of apology and request among Arab postgraduates interacting with Malaysian supervisors, highlighting how cultural differences influence apology practices and providing insights applicable to public figures in Malaysia. | Cultural expectations and politeness strategies influenced how Arab postgraduates' apologies and requests were received, highlighting the role of culture in shaping apology behaviour relevant to Malaysian public figures. | The study highlights components such as message framing, adherence to cultural norms, and strategic language use, illustrating how cultural factors shape apology behaviour in interactions. |
| Communication Strategies of a Malaysian | Perumal et al. (2022) | The study highlighting how cultural factors such | The study indicates that language and cultural | Key components highlighted in the study |

politician in Tamil during the COVID-19 Pandemic

as language and social norms shape public reception. This study is relevant to understanding how cultural influences may affect public apology practices among Malaysian public figures.

factors shape how Malaysian public figures communicate during crises, offering insights relevant to public apology practices.

are message framing, language use, and alignment with cultural norms, showing how Malaysian public figures adapt communication during crises.

Knowledge and cultural cognition in apology framing

Navera and Gustilo (2022) explore how people draw on shared cultural knowledge and contextual awareness when crafting public apologies. They find that effective apologies rely on a sense of mutual understanding between speaker and audience where both parties share awareness of the wrongdoing and the culturally appropriate ways to make amends. When speakers anticipate what their audience already knows or feels, they can frame responsibility in ways that are respectful and socially acceptable within the culture. This suggests that apologies are not merely expressions of personal regret, but social actions shaped by cultural cognition, reflecting the degree to which both parties align in understanding and acceptance. In Malaysia, this pattern is evident in the way public figures communicate remorse. Anuar and Azmi (2022) observed that political apologies are often crafted to resonate with collective values such as unity, morality, and respect. Similarly, Rahim et al. (2023) found that Malaysian leaders tend to express regret through humility and collective responsibility, rather than direct admissions of guilt. In this sense, across these studies, a clear similarity is the emphasis on shared cultural understanding as key to effective apologies. The differences lie in context which Navera and Gustilo (2022) describe general mechanisms, while Malaysian studies show specific applications in political and public settings. Together, they indicate that knowledge functions as a shared cultural lens that shapes both delivery and interpretation of apologies

Cultural context and indirectness in apology speech acts

Across the included studies, a consistent theme is the influence of cultural norms on the indirectness of apology expressions. Jawad et al. (2024) found that Malaysian students frequently employed metaphorical and softened language in their apologies, providing explanations while maintaining harmony and politeness, reflecting Malaysia's collectivist, high-context communication culture. In contrast, Iraqi students favoured direct, self-admitting apologies, highlighting how cultural context shapes the explicitness of regret. Chen (2023) as well as Rahim et al. (2023) similarly observed that in Malaysian corporate and political settings, public apologies framed with humility, moral accountability, and emotional authenticity were better received, emphasizing collectivist values and face-saving norms. While the contexts differ from academic to corporate to political. The pattern consistently shows that indirectness serves as a culturally grounded strategy to maintain social harmony. Differences emerge in medium and form. For instance, media outlets like Malaysiakini adopt a more persuasive and emotionally charged framing to engage audiences (Bhullar, 2021), whereas interpersonal or corporate apologies rely more on subtle linguistic and ethical cues. In this sense, all studies agree that indirectness is a culturally preferred approach in Malaysia. Differences appear in how indirectness is expressed across contexts in

which media emphasizes emotional engagement, while corporate and interpersonal settings emphasize ethical and linguistic subtlety.

Cultural influence on sincerity and moral tone in public apologies

The studies indicates that cultural norms significantly shape perceptions of sincerity and moral tone in apologies. Chen (2023) showed that corporate apologies on Twitter differed in public reception depending on tone, empathy, and acknowledgment of responsibility, with Starbucks' more sincere and accountable approach garnering more positive responses than Uber's defensive messaging. In line with this, Rahim et al. (2023) demonstrated that political apologies in Malaysia are evaluated not only for message clarity but also for moral tone, emotional authenticity, and alignment with collectivist, face-saving values. Across contexts, the studies reveal a shared emphasis on empathy, humility, and shared responsibility as culturally valued indicators of sincerity. However, differences appear in medium and strategy such as social media communications highlight immediate audience reactions, whereas political or corporate contexts may allow for more curated, formalized expressions. In this sense, all studies highlight empathy, humility, and moral accountability as key markers of sincerity. The variation lies in medium and immediacy, showing that cultural norms shape both the content and style of apologies.

