

## SMALL TALK TOPIC SELECTION IN SAUDI ARABIAN AND MALAY DRAMAS: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY

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**Abstract.** Small talk is a form of communication that primarily functions to maintain social relationships rather than convey substantive information. The selection of small talk topics is culturally influenced, with certain topics considered appropriate in one culture but sensitive in another, potentially leading to misunderstandings. This study presents a comparative analysis of small talk topics in Saudi Arabian and Malay dramas through the lens of cross-cultural study. Utilizing Manzo Framework of Small Talk and Schneider Frame Theory of Small Talk Topic Selection, the study adopts a qualitative descriptive methodology. Data are analysed using content and discourse analysis to examine small talk topics selected Saudi drama “Bait Tahir” and Malay drama “Bukan Cinta Sempurna”. In total, 463 small talk expressions were analysed in Atlas.ti version 9 software, yielding 29 topics in Saudi Arabia drama and 27 topics in Malay drama. The findings reveal both cultural parallels and divergences in topic preferences, shedding light on how sociocultural norms influence everyday conversational choices. The findings of this study are intended to contribute to a deeper understanding of cross-cultural study, enrich the field of intercultural communication, and offer insights for educators, future researchers and communication experts who aim to foster mutual understanding across cultural boundaries.

**Keywords:** *small talk, small talk topic, cross-cultural communication, Malay dramas*

### Introduction

Small talk, which is sometimes written off as non-essential, superficial, unimportant and trivial is crucial for building connection with others and managing social relationships. Small talk serves as an effective social lubricant in our everyday communication by establishing rapport, breaking the ice, and expressing politeness and friendliness (Ibrahim, 2025; Sariah et al., 2025; Puspitasari et al., 2024; Appadurai, 2022). The concept of small talk introduced by Malinowski is still found to lack explanation and is too general (Mugford et al., 2024; Toma, 2024; Schneider, 1987). As a result, communication scholars began to study small talk from a broader perspective, including the definition and function of small (Ilmi, 2021; Hidayati and Wardi, 2020; Yusuf, 2019; Gradinaru, 2018; Burnard, 2003), the selection of small talk topics (Wahab et al., 2021; Alexe and Savu, 2016; Endrass et al., 2011; Schneider, 1987), and also the use of small talk according to gender (Pluszczyk, 2020; Sari, 2019; Afrin and Afrin, 2018; Koester, 2010). Research on small talk topic selection highlights the influence of situational and interpersonal factors such as time, place, social distance, age, and communicative purpose (Kembaren, 2020; Bechberger et al., 2016; Schneider, 1987). More recent studies emphasize culture as a key determinant of topic choice, as norms of appropriateness vary across societies (Maíz-Arévalo, 2017; Barron and Black, 2014; Endrass et al., 2011). Empirical findings show that preferred small talk topics differ across cultural contexts, including Indonesian, Malay, and Arab communities, where topics such as health, food, personal background, and social rituals are commonly employed (Trihartanti and Septian, 2021; Tamimi Sa’d, 2019; Sulaiman and Wilson,

2018; Katemba, 2016; Harun and Rahman, 2005). Various small talk studies that have been conducted by researchers since the past until now show that small talk is increasingly relevant to be studied scientifically in line with the currents of globalization and the development of the field of sociolinguistics.

Despite its widespread use, studies on small talk that specifically focus on the selection of small talk topics in Saudi Arabian and Malay societies remain limited. This scarcity may be attributed to the perception of these languages as less widely studied, resulting in comparatively less attention from sociolinguistic researchers than that afforded to English (Mustaffa, 2022; Rahman et al., 2022; Kamil and Mohamad, 2020; Inayatusufi, 2018). Moreover, comparative research on small talk topic selection across different cultural contexts is still relatively underdeveloped. Existing comparative studies predominantly examine Western cultures in relation to other cultural groups. For instance, House et al. (2023) compare small talk practices between Western and Chinese cultures, Vatsadze (2019) examines Western and Georgian cultures, and Agustiyani (2020) compare Western and Indonesian cultures. Hence, this research identifies small talk topics in these two cultural contexts using drama as a medium of naturalistic data. This study seeks to close the gap by focusing on comparison of small talk topics in Saudi and Malay contexts. This study is particularly guided by two key theoretical perspectives, Manzo (2014) Framework of Small Talk, which categorizes expressions based on phatic function and structure, and Schneider (1987) Frame Theory of Small Talk Topic Selection, which analyses how speakers select appropriate small talk topics and structure their interactions.

