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Air Muka in Malay Culture: A Scoping Review of Face, Politeness, and Interpersonal Relations in Multicultural Contexts

Ju Long[1,*], Mohd Azidan Abdul Jabar[1], Salina Husain[1]

[1] Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Jalan Universiti 1, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Air muka reflects cultural knowledge regarding face, dignity, status, and social acceptability in Malay conversations. There have been very few efforts to synthesize the literature on politeness, face work, speech acts, intercultural communication, and conflict management from Malaysia and similar Asian settings. This scoping review, conducted according to JBI guidance, examined how English-language scholarship published between January 2021 and September 2026 has treated air muka in Malay and multicultural interaction. Searches of eight databases and supplementary sources yielded 28 topic-relevant records; after full-text screening, 26 studies were included in the thematic synthesis, comprising 15 core studies on Malay or Malaysian interaction and 11 contextual studies that supplied comparative, intercultural, or theoretical perspective. Themes discussed in the study included issues such as dignity and prestige, facework and politeness, mitigation of speech acts, power and status, intercultural relationships, digital communications, conflicts, and relational repair. It can be noted from the literature that "air muka" should be considered an umbrella concept that incorporates concepts like face, dignity, respect, harmony, and relational management. There is ample evidence in the literature on requests, refusals, expressions of gratitude, business communication, teacher-student interactions, and intercultural communication. There are few empirical studies that employ air muka explicitly as a theoretical construct. Many studies focus on related topics without explicitly referring to this term. Read against the universalist model of face and its Asian critiques, the evidence shows that air muka carries a moral and relational weight (dignity, legitimacy, belonging) that individual-centred face models do not capture, which is why the review treats it as a culturally located field rather than as a translation of "face". Future research would be enhanced by use of naturally-occurring data on Malay discourse, participants' descriptions of offences and repair, and comparison studies that identify Malay-specific aspects of politeness.

* *Corresponding author*
E-mail address: 399738322@qq.com

1. Introduction

Communication in Malay settings is routinely described in terms of respect, appropriate conduct, relational obligation, and the preservation of air muka. The term is usually glossed as "face", but to lose air muka is to suffer a loss of standing that is at once personal, moral, and relational, and the term sits within a cluster of Malay concepts that includes maruah (dignity, honour), malu (shame, propriety), and budi (moral grace and reciprocal obligation) [6, 12, 13]. Studies of Malaysian public discourse link face-sensitive communication to evaluation and social legitimacy [4], and work on Malaysian universities shows that perceived difference shapes whether an exchange is experienced as cooperative or threatening [31, 41]. For the purposes of this review, air muka denotes the socially recognised dignity and relational standing of a person in Malay interaction: a cultural field encompassing reputation, face, respect, moral legitimacy, and relational membership, within which certain interactional acts become consequential. This definition guided eligibility decisions and the thematic analysis.

Three unresolved debates in politeness and facework research bear directly on how air muka should be studied. The first concerns the status of face itself. Brown and Levinson [7], building on Goffman [14], treat face as a universal pair of wants, and their model remains the default apparatus in Malaysian speech-act research, where refusals, requests, and thanking are coded as strategies that attend to positive or negative face [2, 28, 43]. A long line of critique from Asian contexts argues that this apparatus misdescribes societies in which face is a matter of moral reputation and group standing rather than individual autonomy [15, 19, 26, 27]. The Malaysian literature has largely not engaged this critique, so air muka appears in most studies as background common sense rather than as the object of analysis.

The second debate concerns where face is located. Speech-act approaches place it in the speaker's choices, such as the number and type of mitigating devices in a request. Discursive and interactional approaches locate it instead in the hearer's evaluation and in the turns that follow, so that no utterance is polite or face-threatening in itself [5, 17, 24, 45]. The difference matters empirically: the same email mitigation is evaluated differently by L1 and L2 readers [18], and offence in family mediation is constructed retrospectively through accounts and counter-accounts [48]. Almost all Malaysian research has adopted the speaker-strategy design, so what is known about Malay facework is largely what speakers do, not how recipients treat it.

