

## The Mediating Role of Motivating Language in the Relationship Between Leaders' Interpersonal Communication Competence and Employee Performance in Malaysian Service SMEs

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### ABSTRACT

An organisation's success largely depends on its human resources, particularly its employees, who need to be motivated and supported to perform effectively. Research indicates that leaders who possess strong interpersonal communication skills are better able to guide and manage their workforce. This quantitative cross-sectional study investigates how leaders' interpersonal communication competence influences employee performance in Malaysian service small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and examines the mediating role of motivating language in this relationship. Although prior research has separately linked leadership communication and employee outcomes, limited empirical work has explained the mechanism through which leaders' communication competence translates into improved employee performance within SME contexts, particularly in developing economies. Drawing on leadership communication and motivating language theory, the study proposes that motivating language functions as an important behavioural pathway connecting leaders' interpersonal communication competence with employees' work performance. Online survey employed the Perceived Leadership Communication Questionnaire (PLCQ) to measure leaders' Interpersonal Communication Competence, direction-giving items from the Motivating Language Scale (MLS), and Employee Performance Job Assessment Scale. Data were collected from employees working in Malaysian service SMEs and analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). The findings indicate that leaders' interpersonal communication competence positively relates to motivating language and employee performance, and motivating language significantly mediates the relationship between communication competence and performance. These results extend leadership communication literature by empirically demonstrating the mediating mechanism of motivating language in SME settings and provide practical insight for organisations seeking to enhance employee performance through communication-based leadership practices.

**Keywords:** *Motivating language, leadership communication, interpersonal communication competence, employee performance, mediating effect.*

### INTRODUCTION

Human resources are essential for improving productivity and effectiveness across a firm's social structure (Alam et al, 2022). Safar, Ramlawati & Saleh (2023) contend that governing bodies of organisations and employees should embrace a collaborative approach that

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emphasises cooperation and mutual benefit to sustain the organisation's ongoing expansion and safeguard its current standing in the economic market. Wijayanti et al. (2020) found that organisations have little chance of achieving their goals if there is a lack of peace and harmony among their members; thus, leaders and employees must work together to fulfil the vision and mission of the organisation. According to Tahir et al. (2021), the development of a reputation is not based on fortunate circumstances, but rather it is connected to feedback systems, communication activities, stakeholder relations, organisational operations, management, and leadership.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a crucial role in Malaysia's economy, as they contribute significantly to the country's gross domestic product (GDP), accounting for around MYR500 billion, which is equivalent to 38% of the GDP. Furthermore, according to the SME Finance Forum report of 2021, SMEs are responsible for up to 90% of all start-ups in 176 countries. In addition, Hossin et al. (2023) stated that these firms account for more than 50% of the global gross domestic product and employ over 66% of the workforce. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) also confirms that SMEs contribute 33% to the gross domestic product (GDP) and account for approximately 45% of the total employment in emerging economies.

The focus of this study is on Service SMEs, including informal companies, which contribute to around 50% of the GDP in various developed and developing nations, such as Malaysia (Mustaffa, 2022). Despite their significant contributions to the economy, Service SMEs in Malaysia continue to face challenges due to factors such as globalisation, competition, advances in technology, stakeholder pressures, and changes in customer expectations. These challenges can negatively impact employee performance under pressure, as highlighted by Hermawati and Wahjoedi (2022). Ramdan et al. (2022) also emphasised the importance of Service SMEs in Malaysia, as they accounted for 97.2% of business growth in 2020 and contributed 38.2% to the country's GDP in 2021.

The success of a leader is assessed based on their ability to convey a vision, objectives, strategy, and a set of attitudes that gain support and momentum (Lynn-Sze, 2021). Effective communication between a leader and their employees is a critical element in enhancing the performance of Malaysian workers (Dewi et al., 2020; Rasool Khan, Zaman & Khan, 2025). The Interpersonal Communication Competence (ICC), which is a recurring pattern observed in casual settings, is considered a vital factor for the success of an organisation. A study by Saraih et al. (2019) emphasised the need for more empirical evidence on enhancing interpersonal communication within businesses. This study highlights that improving interpersonal communication can positively impact employees' job performance. Falah and Prasastiningtyas (2021) underline the significance of communication in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in this area. Managers must exercise patience when communicating to prevent misunderstandings. Given its importance, this study adopts the leader's interpersonal communication competence as a measure of employee performance in service SMEs, as these SMEs rely heavily on communication compared to other forms of SMEs. This study aims to bridge the knowledge gap identified by Newman et al. (2020) and Ting Feng et al. (2022), who called for further research on how a leader's interpersonal communication competence affects employee performance.

The present research endeavours to enhance comprehension of the influence of motivating language on employee performance in the Malaysian context, as suggested by prior research (Rabiul, 2021; Sondergaard, 2023). As acknowledged by Hosseinabadi (2022),

communication serves as a form of motivation, while Motivating Language operates as a mediator. Enhancing employee performance is an established strategy employed by leaders, which enables organisations to achieve their objectives promptly. As such, motivation is regarded as a vital determinant in this study, as it has been established to significantly impact employees' job performance in terms of reliability (Al-Musadieq et al, 2018). Previous investigations have examined the effects of motivating language on employee outcomes (Rabiul, 2021; Sondergaard, 2023), but additional insights are necessary to understand how this impacts the interpersonal communication competence of leaders and employee performance in the Malaysian context (Hemakumara, 2020; Hosseinabadi, 2022). Rabiul et al. (2021) emphasised the novelty of motivating language, particularly in developing Asian countries such as Malaysia. Similarly, Sondergaard (2023) recommended the examination of motivating language as a mediator. Consequently, this research aims to fill the identified research gaps.