## Materials and Methods

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach with content analysis and discourse analysis to examine the similarities and differences in small talk topics in the Saudi Arabian drama *Bait Tahir* and the Malay drama *Bukan Cinta Sempurna*. The dramas were purposively selected based on their shared thematic focus on family conflict and their comparable duration, each ranging between 200 and 250 minutes to ensure consistency and comparability in the analysis. Content analysis is a systematic and scientific approach used to examine communicative content by focusing on the meanings, functions, and contextual dimensions of messages (Prasad, 2008), whereas discourse analysis refers to an analytical approach that examines how spoken language is used in social and cultural contexts to achieve specific communicative purpose (Aririguzoh, 2022). This method is particularly appropriate for the present study, as content analysis and discourse analysis is widely utilised in communication research to investigate patterns of discourse and interactional practices (Kuznetsov and Kuznetsova, 2024; Aririguzoh, 2022; Jasmi, 2012; Prasad, 2008).

Data collection involved the systematic identification of small talk expressions from both dramas. These expressions were identified and coded according to Manzo (2014) Framework of Small Talk and Schneider (1987) Frame Theory of Small Talk Topic Selection with the support of Atlas.ti version 9 software. Subsequently, a manual comparison of the small talk topics was conducted to identify how cultural factors shape small talk topics in Saudi Arabian and Malay drama. Content analysis was used to identify small talk topics and their frequency, while discourse analysis examined the contextual use of these topics. To ensure intercoder reliability, two examiners were selected to review and validate the coding of the data. Any discrepancies were discussed

and resolved to enhance coding consistency. This approach strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

## Results and Discussion

The extracted 462 small talk expressions were categorized into various topics. The researcher identified 228 small talk expressions in the Saudi Arabian drama *Bait Tahir* and 234 small talk expressions in the Malay drama *Bukan Cinta Sempurna*. This indicates that the frequency of small talk expressions in Saudi Arabian and Malay dramas exhibits only a slight difference. This finding is consistent with expectations, as the data were collected from dramas of comparable duration, ranging from 200 to 250 minutes. Based on the table above, both Saudi Arabian and Malay dramas demonstrate the use of small talk across a variety of topics to facilitate communication and maintain social relationships. An analysis of the differences in small talk topics between Saudi Arabian and Malay dramas of this study indicate that the Saudi Arabian drama *Bait Tahir* contains 29 small talk topics, whereas the Malay drama *Bukan Cinta Sempurna* includes 27 topics (*Table 1*). In term of similarity, analysis reveals that 22 small talk topics are shared between the two cultural contexts, namely; (1) personal relationships, (2) business, (3) social media, (4) food, (5) tasks, (6) gender, (7) fashion, (8) feelings, (9) job, (10) religion, (11) family, (12) death, (13) current activities, (14) achievements, (15) weather, (16) entertainment, (17) appearance, (18) marriage, (19) talent, (20) finance, (21) health, and (22) property. Among the identified small talk topics, five topics; food, feeling, family, marriage, and health were observed to occur with particularly high frequency and demonstrated a similar pattern in both dramas. This similarity can be attributed to the emphasis on politeness in interpersonal communication within both societies (Al-awaid and Mohammed, 2024; Al-Jabali, 2024; Ahmad et al., 2022; Alakrash and Bustan, 2020). Furthermore, the researcher observed that the commonality of these small talk topics is reinforced by the shared practice of Islam in Saudi Arabian and Malay cultures, which encourages adherents to maintain harmonious relationships with others, including through everyday conversational exchanges including small talk (Samsudin et al., 2024; Alasmari, 2023; Alammash et al., 2021).