The third debate is internal to the Malay literature. The classical description holds that indirectness is a rule of speaking and harmony the governing value, a style linked to malu and maruah [6, 13]. If this were complete, preserving air muka would be a matter of avoiding directness. Recent studies complicate the picture: direct refusals and explicit requests are reported as acceptable, and sometimes expected, when the speaker holds authority or supplies an account [20, 28], and Malay cultural expression is discussed as compatible with open disagreement provided moral legitimacy is maintained [30]. The equation of indirectness with the protection of air muka therefore does not hold in general, but no study has addressed the discrepancy systematically.

These debates expose a gap that is both theoretical and empirical. Theoretically, the available frameworks fit air muka poorly. The Brown and Levinson model has no place for the moral legitimacy, group belonging, and institutional identity that the Malay evidence foregrounds [30, 39, 42], and the best-developed Asian alternatives, Chinese mianzi and lian and Japanese wakimae, encode social arrangements that cannot be assumed to transfer to a Malay-Muslim setting. A culturally specific account requires that air muka be the organising concept rather than a local instance of someone else's model. Empirically, the relevant studies are organised by speech act or by setting and rarely name air muka at all; no study has mapped which acts, relationships, and media have been examined

and which remain untouched, and existing reviews take competence or population rather than face and dignity as their axis [9].

This review therefore asks how English-language research published between 2021 and 2026 has treated air muka, facework, politeness, and relational management in Malay and multilingual contexts, and how that research relates to speech acts, dignity, hierarchy, intercultural interaction, digital communication, conflict, and repair. It makes three contributions: it positions air muka as an umbrella concept, distinct from face and from politeness, that encompasses dignity, respect, harmony, and relational management; it provides an evidence map showing which speech acts, relationships, and media have been studied and which have not; and it uses the three debates to specify a research agenda that would allow Malay-specific features of facework to be identified rather than assumed.

2. Methods

2.1 Review design and review question

A scoping review methodology was chosen due to the breadth of the concept being studied and its expression in various forms of language, and due to the inclusion of literature of a qualitative, quantitative, discourse analysis, literary, and review nature. Methodological and reporting approaches were guided by existing JBI scoping review guidelines and recommendations for handling heterogenous evidence [22, 34–38, 46]. The research question was: how have recent studies discussed air muka, facework, politeness, and interpersonal-relational management in a Malay and multilingual context, and how do these topics relate to speech acts, social dignity, hierarchy, intercultural communication, digital communication, conflict, and relational restoration? This review was not pre-registered. The research question, inclusion criteria, search blocks, and extraction variables were recorded internally before screening began. These seven methodological sources were consulted independently of the literature search and are not part of the search yield. Likewise, the theoretical literature on face and politeness that frames the review question is not part of the evidence base.

2.2 Eligibility criteria

The database search targeted sources published in English from 2021 to 2026. Malay-language sources were not searched systematically, but one that surfaced through the supplementary searches and met all other criteria [47] was retained because it reports direct evidence on a Malay speech act. Evidence from eligible sources was relevant to the Malay, Malaysian, or similar Southeast Asian communication context, or offered comparative and theoretical evidence that is pertinent to the interpretation of face, politeness, dignity, relational management, or intercultural communication in these contexts. Eligible sources include empirical research papers, comparative studies, analysis of discourse and speech acts, qualitative research, literary pragmatics analysis, and evidence synthesis. The documents that did not relate to issues related to communication, face, politeness, speech acts, social dignity, or inter-personal relations were eliminated. Similarly, the documents that were not within the period and linguistic range, dealt with Malay cultural identity but not with interactional/pragmatic issues, or those which were methodology only, were also eliminated.

The following approach involving two stages was employed for the selection of relevant data sources. Firstly, research studies which utilized the construct of air muka directly in their analysis or descriptions were selected. Since it became apparent from preliminary searches that the direct use

of this term in the context of English language-based literature is scarce, the second stage consisted of inclusion of those studies that discussed issues related to face, dignity, politeness, respect, harmony, or interpersonal appropriateness within Malay/Malaysian contexts as well as comparative studies providing interpretations of these processes.