To address these gaps, this study aimed to Alam et al. (2022) examined the relationship between leaders' ICC and ML, Al-Musadieq et al. (2018) measured the relationship between ICC and EP, Ali and Kashif (2020) investigated the relationship between ML and EP, and Amirrudin et al. (2021) measured the mediating effects of ML between ICC and EP. This study adds to the corpus of knowledge by applying three connected and relevant theories to the research topic: interpersonal communication competence theory (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984), Motivating Language Theory (Sullivan, 1988), and the Theory of Human Motivation (Maslow, 1943). The final expectation of this study is to provide a more comprehensive understanding and practical guide on how companies can manage the relationships between leaders and their followers.

This study addresses an important gap in leadership communication research. While earlier studies have examined leadership style, interpersonal communication, or motivation independently, there remains limited empirical evidence explaining how leaders' interpersonal communication competence translates into improved employee performance through specific communicative behaviours. Furthermore, research focusing on motivating language as a mediating mechanism within Malaysian service SMEs remains scarce. By integrating interpersonal communication competence with motivating language theory, the present study contributes to the literature by testing a mediation framework that clarifies the communication process through which leaders influence employee performance in SME environments.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Interpersonal Communication Competence and Employee Performance*

Elvie (2019) recognises the communication skills of a leader as one of the most potent factors in corporate communication. The literature on this topic highlights the importance of leaders' ability to communicate clearly and effectively with their staff. In the 21st century, communication serves as a means for individuals and groups to communicate, comprehend, and transmit messages through a reciprocal process (Mustaffa, 2022). As a result, employees are more likely to respond favourably to interactions with supervisors that are both respectful and appropriate (Mustaffa, 2022). Salama (2021) posits that employees are more likely to respond positively to communication from supervisors that is both respectful and suitable. Interpersonal communication differs significantly from written communication because it is

fleeting and is typically maintained only once. Therefore, assessing the nature of a leader's interpersonal communication occurs in real-time.

Most companies in Malaysia have a strong foundation undoubtedly possess strategic planning profiles to ensure that their organisations remain at the forefront of the industry. Putri (2018) stated that the importance of maintaining a robust level of communication between the organisation's members, namely the leaders and employees, to avoid any misunderstandings regarding a particular notion, is overlooked. To enhance employee performance, a leader must possess proficient Interpersonal Communication Competence (ICC) from the beginning (Rasool Khan et al., 2025). These reviews confirm that leaders' interpersonal communication competence has a significant impact on employees' performance. Khan and Gul (2022) suggested that further research should prioritise the advancement of soft skills, including proficiency in interpersonal communication, and integrate these talents into businesses to enhance performance.

H1: There is a positive and significant relationship between a Leader's Interpersonal Communication Competence and Employees' Job Performance.

#### *Interpersonal Communication Competence and Motivating Language*

Interpersonal communication plays a crucial role in an organisation as it enhances mutual understanding among employees and superiors and facilitates the coordination of diverse activities or tasks. Inadequate interpersonal communication can impede collaborative efforts and result in increased stress and dissatisfaction among personnel (Tahir et al., 2021). Motivating language, also known as motivation, refers to the force, desire, necessity, passion, pressure, or psychological mechanisms that stimulate an individual or a group to accomplish tasks aligned with their desires. Matondang et al. (2021) discussed the subject of how to effectively motivate subordinates to develop a strong enthusiasm for their profession, leading them to exert maximum effort and utilise their full range of capabilities and skills to achieve organisational goals. Internal communication, which refers to the transmission of information between individuals within an organisation, is an essential element in creating successful work environments. Leaders devote a significant portion of their effort to creating and delivering knowledge to their staff. The content and transmission method of communications may have significant effects on the results of followers. Effective communication skills enable leaders to exert influence over others. Employing appropriate language at the appropriate time can inspire employees to achieve desirable personal and organisational goals (Salama, 2021). Utilising interpersonal interactions is highly beneficial for enhancing work motivation. Interpersonal communication facilitates the transmission of several elements, such as openness, empathy, support, pleasant emotions, and the promotion of equality. Interpersonal communication facilitates acceptance and fosters a sense of kinship and enjoyment between leaders and subordinates, ensuring easy message transmission and creating a feedback loop. Such interventions are undeniably beneficial for enhancing teacher work motivation (Saraih et al., 2019).

H2: There is a positive and significant relationship between a Leader's Interpersonal Communication Competence and Motivating Language.