**Table 1.** Comparison of Small Talk Topics.

No	Saudi Arabia	Frequency	Malay	Frequency
1	Personal relationship	5	Personal relationship	20
2	Business	22	Business	2
3	Social media	2	Social media	1
4	Food	20	Food	20
5	Task	4	Task	7
6	Gender	2	Gender	5
7	Fashion	4	Fashion	3
8	Feeling	30	Feeling	26
9	Job	8	Job	5
10	Religion	21	Religion	1
11	Family	19	Family	25
12	Death	2	Death	2
13	Current activity	13	Current activity	29
14	Performance	6	Performance	2
15	Weather	1	Weather	4
16	Entertainment	1	Entertainment	6
17	Appearance	8	Appearance	1
18	Marriage	17	Marriage	15
19	Talent	8	Talent	22
20	Financial	7	Financial	6

21	Health	15	Health	19
22	Property	1	Property	7
23	Medicament	4	Education	1
24	Disease	1	Ambition	1
25	Personal issue	1	Atmosphere	1
26	Reputation	1	Origin	2
27	Country	1	Rank	1
28	Age	2	-	-
29	Nickname	2	-	-
Total	29 small talk topics	228	27 small talk topics	234

With regard to differences, the Saudi Arabian drama *Bait Tahir* features 29 small talk topics, while the Malay drama *Bukan Cinta Sempurna* contains 27 small talk topics. Although the overall number of small talk topics in both dramas is comparable, differences emerge in terms of frequency and the presence of additional topics. For instance, medical issues, personal issue, and country appear in *Bait Tahir* but are absent in *Bukan Cinta Sempurna*. Apart from that, four small talk topics that exhibited notable differences in frequency between both dramas include business, religion, talent and personal relationship. This distinction highlights cultural differences in conversational focus, reflecting how social norms and community values shape the subjects considered appropriate or significant for everyday interaction in each context. These differences suggest that narrative factors influence the selection of small talk topics in both Saudi Arabian and Malay dramas. Specifically, *Bait Tahir* presents a broader range of small talk topics, while *Bukan Cinta Sempurna* emphasizes topics aligned with the social norms of the Malay community, though in a more limited scope. This finding is consistent with previous research (Budiawati, 2021), which demonstrates that small talk can also be identified in dramas or films. However, the present study extends earlier work by providing a detailed comparative analysis of small talk topics across two different cultural contexts, whereas the previous study focused solely on the functions of small talk in English-language films.

In addition, the differences in small talk topics between the Saudi Arabian drama *Bait Tahir* and the Malay drama *Bukan Cinta Sempurna* can be attributed to cultural factors. Culture plays a significant role in shaping small talk topics, as each culture possesses distinct social orientations, values, and communication norms (Saaida, 2023; Warchulski, 2021). Speakers from different cultural backgrounds develop unique communication styles, including strategies for engaging in small talk and selecting appropriate topics. Saudi Arabian society, for instance, emphasizes hierarchical politeness and assertive tribal identity, whereas Malay society tends to be more flexible in the selection of small talk topics, prioritizing the maintenance of social relationships while adhering to cultural norms (Uri et al., 2025; Rashid et al., 2023; Farahat, 2022). This cultural distinction is reflected in Saudi Arabian dramas, where topics such as reputation appear prominently due to the emphasis on status and dignity. The findings of this study align closely with Sariah et al. (2025) who examined small talk among foreign workers in Indonesia, including greetings such as “How are you?” and “Selamat pagi.” However, the present study extends the concept of small talk by examining topic selection within the narrative and cultural contexts of Saudi Arabian and Malay dramas.