2.3 Search and screening procedure

The search approach comprised concept blocks of (a) the focal concept and its cultural context (air muka, Malay face, Malay politeness), (b) Malay/Malaysian setting OR facework OR politeness OR impoliteness OR dignity OR interpersonal communication, (c) Malay/Malaysian setting OR speech act (request, refusal, thanking) OR pragmatics/facial work, and (d) Malaysian workplace OR student OR teacher OR email OR messaging OR conflict setting OR politeness OR intercultural OR relational. The searches were done in Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, DOAJ, and Google Scholar, along with searching of publisher and journal websites, university repositories, DOI resolutions, and backward and forward citations of key studies identified in the literature search process. The search was performed in September 2026.

Database and supplementary searches identified 28 unique topic-relevant records; records retrieved from more than one source were merged manually at the point of export, and no further duplicates were identified at screening. All 28 records were screened on title and abstract against the eligibility criteria and proceeded to full-text retrieval. One record could not be retrieved in full text through the institutional access routes checked [32]. One record was excluded at full-text review because its treatment of Malay cultural identity contained no analysable material on face, politeness, speech acts, or interpersonal interaction [3]. The remaining 26 studies entered the thematic synthesis and were classified, on the basis of their setting and evidence function, into 15 core studies and 11 contextual studies.

2.4 Data extraction and thematic synthesis

Reasons for inclusion and exclusion at each screening stage were recorded in an extraction table. Where the eligibility of the document was ambiguous, a conservative approach towards inclusion was taken while doing title and abstract screening. Charting of data included the following information: publication year, setting, population/communicative context, research methodology, key ideas, speech acts/interactional processes, cultural/intercultural perspective, contribution to review question. The descriptive mapping involved the summary of publication year, evidence function, context, and methodologies, whereas thematic synthesis organized results in relation to social dignity and prestige, facework and politeness, speech act mitigation, power, status, and social distance, multicultural and intercultural interaction, digital and organizational communication, conflict, and relational repair.

The review used air muka as its analytical framework, in that evidence pertaining to face, dignity, reputation, respect, relational harmony, identity, and social consequence management were considered as a whole, as opposed to any mentions of politeness being regarded as evidence of air muka. Evidence core consisted of studies done on Malays or Malaysia, or interactional practices that were culture-specific. Evidence context consisted of comparative studies, theoretical studies, literary studies, diplomatic studies, digital media studies, or intercultural studies which aided in interpreting the core evidence. The two evidence categories were mutually exclusive for counting purposes. There was no need for formal quality assessment as a means of excluding studies because of the purpose of the review.

3. Results

3.1 Study selection

Of the 28 topic-relevant records identified, 27 were retrieved in full text and 26 met the inclusion criteria (Figure 1). The 26 studies comprise 15 core studies on communication in Malay or Malaysian settings and 11 contextual studies.