#### *Motivating Language and Employee Performance*

An organisation's success and establishment highly depend on employee motivation, and a motivated employee will willingly feel a sense of duty to complete a given task effectively if it

can yield positive outcomes and contribute to the organisation's development (Elvie, 2019). Work motivation is a contextual factor that fosters innovative, coordinated, and enduring workplace conduct. Sondergaard (2023) defined work motivation as the internal drive within an employee that empowers them to fulfil organisational tasks and objectives effectively. A worker's diminished output resulting from idleness, delayed task submission, and absence indicates a deficiency in work motivation. Motivation is undoubtedly a remedy for unproductive work ethics and is essential for instilling the enthusiasm and commitment required to meet expectations in people.

Motivating Language Theory (ML) is a captivating framework that presents schemata. This demonstrates how leaders speak to their followers and can impact the well-being of employees, their performance, job happiness, and the company's outcomes. Ellahi et al. (2022) found that servant leaders can enhance favourable subordinate attitudes and behaviours by skilfully employing motivating language in their communication with subordinates. Literature analysis suggests that motivation has a substantial influence on employee performance. However, despite the existence of several studies that have shown positive results in terms of the impact of motivational language on employee and organisational outcomes, there is a lack of research in this area, as highlighted by the limited number of studies conducted on motivating language (Suntani et al., 2021). Furthermore, amid the recent medical crisis caused by COVID-19, it was discovered that a leader's use of Motivating Language played a crucial role in enhancing employee performance (Singh et al., 2024). This study aims to evaluate the influence of motivational language on employee performance based on the hypothesis provided by utilising updated statistical data and metrics.

H3: There is a positive and significant relationship between motivating language and employee performance.

#### *Motivating Language, Interpersonal Communication Competence and Employee Performance*

According to Singh (2014), a leader's ability to communicate effectively with others is very influential in motivating employees to perform delegated tasks and responsibilities. Effective communication offers employees valuable feedback and motivation during smooth organisational change. The degree of communication intensity directly affects the levels of job satisfaction, contentment with communication conveyance, and motivation within the company among personnel. Employee motivation can be perceived optimistically or pessimistically based on how interpersonal communication is conducted (Delgado, 2021). Communication establishes distinct connections that support job satisfaction and staff performance by promoting motivation. Proficiency in interpersonal communication and motivation are strongly interconnected without any complexities.

Ma'ruf et al. (2019) found that empowering interpersonal communication significantly affects an individual's motivation. Implementing an empowerment system within a company, along with management's creation of a supportive environment for employee engagement and effective communication, significantly affects work motivation. This is achieved by clearly communicating expectations to employees, recognising their work achievements, and providing feedback to enhance their performance.

A leader's use of motivating language is crucial for improving employee performance. While it is positive that there is a clear connection between leaders' interpersonal communication and their use of motivating language, it is essential to note that not all leaders possess the same proficiency in communication, particularly when it comes to motivating language. This lack of competence can negatively affect employees' performance. This study sought to investigate the impact of leaders' use of inspiring language on employees' job performance, building upon the highlighted gaps in knowledge regarding motivating language in Malaysia (Rabiul et al., 2021).

H4: Motivating language mediates the relationship between leaders' interpersonal communication competence and employees' job performance.

## METHODOLOGY

### Sampling procedure

This study examined whether there is a positive correlation between a leader's interpersonal communication ability and employee performance (EP) and whether ML acts as a mediator in this relationship. The study employed a multi-stage sampling approach. First, purposive sampling was used to select eight service-based SMEs in Malaysia, ensuring a representative and unbiased selection of companies from the population of 983,994 service SMEs, which comprise 85.5% of the total SMEs in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). Subsequently, purposive sampling was used to select organisations within the selected service-based SMEs to gather respondents who met the criteria relevant to the study, ensuring the collection of 300 valid responses, surpassing the required sample size of 138 (see Figure 1). determined by G\* Power calculations.

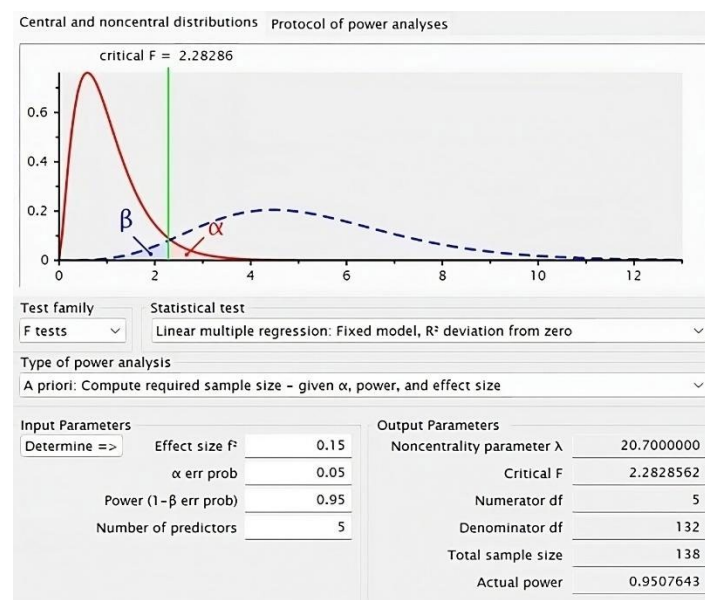


Figure 1: Sample size calculation

The researchers obtained permission to gather data once the ethical aspects of the procedure were highlighted, and the importance of this research to the human resource teams in the target organisations was emphasised. The researchers confirmed that any aspect of the work covered in this manuscript that has involved human subjects has been conducted with the ethical approval of all relevant bodies and that such approvals are acknowledged

during data collection. The questionnaires were distributed and completed over three months, from February 2024 to April 2024. An online survey was conducted using platforms such as Google Forms, in which participants were provided with a hyperlink or QR code to access and complete the survey electronically. We used various follow-up methods to accelerate the data collection process, including email, telephone, and human visits. Most respondents were more responsive to personal follow-ups, which helped to ensure a higher participation rate.