Three examples of small talk topic analyses are illustrated in this section. The analysis below highlights small talk topics in Saudi Arabian and Malay dramas that exhibit closely similar frequencies across the two cultural settings: (1) feeling; (2) food; (3) health. In feeling, based on *Table 2*, speakers in both dramas employ feelings as a topic of small talk by expressing emotions in a light and affectionate manner. Such

expressions function to bridge relational gaps and mitigate tension between the speaker and the listener. Although the topic of feeling is not explicitly addressed in Schneider (1987) Frame Theory of Small Talk Topic Selection, it emerges as a novel finding that expands the scope of Schneiders's Frame Theory within the Saudi Arabian and Malay cultural context. While in food, based on *Table 2*, speakers in both dramas employ food as a topic of small talk to initiate conversation, demonstrate familiarity, and reinforce family relationships. Although food is not explicitly addressed in Schneider (1987) Frame Theory of Small Talk Topic Selection, this study suggests that it should be recognized as a culturally significant topic, particularly within the Saudi Arabia and Malay context, thereby extending the scope of Schneiders's Frame Theory. Lastly for health, Based on *Table 2*, speakers in both dramas use health as a topic of small talk to fill conversational gaps, promote rapport, maintain camaraderie, and reinforce family relationships. Although health is not explicitly addressed in Schneider (1987) Frame Theory of Small Talk Topic Selection, this study suggests that it should be recognized as a culturally significant topic, particularly within the Saudi Arabia and Malay context, thereby extending the scope of Schneiders's Frame Theory.

**Table 2.** *Small Talk on related Topic.*

Category	Saudi Arabia	Malay
Small talk on feeling related topic	<p>عيدة: ... (ابتسام) يوسف: مرة وحشتيني عيدة: ... (ابتسام)</p> <p>Aida: ... (smiles) Youseef: I miss you so much Aida: ... (smiles)</p> <p>Youssef presented a bouquet of red roses to persuade his wife and expressed his longing as soon as she opened the door. This expression of longing served as the opening for their conversation. Youssef had returned to the house following a period of emotional distance and a minor argument.</p>	<p>Mama Qistina: ... Qistina: Ma, jom kita balik. Tiba-tiba Qis takde mood la nak tengok drama (merajuk) Mama Qistina: Pulak Qistina's mother: ... Qistina: Mom, let's go home. I suddenly don't feel like watching the drama. (sulking) Qistina's mother: Alright. Qistina, who was sulking at Luqman, asked her mother to come home to avoid seeing him. Recognizing Qistina's intentions, Luqman simply smiled. The interaction occurred in a relaxed and casual manner.</p>
Small talk on food related topic	<p>يوسف: ... لطيفة: وأنا أقول، ريحة الأكل هادي من فين؟ اتاري إنت هنا. يوسف: جبته ل "عيدة" هذا بس هي اتعشت.</p> <p>Youseef: ... Latifa: Grandma was wondering where the smell of food was coming from. Apparently, you came. Youseef: I bought it for Aida, but she already had her lunch. Latifa walked into the living room and greeted her grandson, Youseef to start a conversation. Latifa didn't expect Youseef to stop by her house. Youseef bought food and placed it on the table in the living room.</p>	<p>Diana: ... (senyum) Puan Sahara: Sedapnya bau. Masak apa ni? (ketawa) Diana: Mi goreng je ibu, simple je (senyum) Diana: ... (smiles) Mrs. Sahara: It smells delicious. What are you cooking? (laughs) Diana: Fried noodles, mom, just a simple dish (smiles)</p> <p>Mrs. Sahara greeted her daughter, Diana, who was cooking in the kitchen, and praised the aroma of her cooking. She expressed anticipation to taste Diana's preparation. The interaction reflects a spontaneous, relaxed, and friendly conversation</p>
Small talk on health related topic	<p>جوما: ... يوسف: أبوي، إنت تمام؟ جوما: أنا تمام! إيش بكم؟ أنا تمام. شايقين في شي غلط؟</p> <p>Jumaa: ... Youseef: Dad, are you okay? Jumaa: I am okay. Why with all of you?</p>	<p>Mak Bibah: Saya dah ikut sukatan puan. Kalau saya letak lebih garam, nanti puan jugak yang sakit. Benjamin: Betul kata Mak Bibah, bu. Bu, ibu dah start kena jaga kesihatan ibu. Puan Sahara: ... (senyum) Mak Bibah: I followed your instructions, ma'am. If I add too much salt, it will affect your health.</p>