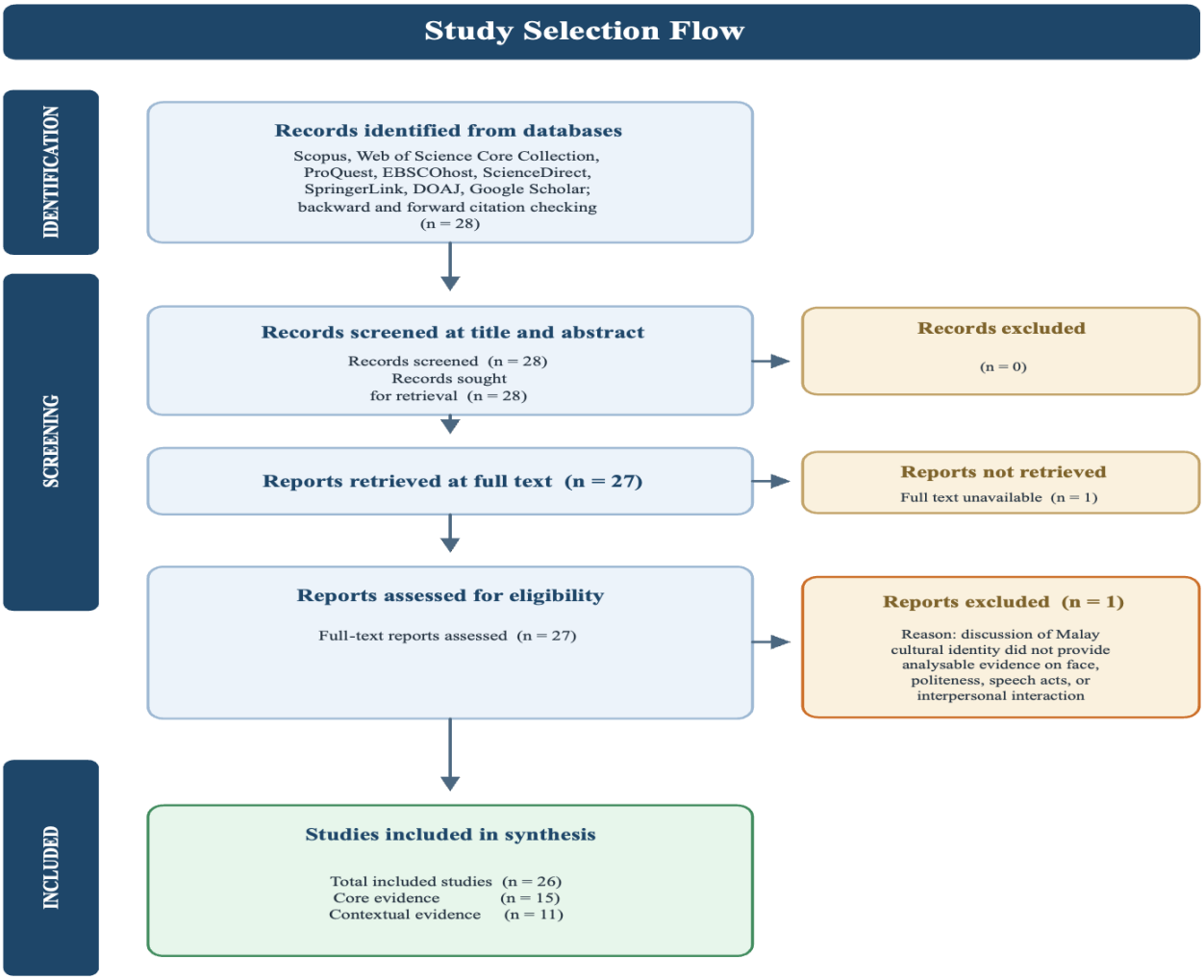

Fig. 1. Study-selection flow, adapted from PRISMA 2020: 28 records identified; 1 not retrieved; 1 excluded at full text; 26 included (15 core, 11 contextual). Methodological guidance documents consulted for review design (n = 7) were not part of the search yield

3.2 Characteristics of the included evidence

The 26 studies selected for the analysis were all published during 2021–2026 and discussed either Malaysia and the Malay-speaking population, Southeast Asian intercultural context or comparative context. The types of evidence used include discourse analysis, speech act analysis, qualitative interviews/observations, surveys, evaluative email research, review research, literary-pragmatic analysis, and cross-cultural psychological research. The literature on Malaysia and Malay speakers was focused on such topics as requests, refusals, thanking, student-teacher communication, work place communication, intercultural communication, and cultural or social concepts of dignity, while the contextual literature broadened the discussion into diplomatic face management, family conflict resolution, multilingual communication, and pragmatic functions of politeness [1, 2, 9, 11,

16, 20, 23, 28, 29, 40, 47]. The evidentiary base was not uniform, as some studies focused on natural interactions while others on elicited data, questionnaires, written communication, or scenarios. The principal strength of the evidence base was focus on relational language in its social context, while its main weakness was inconsistency in use of the concept air muka. Table 1, thus, categorizes the evidence based on the analytical contribution made. Table 2 cross-tabulates the same studies by interactional focus and communication medium. Read across, it shows that the Malay and Malaysian evidence concentrates on requests and refusals in spoken or elicited data and on requests in email and instant messaging. Refusals, thanking, humour, and conflict repair have not been examined in digital media, and disagreement, criticism, and apology have not been studied as focal acts in any medium.