Cultural and religious contexts in shaping crisis communication and public accountability

Sensitivity to cultural and religious aspects appears to play an important role in shaping crisis communication strategies. Bhullar (2021) found that Malaysian media coverage of the Cadbury Pork DNA crisis varied across media outlets, with Malaysiakini adopting a persuasive approach that emphasized emotion, while The Star Online maintained a neutral and factual style, both guided by social, cultural, and religious contexts, particularly regarding Halal issues. Along with that, Anuar and Azmi (2022) show that political apologies in Malaysia are framed based on moral and religious norms, emphasizing collective responsibility, humility, and respect for authority. From these various studies, a clear pattern has emerged whereby crisis responses and public apologies are more effective when they are in line with cultural and religious expectations, demonstrating moral responsibility that reinforces societal values. The difference is seen in the strategies and mediums where the media emphasizes stylization and emotional appeal, while political discourse emphasizes ethical and respectful language. In summary, this study emphasizes the importance of aligning apologies with cultural and religious norms, although the way they are expressed differs depending on the context, whether it is focused on the media or politics.

Cultural influence on apology intent: Settlement vs. Atonement

Studies have shown clear cultural differences in the meaning behind apologies in Malaysia. Compared to the Western model that emphasizes guilt, apologies in Malaysia are more focused on solutions. For example, Isagozawa (2025) as well as Elasar et al. (2023) found that in interpersonal and organizational contexts, apologies are usually aimed at restoring relationship harmony and social balance. This pattern strongly reflects the Malaysian Collectivist orientation (Hofstede, 2001), where maintaining

group cohesion and saving face are culturally prioritized over individual emotional expression or guilt. However, Andriani and Himawan (2025) as well as Perumal et al. (2022) extend this understanding into the public and political sphere, showing that while the settlement motive remains central, public figures are also expected to project atonement through moral clarity and social responsibility. For instance, Andriani and Himawan's analysis of brand narratives during socio-political boycotts highlights that audiences interpret apologies through ethical and ideological lenses, demanding a moral stance beyond simple regret. Similarly, Perumal et al. (2022) demonstrate how the strategic use of the Tamil language during crisis communication fostered moral identification with specific communities, making the act of communication a moral affirmation. Thus, the cultural influence on apology intent among Malaysian public figures must satisfy a hybrid expectation in which effective apologies must combine settlement to preserve social harmony, supported by Isagozawa (2025) and Elasfar et al. (2023) with atonement to affirm shared moral and ideological values, demanded by Andriani and Himawan (2025) as well as Perumal et al. (2022). This dual expectation differentiates Malaysian public apologies from guilt-cantered Western models, illustrating a complex cultural approach where public context introduces the non-negotiable expectation of moral affirmation alongside pragmatic resolution.

Sub-title/topic The divergence of accountability: Speech act vs. Ethical narrative

A strong point of divergence among the studies lies in how accountability in public apologies is culturally evaluated. Isagozawa (2025) and Elasfar et al. (2023), focused on interpersonal and institutional settings, primarily treat apologies as a speech act, concentrating on pragmatic strategies like politeness, deference, and linguistic appropriateness that determine acceptance within hierarchical settings. Their findings imply that for an apology to be socially functional, pragmatic competence and respect for rank are essential. However, Andriani and Himawan (2025) and Perumal et al. (2022) reveal a deeper, ethical narrative dimension when apologies are made in the public sphere. For Malaysian public figures, accountability extends beyond the linguistic form into the perceived sincerity and ideological consistency behind the message. This phenomenon is best explained by Malaysia's culture of High-Context Communication, where trust and meaning are primarily derived from the shared cultural and ethical context, not explicit words alone. Andriani and Himawan (2025) highlight that neutral or apolitical messaging is interpreted as evasive and fails to resonate, while Perumal et al. (2022) show that alignment with specific cultural or linguistic identity reinforces authenticity. Consequently, pragmatic competence in the speech act is necessary but not sufficient. Public acceptance depends on the extent to which the apology is in line with the moral and cultural values of society, as well as affirming the integrity of leadership. Across the studies, accountability is essential for acceptance, but the focus differs: interpersonal settings emphasize speech act competence, while public and political settings introduce the critical requirement of ethical and cultural resonance.