	<p>Does it look like I am not okay?</p> <p>Youseef initiated the conversation by inquiring about his father Jumaa's health. Prior to the wedding, Jumaa had consumed a large amount of Habsa herbal water, and upon exiting the car, he appeared dizzy.</p>	<p>Benjamin: Mak Bibah is right, mom. You need to start taking care of your health. Mrs. Sahara: ... (smiles) Benjamin supported the view of Mak Bibah, a maid who was concerned about her employer's health. Benjamin then advised his mother to start taking her health seriously. Mak Bibah prepared less salty food in an effort to take care of her employer's health. This conversation took place in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere.</p>
<p>Small talk on personal relationship related topic</p>	<p>جوما: كان المفروض اني انا اشتغل المشروع دا لوحدي بدونهم. ولا تشتغله انا وانتي. زكية: انا معاك لو نتي تروح القمر. جوما: انا اللي ابغاه اني اخلص من قرف أبو ريان دا.</p> <p>Jumaa: I think I should work on this project on my own, or maybe just the two of us. Zakiya: I'm willing to go to the moon with you. Jumaa: Actually, I want to solve the problem with Abu Rayan. Zakiya responded in a gentle manner to safeguard her husband's feelings and to soothe him as he experienced stress related to their children's problems.</p>	<p>Luqman: Slow talk, slow talk, slow talk, tak dengar jugak (gurauan). Diana: Eh bang, cerita la siapa. Siapa perempuan tu? (senyum) Luqman: Tak payah. Nak tahu buat apa? (gurauan) Luqman: Slow talk, slow talk, slow talk, he still doesn't listen (joking). Diana: Hey bro, tell me. Who is she? (smiling) Luqman: No need. Why do you want to know? (joking)</p> <p>Diana shifted the topic of conversation and attempted to tease her brother, Luqman about the female worker whom he had helped by intervening in Aniq's actions. The conversation was delivered in a light-hearted and friendly tone.</p>
<p>Small talk on talent related topic</p>	<p>جوما: ... أبو ريان: ما شاء الله. إبداع، إبداع! ويش هالموهبة هذي؟ جوما: الله يسعدك يا أبو ريان</p> <p>Jumaa: ... Abu Rayan: Wow! Great! What an incredible talent! Jumaa: May God bless you, Abu Rayan. Abu Rayan praised Jumaa's talent, as Jumaa had stepped in to perform in place of Abu Siraj, who was unable to attend the wedding, leaving only his band members present. Impressed by Jumaa's performance, Abu Rayan offered spontaneous and casual praise, highlighting his admiration for Jumaa's skills.</p>	<p>Qistina: ... (nyanyi) Abu: Uhh Qis, suara kau ni, merdu betul! Hajar: Apa pasal kau tak jadi penyanyi je Qis? Qistina: ... (singing) Abu: Uhh Qis, your voice is so melodious! Hajar: Why don't you just become a singer, Qis? Abu praised Qistina's singing talent as she picked pineapples while singing a traditional Malay song. This interaction occurred in the plantation, where Qistina and several other workers were communicating in harvesting pineapples.</p>
<p>Small talk on business related topic</p>	<p>زكية: يا سيدي جوما، أنت وكلامك العسل جوما: يفكر نغير نشاط المحل عطارة بدل الزفارة زكية: ... (ابتسام)</p> <p>Zakia: Oh, my dear, you and your sweet words! Juma: I'm thinking of changing the shop's business to a spice shop instead of this awful one. Zakia: ... (smiles) Jumaa was touched by his wife's gentle words to be more open to sharing his problems. Jumaa explained that he wanted to convert the fish shop into a spice shop for the sake of the future of their children and grandmother.</p>	<p>Amanda: Sayang, are you okay? You look tired. Aniq: Biasalah, syarikat perniagaan besar pun. I kena kerja keras. Amanda: ... Amanda: Honey, are you okay? You look tired. Aniq: It's normal, even in big company. I have to work hard. Amanda: ...</p> <p>Aniq continued his conversation with his girlfriend, Amanda, explaining that he had to manage numerous responsibilities and work diligently, as the company left by the late Tuan Budi was a large enterprise. The conversation was relaxed and friendly, showing his care for her feelings.</p>