Table 1
Compact overview of the 26 studies included in the thematic synthesis

Evidence group	Main analytical focus	Typical contexts represented	Included studies	n
Malay and Malaysian face, politeness, and relational communication	Face-sensitive discourse, refusals, thanking, requests, interpersonal communication, power and social distance	Malay ESL, Malaysian students, workplace and interpersonal interaction	[4]; [31]; [43]; [23]; [1]; [47]; [2]; [20]; [28]; [40]; [16]; [39]; [30]	13
Malaysian intercultural, institutional, and mediated communication	Intercultural competence, migrant communication, digital requests, workplace interaction	Malaysian universities, migrant work, instant messaging, institutional communication	[29]; [11]	2
Comparative and intercultural facework	Face concerns, impoliteness, conflict, email evaluation, diplomatic and intercultural interaction	Cross-cultural samples, Asian English, family conflict, diplomacy, international requests	[41]; [44]; [21]; [9]; [42]; [25]; [48]; [18]; [33]; [8]	10
Culturally embedded pragmatic analysis	Pragmatic meaning and relational management in literary or culturally situated material	Malaysian Islamic literary context	[10]	1
Total				26

Note. Groups 1–2 constitute the core evidence (n = 15); groups 3–4 constitute the contextual evidence (n = 11).

Table 2
Evidence map of the 26 included studies by interactional focus and communication medium

Interactional focus	Spoken or elicited interaction	Email	Instant messaging and social media	Public, institutional and literary text
Requests	[20]; [33]*; [8]*	[2]; [18]*	[29]	—
Refusals	[43]; [28]; [40]	—	—	—
Thanking	[47]	—	—	—
Humour and teasing	[44]*	—	—	—
Conflict, offence and repair	[23]; [48]*; [25]*	—	—	—
Disagreement, criticism and apology as focal acts	—	—	—	—
General politeness, dignity and relational norms	[1]; [39]; [21]*	—	[16]	[4]; [30]; [42] *; [10] *
Intercultural competence and perception	[31]; [11]; [41]*; [9]*	—	—	—

Note. Studies marked * are contextual evidence (n = 11); unmarked studies are core Malay or Malaysian evidence (n = 15). A dash marks a combination with no included study; settings and populations are given in Table 1.

3.3 Air muka, dignity, and social standing

The most evident concept relationship was the relationship between communicative behavior and maintaining the social status of people. The studies on the socio-cultural norms of the Malays portrayed dignity, reputation, social acceptability, and harmony in relationships not as separate traits but as being interconnected. For the Duano Malays, the communicative practices were seen in terms of maintenance of their social and cultural identity suggesting that communicative norms may bear some importance to social inclusion and continuity [39]. Cultural expression among the Malays was also seen as being related to freedom of expression and the dignity of the people in speaking without loss of moral legitimacy [30].

It is thus clear that there is no justification to see air muka as the cultural counterpart of Western "face" or the synonym of politeness. It is rather a culturally located domain of dignity and status in which these terms are negotiated. The research conducted in the diplomatic domain of facework justifies this relational understanding by indicating that face is not merely an individual property but could be managed in the form of institutional identity, expectations, and maintenance of working relationships [42]. Similarly, the research carried out from the literary-pragmatic perspective clearly shows that culturally located texts convey the meaning of politeness and interpersonal relations

through indirectness and stance [10]. Cross-cultural research provides a caveat that face issues may influence the course of the conflict regardless of cultural affiliation, but the implications of face concern are not exactly the same everywhere [25]. This justifies using air muka as an analysis tool based on a particular culture, not as a universal factor. In addition, the connection between air muka and facework is obvious, although the differentiation between air muka as a Malay concept and facework as an interpersonal process remains clear.

3.4 Facework, politeness, and speech-act mitigation

An important line of research was related to the topics of politeness and face work [43]; [47]; [2]; [20]; [28]; [40]; [29]; [33]; [8]. Requests, refusals, thanking, joking, disagreement, and criticism have traditionally been analyzed as speech acts which do not only require explicitness of meaning, but also concern managing the impact of an utterance on the hearer, the speaker's social image, and the future relationship. Comparative research on offense and mediation of family disputes suggested that impoliteness can be considered not only the characteristic of a certain utterance, but also a process of interpretation of intentions, disrespect, and construction of explanations of an interaction [48].