In alignment with ethical standards and guidelines governing research involving human participants, informed consent was rigorously obtained prior to the commencement of the study. Specifically, verbal consent was solicited and secured through detailed discussions between the researcher and each participant. During these discussions, participants were thoroughly briefed on the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and anticipated benefits. To ensure comprehensive documentation, the verbal consent was substantiated by having participants sign a supervisor letter, thereby attesting to their informed understanding and voluntary participation. This protocol ensures that all participants provided explicit, informed consent, adhering to the highest standards of ethical research practice.

This research was granted ethical clearance by the Technology Transfer Office at Multimedia University, Malaysia (Approval Number EA0292024). All human participant procedures were carried out in accordance with the institutional research committee's ethical standards. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained in accordance with the ethical guidelines for research involving human participants.

The research instrument included the necessary ethical statements that adhere to all ethical procedures. The study adheres to ethical principles, ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. The survey questionnaire also assured the participants that the data collected would be used solely for research purposes, reported in aggregate form, and stored securely. Participation was voluntary, and consent was obtained before the respondent's participation and by completing the survey.

The population of this study surpasses the minimum sample size required for social sciences, which is 30, while retaining a 95% confidence level (Louangrath & Sutanapong, 2019). This study administered an English and Bahasa Melayu survey, finding that English is the lingua franca in Malaysia, and Bahasa Melayu is the local language, divided into four parts. Part 1 was related to the respondents' profiles and sociodemographic characteristics. Part 2 measured participants' perceptions of their leaders' communication. Part 3 relates to employees' perceptions of using motivating language in their leaders' speech. Finally, since this study used a questionnaire instrument to collect data, this instrument commonly encompasses self-report scales to examine the explanatory or predictor variables and the dependent or criterion variables (Ting Feng et al., 2022).

#### *Measurement Instruments and Scales*

Amiruddin et al. (2021) state that trustworthy instruments produce consistent results and boost study credibility when analysing targeted variables. This study shows that earlier research has assessed factors using the same methods (Louangrath & Sutanapong, 2019). Leaders' ICC is measured by the perceived leadership questionnaire (Delgado, 2021). A 12-item bipartite survey, the Perceived Leadership Communication Questionnaire (PLCQ), compares leader and subordinate replies. PLCQ-SR and PLCQ-OR are the scale's "self-rating"

and "other-rating" sections. In this study, which assesses employees' one-way opinion of the boss, just the six-item "other rating" portion is needed.

Motivating Language (ML) was assessed using a scale (Mayfield, Mayfield, & Kopf, 1995). The 24-item scale has three subscales: direction-giving, empathic, and meaning-making. This research focuses on direction-giving language as a motivator. The study focused on 10 construct-related items. Singh et al. (2024) and Sondergaard (2023) established that direction language significantly impacts employee performance. For assessing employee performance and meeting organisational goals, the Employee Performance (EP) Scale is effective (Cortes, 2023). To examine the study's dependent variables, this survey was used. Employee performance refers to job practices and company goals. Aptitude, inclination, satisfaction, drive, surroundings, and workplace management affect employee performance, according to research.

### *Pilot Test*

Research methodology requires pilot testing to find and fix issues before executing a project. A pilot study with a small sample size can help researchers identify and address issues with the research design, methodology, data collection instruments, and procedures, improving questionnaire validity and reliability (Pearson, 2020). Malaysian SMEs provided 50 replies for this pilot survey.

### *Reliability Test*

This study first analysed Cronbach's alpha's precision using SPSS. The table below shows that each variable has excellent internal consistency. The results made the questionnaires statistically viable for further study (see Table 1).

Table 1: Reliability Test Results

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha
ICC	.869
ML	.939
EP	.908

Coefficients often range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater internal consistency. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all four measures were significantly high, suggesting a robust connection among the items within each scale and a substantial degree of dependability, which implies that the components within each assessment consistently assess the same underlying construct or concept. A higher alpha value indicates a stronger correlation between survey questions, suggesting a more accurate measurement of the same construct (Amirrudin et al., 2021). A Cronbach's alpha value greater than 0.90 implies high internal consistency (Saidi & Siew, 2019).

### *Construct Validity*

Bartlett's test of sphericity for all variables is significant ( $p < 0.01$ ), and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index is more than the minimum value of 0.60. Therefore, the KMO value for ICC is 0.922, ML is 0.956, and EP is 0.965, which are all  $> 0.60$  (see Table 2). This implies that the data is eligible for factor analysis because it satisfies the set validity requirements.