The multi-layered influence of cultural identity in crisis

The cultural influence shaping Malaysian public apologies operates on multiple layers. Andriani and Himawan (2025) identify a supra-ethnic cultural expectation rooted in regional religio-political solidarity. For instance, shared sentiments toward global Muslim issues which pushes public figures to express collective moral unity.

Meanwhile, Perumal et al. (2022) highlight ethno-linguistic specificity using the Tamil language during the COVID-19 crisis allowed a politician to build trust and authenticity within the Indian Malaysian community. Both studies emphasize the importance of cultural identity, but at different scales, with one emphasizing moral coherence at the national and regional levels, while the other focuses on a sense of belonging at the community level. Therefore, this shows that Malaysian public figures must balance these two layers expressing solidarity with a broader Malaysian moral consensus while remaining linguistically and culturally responsive to specific ethnic constituencies. Such complexity underscores that cultural influence on public apologies in Malaysian is multilayered rather than uniform, reflecting the nation's plural identity and sensitivity to context. To make it short, all studies confirm the centrality of cultural identity, but at different scales which are national and regional moral alignment versus community level belonging. Malaysian public figures must now how to balance broad moral consensus with specific ethnic community expectations.

Consequences of cultural misalignment: Public scepticism and trust erosion

Studies by Isagozawa (2025) and Elasfar et al. (2023) show that in personal or organizational interactions, when an apology is not in line with social norms or hierarchies, it can lead to misunderstandings and relationship tension. In such situations, an apology can easily be perceived as insincere or disrespectful. In public or political contexts, Andriani and Himawan (2025) and Perumal et al. (2022) find that cultural incongruence can have more serious consequences. For example, Andriani and Himawan mention the phenomenon of “ideological silence,” where when public figures avoid taking a moral stand, the public may interpret this as complicity. Perumal et al. (2022) emphasize that ignoring cultural cues, such as appropriate language use, can undermine community trust. In the Malaysian context, this means that culturally incongruent apologies that fail to demonstrate ethical conviction and sensitivity to social relationships not only do not improve reputations but can also damage the credibility and moral authority of public figures. Therefore, for Malaysian public figures, it is important to align apology strategies with national moral values and community-specific values to maintain public trust. In summary, cultural incompatibility undermines trust and credibility. The difference depends on the scale where, at the interpersonal level, it strains relationships while at the public level, it can damage moral authority and reputation more broadly.

Conclusion

Across all eight studies, Malaysian public apologies consistently emphasize indirectness, moral accountability, empathy, and collective responsibility. Differences emerge in medium, context, and scale such as interpersonal, corporate, media, and political settings influence how apologies are framed and received. Effective public apologies in Malaysia require a hybrid approach that integrates pragmatic competence, ethical narrative, and cultural alignment, balancing settlement and atonement and attending to both national moral norms and community specific values. Furthermore, this review advances intercultural communication scholarship by emphasizing that apology behaviors should be interpreted within moral and relational frameworks, rather than purely linguistic models. It extends Benoit's Image Repair Theory by incorporating cultural cognition and moral reasoning as integral dimensions of apology construction

and evaluation. This review focused on open-access studies retrieved from Google Scholar and Scopus. Future research could integrate larger datasets or employ mixed-methods or meta-analytic approaches to enhance generalizability. Additionally, exploring audience reception through sentiment analysis or experimental designs could deepen understanding of apology effectiveness in digital communication contexts. Ultimately, understanding these cultural influences not only enriches academic discourse but also provides practical guidance for leaders, policymakers, and media practitioners in addressing culturally sensitive communication challenges in Malaysia and beyond.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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