Studies conducted on email communication showed that there exist variations in terms of politeness mitigation which affect how messages are perceived by individuals of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds [18]. The importance of the concept for the case of Malaysia and multicultural situations is the possibility of mismatch between the actual mitigation and respect expected, whereby an appropriate mitigated message for one individual may be considered as evasive and lacking in respect by another individual. The aforementioned literature further indicates how politeness may be organized via ritualization and sequential structuring, whereby there are conventional beginnings, supportive actions, and the placement of the request in a wider interactional structure [33], as well as how a single politeness form like "please" may have multiple facework functions according to its placement, ongoing activity, and the relationships among interlocutors [8]. Both of these pieces of information serve to highlight the crucial analysis of the fact that air muka is best illustrated not in individual words but in the process of a social action.

3.5 Power, status, and multicultural relations

Both power and social distance became apparent in educational, professional, familial, migration, and cross-cultural contexts. When it came to communication between students and teachers, request and refusal behaviors were influenced by the institutional status disparity and practical concerns on the part of students [23]; [2]; [28]. In terms of workplace studies as well, it was found that the alteration of a request is based on the speaker's sense of entitlement, costliness of the request, amount of imposition and the need to maintain a functional relationship [20]; [29]. The hierarchical position can make face work more significant because the lower status individual may have very few means through which he/she can resist, reject or correct the high-status individual, who in turn has certain interactional obligations because being too blunt and criticizing the lower status individual publicly can hurt the latter's face [28]; [40].

Other complexities emerge from multicultural environments. Malaysian universities and organizations involve participants who have different languages, different social and cultural expectations, and varied experiences of power structures within institutions [31]; [41]; [23]. The work done on migrant workers demonstrates the relationship between communication skills and the capacity to understand local conventions, to handle differences, and to deal with misunderstandings

without framing the process only in terms of deficiency in language skills [9]; [11]. The problem then is not the relative politeness of one group against another but how communicative resources are interpreted in these relations.

3.6 Digital, institutional, and conflict contexts

The included literature indicated that face work has transcended from the physical interaction of individuals. The use of digital messages, emails, and instant messaging means that there is limited availability of prosody, gestures, timing, and immediate repairs, leading to a situation where lexical items, punctuation, greetings, explanations, and closings have to bear the weight of interpretation [2]; [16]; [18]; [29]. In addition, workplace short messages can be both effective and socially risky since the person receiving the message will not be able to know the stance and intention of the sender [29]. Formal communication may be regarded as face threatening in the case that it fails to consider status, effort, vulnerability, or participation rights of the person on the receiving end, especially in an educational, business, or migrant setting where language selection correlates with resource accessibility [2]; [11].

As shown by the studies on conflict, facework is not just about avoiding offence but can include the managing of offences once they have taken place [23]; [48]; [25]. Explanation, apologies, concessions, humor, and other methods such as the reformulation of discourse through a mediator can allow participants to regain a functional relationship despite the fact that this is not always possible [44]; [48]. There is less research material available about natural Malay conflict sequences than there is about speech acts and writing, making it difficult to understand how air muka unfolds.

4. Discussion

The following review has shown how, in an area where air muka has seldom been singled out as an independent variable, it has frequently been dealt with via issues of dignity, respect, reputation, face, politeness, hierarchy, and harmonious relations. In conversations in Malay societies and other multi-ethnic contexts, an utterance is often judged not only on the basis of whether or not it serves its immediate purpose, but also whether it maintains the social status of the speakers and the relationship itself. This does not mean that all interaction among Malays is indirect and harmonizing. On the contrary, the social implications of directness, conflict, refusal, and criticism are a key focus of many of the selected studies.

4.1 Theoretical implications

The synthesis speaks to each of the three debates that motivated the review: whether face is universal or culturally constituted, whether it resides in speaker strategy or in recipient evaluation, and whether Malay facework is governed by indirectness. On the first, the evidence favours a culturally specific reading of air muka over a universalist one. The core studies repeatedly tie communicative appropriateness to dignity, moral legitimacy, and group membership [30]; [39], dimensions that the positive/negative face model does not represent, while the cross-cultural evidence shows that face concerns shape conflict everywhere but with different content [25]. Air muka is therefore better treated as a field of dignity and standing in which face and politeness are negotiated than as a Malay label for negative face. This is consistent with Haugh's [17] argument that face and politeness are distinct objects of study and that emic concepts of face open analytical ground that the Goffmanian paradigm leaves unexplored.