Table 2: Validity Test Results

ICC	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.922
	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1470.103
		df	15
		Sig.	<.001
ML	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.956
	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2962.396
		df	45
		Sig.	<.001
EP	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.965
	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	3881.043
		df	66
		Sig.	<.001

## RESULTS

### *Descriptive Analysis*

Table 3 provides a comprehensive summary of the overall attributes of 300 participants in this research. The study analysed the attributes of the participants according to their gender, age, educational background, length of employment, business sector, division/department, and leadership role within the organisation. This study offered a detailed participant profile by offering the respondents' general characteristics. This information provided a basis for additional analysis and interpretation of the research findings, facilitating a more comprehensive comprehension of the many viewpoints and backgrounds represented in the sample. According to the data in Table 2, most respondents were female, accounting for 51.7%. The most significant proportion of respondents (40.3%) belongs to the age group of 30-39 years old. 35% of the respondents have obtained a postgraduate degree, representing the overwhelming majority. Furthermore, a significant proportion of the participants are employed in the wholesale and retail sector, specifically in service-oriented small and medium enterprises (SMEs), with 29% working in Sales and Marketing. Moreover, concerning tenure, most participants had been employed for a period ranging from 6 to 10 years, accounting for 37.7% of the respondents. Ultimately, 40.3% of participants occupy leadership roles within their respective departments.

Table 3: Respondents' demographic profile

Demography	Count	%
<b>Age</b>		
20-29 years old	114	38
30-39 years old	121	40.3
40-49 years old	54	18
50-59 years old	11	3.7
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	145	48.3
Female	155	51.7
<b>Level of education</b>		
SPM (High School)	90	30
STPM (Pre-U)	37	12.3
Diploma	28	9.3
Undergraduate Degree	40	13.3
Postgraduate Degree	105	35

<b>Work experience</b>		
0-2 years	65	21.7
3-5 years	43	14.3
6-10 years	113	37.7
10 years and above	79	26.4
<b>Business Segment</b>		
Education	25	8.3
Health	23	7.7
Professional Services	40	13.3
Hospitality	54	18
Transportation	9	3
Computer Industry Services	39	13
Wholesale and Retail Trade	87	29
Telecommunication	23	7.7
<b>Department</b>		
Management	46	15.3
Sales & Marketing	88	29.3
Human Resources	33	11
Finance	13	4.3
Accounting	18	6
Public Relations	23	7.7
Computer and IT	22	7.3
Administration	29	9.7
Engineering & Technical	13	4.3

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#### *Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM)*

Two phases make up partial least squares (PLS) analysis: outer and inner model testing. The outer model testing step assessed the constructs' measurement indicators' correctness and consistency. Conversely, inner model testing examines study assumptions and constructs relationships. The study tested the structural model using SEM-PLS. Modern partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) may accurately estimate cause-and-effect relationship models based on known theories across multiple variables. The choice of PLS-SEM is appropriate because the study examines predictive relationships between constructs and includes mediation analysis with multiple latent variables. This approach is widely recommended for exploratory models and studies focusing on prediction in organisational research contexts. Over the past 20 years, construction management research has increasingly used this method, especially for smaller samples (Zeng et al., 2021). However, population factors determine when small sample sizes are sufficient. PLS-SEM may estimate complex linkages and provide important predictions without requiring data or link definition (Qalati et al., 2022). PLS-SEM directly assesses latent variable scores, uses a flexible residual covariance structure to identify factors, and predicts accurately in small sample sizes, asymmetric distribution, and interdependent observations (Zeng et al., 2021). The study tested all hypotheses simultaneously, allowing for detailed correlation analysis. Two PLS-SEM measurements are used in the investigation. Discussing the Reflective Measurement Model and Structural Model. The Reflective Measurement Model evaluated construct convergent and discriminant validity.

*Convergent and Discriminant Validity*

Convergent and discriminant validity are subsets of construct validity. Convergent validity assesses the extent to which one observable variable is correlated with other observable variables within a specific construct. Convergent validity should be evaluated by assessing the average variance extracted (AVE) of measured constructs, which should be less than 0.5, according to Zeng et al. (2021). To assess the measurement model, it is necessary to calculate the factor loading of each item within a construct. According to Qalati et al. (2022), an item is regarded as appropriate for retention when it has a value between 0.6 and 0.7. The present investigation found that all outside loadings exceeded 0.7 (Table 4). Therefore, the study met the requirement for individual item dependability. Joseph Jr (2021) established a guideline for calculating the composite reliability coefficient. They suggested that a cutoff of 0.7 or higher should be used. Therefore, all outer loadings must exceed 0.7 to meet the minimal criterion loading. In terms of the reliability and validity of the construct, this study used a benchmark value of .70 or above for Cronbach's Alpha, Rho-a, and composite reliability. Additionally, an Average Variance Extracted value larger than 0.5 was used to validate convergent validity (Saadaoui et al., 2024).

Table 4: Convergent validity assessment

	<b>AVE</b>	<b>CR</b>	<b>Rho-A</b>
<b>EP</b>	0.752	0.970	0.970
<b>ICC</b>	0.760	0.936	0.938
<b>ML</b>	0.741	0.961	0.962

\*Average Variance Extracted (AVE) >0.5, Composite Reliability (CR) >0.7, Dijkstra-Henseler (Rho-A) >0.7

Discriminant validity examines whether a component is truly separate from other constructs. Two primary metrics for assessing discriminant validity are the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and cross-loadings (Zeng et al., 2021). Fornell and Larcker (1981) introduced the conventional metric and recommended that the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of each construct should be compared to the squared inter-construct correlation, which represents the amount of shared variance, between that construct and all other constructs measured reflectively in the structural model (Hair et al., 2019). Table 5 displays the cross-loading values for all variables and their corresponding indicators. The cross-loading values for each variable that is highlighted are much greater than the others. Therefore, the cross-loading values are deemed acceptable.