Three small talk topics that exhibit significant differences in frequency between Saudi Arabian and Malay dramas are presented and analyzed in the following table: (1) personal relationship; (2) talent; (3) business. In personal relationship, Based on *Table*

2, speakers in both dramas employ personal relationships as a small talk topic to enhance and reinforce family bonding. However, the findings indicate that this topic occurs more frequently in Saudi Arabian drama (20 expressions) than in Malay drama (5 expressions). Although personal relationship is not specifically included in Schneider (1987) Frame Theory of Small Talk Topic Selection, the findings of this study indicate that it constitutes a culturally significant topic in the Saudi Arabian and Malay contexts, thereby broadening the application of Aitchison (2000) framework. For talent, based on *Table 2*, speakers in both dramas use talent as a topic for small talk to praise and show appreciation for musical performance and singing skills. Nevertheless, the results show that this topic appears more often in Malay dramas (22 expressions) compared to Saudi Arabian dramas (8 expressions). This small talk can strengthen the social relationship between the speaker and the listener. While Schneider (1987) Frame Theory of Small Talk Topic Selection does not explicitly mention talent, this study highlights it as a culturally small talk topic in both Saudi Arabian and Malay contexts, thereby expanding the relevance of Schneider (1987) Frame Theory. In business, based on *Table 2*, the speaker in both dramas employ business as a topic of small talk, which can be appropriately categorized as a business-related theme since the discussion revolves around a proposed change in business direction and company workload. While business is not specifically discussed in Schneider (1987) Frame Theory of Small Talk Topic Selection, its occurrence in this context suggests a novel extension of the framework, thereby broadening the understanding of small talk topics. This finding contributes to the expansion of existing knowledge regarding the dimensions of small talk within the cultural context of Saudi Arabia and Malay. These findings underscore the role of culture in shaping topic prioritization, as speakers draw on culturally specific norms and social conventions when selecting small talk topics, resulting in distinct patterns of topic preference across different cultural contexts.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that small talk topics in Saudi Arabian and Malay dramas exhibit more similarities than differences, with 22 shared topics such as personal relationships, food, feelings, family, marriage, and health, occurring frequently in both contexts. Minor differences in small talk topics, including the presence of disease topic and reputation topic in Saudi Arabian dramas and ambition topic and rank topic in Malay dramas, reflect the influence of cultural norms and social context on topic selection. Overall, the findings suggest that, while small talk serves a similar function in maintaining social relationships across cultures, the choice and emphasis of topics are subtly shaped by cultural and societal factors. Future research can expand on this by including spoken interactions or other media genres. This study offers several important implications for theory, practice, and cross-cultural communication. The findings highlight the influence of culturally specific norms on small talk topic selection, emphasizing the need for educators and communication trainers to consider cultural context when teaching social interaction strategies. By identifying additional topics beyond Schneider (1987) Frame Theory of Small Talk Topic Selection such as feelings, business, and financial matters, the study extends existing theoretical frameworks and demonstrates the importance of flexibility in small talk research. Moreover, the study reinforces the functional significance of small talk in fostering interpersonal intimacy, maintaining social harmony, and managing social distance. By revealing both shared

and divergent patterns in Saudi Arabian and Malay dramas, this research offers practical insights for promoting culturally sensitive communication and understanding across diverse social contexts.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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