On the second, the included studies are weighted heavily towards speaker strategy, yet the findings that most clearly reveal how air muka operates come from interactional and recipient-centred designs: the retrospective construction of offence in mediation [48], the divergent readings of email mitigation [18], and the multiple functions of a single politeness token depending on its sequential position [8]; [33]. The Malay evidence base would be strengthened by designs that capture evaluation and repair rather than production alone.

On the third, the review finds no support for a simple equation of indirectness with the protection of air muka. Directness is reported as acceptable under conditions of authority, accountability, and adequate explanation [20]; [28], and the core studies treat the social consequences of refusal and criticism as the object of analysis rather than as departures from a harmony norm. What protects air muka appears to be the recognition of status and entitlement, not the avoidance of directness as such.

4.2 Implications for research and practice

The co-construction of face becomes especially consequential in intercultural communication, where the speaker and recipient might have entirely different conceptions of what is respectful, the right degree of distance, adequate explanation, or proper argumentation. Consequently, a cultural analysis of air muka would do well to consider how the participants define these concepts for themselves.

Power is an essential element of this process. Face-sensitive interaction takes on its utmost importance when the parties involved do not have equal opportunities for exercising institutional power, social influence, or communication practices considered acceptable. In cases where the parties involved are students, migrant workers, employees, or less advanced users of the language, they must defend their status without committing any acts that might be construed as being disrespectful to someone in a superior position. This requires a more complete picture in which the relationship between pragmatics and institutional order is considered, along with the circumstances under which politeness serves to maintain relationships, where it is used to reinforce hierarchy, and where facework is deployed to challenge inequality. This is complicated further by digital discourse, for it removes intentionality in interpersonal communication to the extent that the recipient has to deduce intent from a small array of textual features.

The review holds many implications for language and intercultural education. Teaching politeness based on a set of prescribed formulaic forms does not meet the needs indicated by the evidence. It would be more effective to teach about entitlement, social distance, status, imposition, stance, disagreement, refusal, and the ability to repair an interaction even if one's speech is formally polite but perceived as being impolite. Such teaching must not present the Malay culture as one uniform system; there is an indication of variability with regards to generation, context, language, institution, relationship, and mode of communication.

5. Limitations

There are several drawbacks of this literature review. For instance, the database search covered papers published between 2021 and 2026 in English; Malay-language sources were captured only incidentally through supplementary searching, so Malay and Indonesian scholarship and locally circulated works are under-represented, and one relevant study could not be obtained in full text. The 26 selected articles vary in terms of the population, setting, methodology used, data sources,

and terminology applied. Therefore, the results are analyzed using thematic synthesis and cannot be regarded as meta-analysis or as an evidence of the homogeneous Malay communication style.

The direct usage of the concept air muka has not been as prevalent as the usage of related terms, such as face, dignity, politeness, respect, harmony, and interpersonal appropriateness. This scoping review therefore treats air muka as an analytical lens and does not claim that the included studies used the term themselves. Because the included studies seldom engaged the theoretical debates on face and politeness directly, the theoretical implications drawn here are the reviewers' interpretation of the evidence rather than positions the primary authors took. Eleven contextual studies were included since they helped to understand comparative, intercultural, digital, institutional, or theoretical aspects of air muka, but they should not be regarded as Malay cultural core evidence.

6. Conclusion

This literature review has sought to locate recent academic works on air muka, facework, politeness, and interpersonal relations in the context of Malay culture and multicultural communication. In the conceptual scheme used here, air muka should be viewed as a culturally specific area of dignity, status, respect, identity, and relational acceptability, which relates to facework and politeness, yet is not defined by them. These researches reveal that requesting, refusing, thanking, disagreeing, using humor, communication at work, educational communication, intercultural communication, and mediating conflict situations all presuppose the consideration of possible impacts of communicative actions on the status of interlocutors and their future relations. The literature is stronger in examining related pragmatic practices than in directly theorizing or measuring air muka, which creates a clear opportunity for future research that uses naturally occurring Malay interaction, participant explanations, and comparative designs attentive to power, institutional setting, and communication medium. A more precise account will emerge when dignity, politeness, face, and relational repair are examined together while their conceptual differences are maintained.

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