Table 5: Discriminant validity using HTMT

	<b>EP</b>	<b>ICC</b>	<b>ML</b>
<b>EP1</b>	0.855	0.688	0.691
<b>EP10</b>	0.882	0.645	0.676
<b>EP11</b>	0.884	0.690	0.677
<b>EP12</b>	0.874	0.675	0.672
<b>EP2</b>	0.880	0.664	0.677
<b>EP3</b>	0.872	0.673	0.680
<b>EP4</b>	0.814	0.655	0.658
<b>EP5</b>	0.884	0.702	0.703
<b>EP6</b>	0.884	0.661	0.654
<b>EP7</b>	0.853	0.634	0.645
<b>EP8</b>	0.855	0.649	0.681
<b>EP9</b>	0.864	0.644	0.638
<b>ICC1</b>	0.638	0.802	0.724

<b>ICC2</b>	0.725	0.916	0.844
<b>ICC3</b>	0.676	0.905	0.827
<b>ICC4</b>	0.652	0.871	0.802
<b>ICC5</b>	0.665	0.854	0.787
<b>ML1</b>	0.710	0.852	0.904
<b>ML10</b>	0.580	0.704	0.737
<b>ML2</b>	0.697	0.790	0.877
<b>ML3</b>	0.685	0.827	0.882
<b>ML4</b>	0.680	0.817	0.894
<b>ML5</b>	0.651	0.780	0.866
<b>ML6</b>	0.692	0.801	0.868
<b>ML7</b>	0.620	0.743	0.829
<b>ML8</b>	0.672	0.806	0.871
<b>ML9</b>	0.669	0.783	0.869

The Fornell-Larcker discriminant validity criterion involves comparing the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value with that of a prior table. Each variable in the table must have an AVE value that is higher than the AVE value of the previous variable (Hair et al., 2019). The covariance table is unnecessary because the data have been standardised, resulting in covariances that are equivalent to correlations. Table 9 displays the Fornell-Larcker discriminant validity criterion for all variables. The AVE value for each variable is much higher than the previous AVE value. Therefore, the confirmation of the Fornell-Larcker Discriminant Validity Criterion was obtained in Table 6.

Table 5: Fornell–Larcker discriminant validity criterion

	<b>EP</b>	<b>ICC</b>	<b>ML</b>
<b>EP</b>	0.867		
<b>ICC</b>	0.768	0.872	
<b>ML</b>	0.774	0.819	0.861

### *Structural Model*

Figure 2 shows the structural model that represents the causal-predictive relationships between the constructs, whereas the measurement models represent the relationships between each construct and its associated indicators. In PLS-SEM, the structural model is sometimes referred to as the inner model, and the measurement models are sometimes referred to as outer models. To develop path models, researchers need to draw on both structural theory and measurement theory, which indicate the relationships between the elements of a path model (Sarstedt et al., 2017).

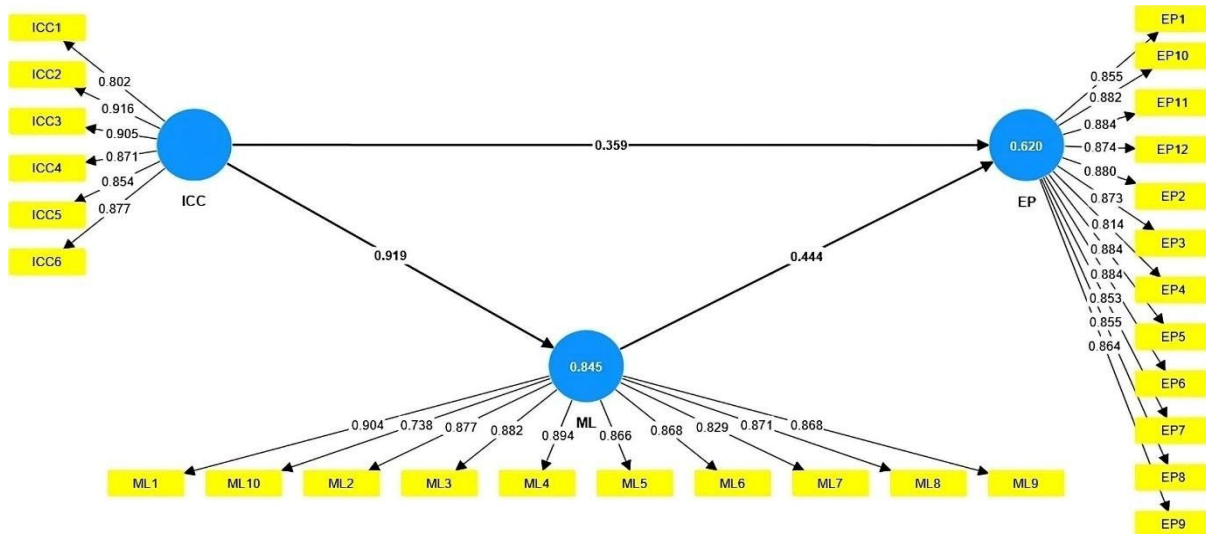


Figure 2: Structural model

Table 6: Direct effect

	Std Beta	Std Error	T-Value	P- Value	Decision	Q <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup>	VIF
<b>H1: ICC→EP</b>	0.120	0.115	2.432	0.043	Supported*	0.474	0.635	7.450
<b>H2: ICC→ML</b>	0.509	0.507	9.500	0.000	Supported*	0.000		5.190
<b>H3: ML→EP</b>	0.235	0.229	2.372	0.018	Supported*	0.651	0.885	8.731

Hypothesis 1 posited that there is a positive and significant relationship between ICC and employee performance. The findings presented in Table 10 indicate that ICC has a significant and positive impact on employee performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia. This supports the first hypothesis, with a coefficient of 0.120, a t-value of 2.432, and a significance level of  $p < 0.05$ .

According to Hypothesis 2, there exists a positive and significant relationship between ICC and ML. The data in Table 10 illustrate that ICC displays a significant and positive effect on motivating language among SMEs in Malaysia. This finding is consistent with the second hypothesis, which has a coefficient of 0.509, a t-value of 9.500, and a significance level of  $p < 0.01$ . Additionally, the coefficient of 0.235, t-value of 2.372, and significance level of  $p < 0.05$  also support the third hypothesis that there is a positive and significant relationship between motivating language and employee performance.

The Q<sup>2</sup> effect size can be calculated to assess how the exclusion of a specific exogenous variable affects the Q<sup>2</sup> value in the structural model. A high Q<sup>2</sup> value indicates a strong predictive relevance; it is important for the difference between the predicted and original values to be minimal. A Q<sup>2</sup> value greater than zero signifies an acceptable level of predictive accuracy (Ali & Kashif, 2020). Hence, Q<sup>2</sup> values of 0.474 and 0.651 have a large predictive relevance, respectively (Amirrudin et al., 2021). The values of R<sup>2</sup> are 0.635 and 0.885, indicating that the model is deemed effective in estimating the impact of independent variables of ICC and ML on the dependent variable EP. The variance inflation factor (VIF) examines the issue of multicollinearity. The higher the VIF, the higher the possibility that multicollinearity exists. However, for VIF higher than 10, there is significant multicollinearity that needs to be corrected (Chin, 1998). VIF values greater than 5 indicate high collinearity and indicate that there is no multicollinearity problem (see Table 6).

Table 7: Indirect effects

	Std Beta	Std Error	T- Value	P- Value	Decision	R <sup>2</sup>	Q <sup>2</sup>	95% CI LL	95% CI UL
<b>H4: ICC→ML→ EP</b>	0.120	0.115	2.432	<0.05	Supported*	0.635	0.474	0.013	0.208

The cross-validated redundancy Q2 is used to test the predictive relevance of the structural model. The blindfolding procedure resulted in a Q2 value of 0.474, which is more than 0, ensuring the model's predictive relevance (Joseph Jr, 2021). The results of the indirect effects are presented in Table 7, and both the t and p values indicate a full mediation effect. Hence, the results reveal that the indirect effect of ICC is significant, and it can be concluded that ML mediates the relationship between ICC and EP.

### *Bootstrapping*

In this study, the bootstrapping procedure is utilised to determine the significance of the Path Coefficient. Structural path coefficients, depicted in the path diagram, represent the weights of the connections between the factors. When data is standardised, the route loadings can range from 0 to 1. These loadings must be substantial. The significance of the path is determined by a P-value of less than 0.05 and a T-value of more than 1.96 (Khaltar & Moon, 2020). Tables 6 and 7 display the statistical significance of the findings in this investigation. The mediating relationship in this study was acknowledged based on those criteria. Therefore, it has been verified that motivating language (ML) acts as an intermediary between the leader's interpersonal communication competence (ICT) to enhance employee performance (EP).

Hence, the results provide several important implications for leadership communication practices within SMEs. The findings suggest that leaders' interpersonal communication competence plays a critical role in shaping employee outcomes, particularly when such competence is expressed through motivating language behaviours. This indicates that effective leadership communication is not limited to the transmission of information but also involves providing encouragement, clarifying organisational goals, and reinforcing employees' sense of purpose. For SME leaders, these results highlight the importance of developing communication strategies that combine interpersonal competence with motivation to enhance employee engagement and work performance. In practical terms, leadership development initiatives within SMEs may benefit from incorporating communication training that emphasises motivating language techniques, enabling leaders to translate their communication competence into behaviours that positively influence employee performance.

## DISCUSSION

This study's findings enhance insight into the relationship between employees' perception of the interpersonal communication competence of their leaders, motivational language, and its impact on employee performance in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia. This discussion section examines and evaluates the findings concerning the research objectives and other literature.

The findings confirm Hypothesis 1, demonstrating a significant and positive correlation between ICC and employee performance among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia. The results of this study are consistent with a prior study that highlights the significance of efficient communication between leaders and employees (Elvie,

2019). The coefficient (0.120) and t-value (2.432) indicate the strong influence of ICC on improving employee performance. The findings emphasise the essential value of leaders' communication abilities in cultivating a favourable work atmosphere and enhancing employee performance and productivity.

Secondly, the findings of Hypothesis 2 show a significant and positive correlation between Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) and employee performance among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia. This aligns with prior research that emphasises the importance of effective communication and motivating language in the workplace (Putri, 2018; Rasool Khan, et al, 2025). The coefficient of 0.509 and t-value of 9.500 indicate a strong influence of ICC on motivational language (ML). These results underscore the value of leaders' communication skills and the role of motivating language in creating a positive work environment and enhancing employee performance and productivity.

Furthermore, the results confirm Hypothesis 3, providing evidence of a significant and positive correlation between motivating language and employee performance. The result reinforces existing research indicating that motivating language has a significant impact on employee behaviour and organisational performance (Ellahi et al., 2020). The significant coefficient (0.235) and t-value (2.372) confirm the significance of leaders' employment of motivational language in improving employee performance within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia.

Moreover, the findings provide evidence in support of Hypothesis 4, suggesting that motivating language plays the role of a mediator in the relationship between leaders' ICC and employees' performance. The study implies that leaders' competent communication abilities contribute to staff performance, if not entirely, in part, by employing language that motivates them. The notable indirect impact of ICC on employee performance via motivating language highlights the significance of integrating motivational tactics into leadership communication strategies. Interpersonal communication can influence employees' perceptions of motivation, either positively or negatively, contingent upon the method of information transfer (Delgado, 2021). This form of interaction fosters distinctive relationships that, consequently, enhance job satisfaction and employee performance through the utilisation of motivating language. A significant relationship exists between a leader's proficiency in interpersonal communication competence and their employment of motivating language, which improves employee performance (Singh, 2014). The results of this study align with previous studies and reinforce the role of communication and motivation in influencing employee performance (Delgado, 2021; Singh, 2014; Singh et al., 2024; Ma'ruf et al., 2019). Based on the demographic profile of the respondents, it is worth noting that almost half of the participants (40.3%) hold management positions in their respective departments who understand and value interpersonal communication and the use of appropriate motivating language to inspire and drive desirable results.

## CONCLUSION

The findings offer several practical implications for SME leaders and organisational decision-makers. First, the results highlight the importance of strengthening leaders' interpersonal communication competence, as effective communication behaviours such as clarity, empathy, and supportive interaction can directly and indirectly enhance employee performance. Second, organisations should incorporate motivating language practices into leadership development programmes by training managers to communicate organisational

goals clearly, provide encouragement, and reinforce employees' sense of meaning at work. Third, SME managers can utilise motivating language as a strategic leadership communication tool to foster higher engagement, stronger work motivation, and improved job performance among employees. From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to leadership communication literature by demonstrating that motivating language functions as a critical explanatory mechanism linking leaders' interpersonal communication competence with employee performance within the SME context.

This study examines the relationship between ICC, motivating language, and employee performance in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia. The study uses a comprehensive theoretical framework and empirical analysis to demonstrate strong positive connections between leaders' interpersonal communication competence (ICC) and employee performance, as well as between motivating language (ML) and performance. Moreover, ML is recognised as a mediator in the relationship between leaders' ICC and employee performance. These findings highlight the significance of competent interpersonal communication of leaders as perceived by employees and the adoption of motivating language in improving staff productivity, which directly impacts organisational success. The study offers significant insights for professionals, enhances theoretical understanding, and provides empirical evidence to direct future research in organisational communication and motivation.

The results of this study have many implications for practical application. Organisations should prioritise investing and allocating resources towards leadership development and communication training that focuses on improving leaders' interpersonal communication skills. These programmes should emphasise the significance of clear and effective communication in motivating staff performance. In addition, leaders should integrate motivational language into their communication strategies to inspire and drive staff towards the accomplishment of organisational objectives. This study strengthens theoretical significance by incorporating three relevant theories: interpersonal communication competence theory, motivating language theory, and the theory of human motivation. The incorporation of motivating language as a mediator between leaders' interpersonal communication competence and employee performance contributes to the current literature on leadership communication and motivation. This new understanding improves the theoretical comprehension of the fundamental mechanisms by which leadership communication affects employee results. This study addresses a gap in the existing literature by examining the application of communication and motivation theories specifically in the setting of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia. The findings offer valuable insights into the distinct challenges and opportunities encountered by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and contribute to the larger comprehension of organisational behaviour in this context. This study presents empirical evidence that confirms the thorough approach and rigorous statistical analysis that strengthen the credibility of the findings. By incorporating bootstrapping approaches and mediation analysis, the study gains methodological rigour.

Although the research has made valuable contributions, it is important to recognise that there certainly are several limitations. First, the research was carried out exclusively in the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia, which might restrict the applicability of the results to other types of organisations. Future studies should examine the proposed relationships in diverse cultural settings to gain a more extensive

comprehension of the relationships among leadership communication, motivating language, and employee performance. Furthermore, the study was based on data that was self-reported, which could potentially be influenced by biases. In future studies, it would be beneficial to employ objective metrics or qualitative techniques that validate the results.

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