



## **Investigating the Barriers and Key Determinants of a Successful International Business Communication Strategy and the Survivability of Indonesian SMEs Exporters in Pandemic Era**

**Sri Hartati <sup>1,2\*</sup> Engkus Kuswarno <sup>3</sup>, Purwanti Hadisiwi <sup>4</sup>, Funny Mustikasari Elita <sup>5</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Communication Science, Padjajaran University ([sri19020@mail.unpad.ac.id](mailto:sri19020@mail.unpad.ac.id))

<sup>2</sup> School of Business and Management, Institute Technology Bandung ([sri.hartati@sbm-itb.ac.id](mailto:sri.hartati@sbm-itb.ac.id))

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Communication Science, Padjajaran University ([kuswarno@unpada.ac.id](mailto:kuswarno@unpada.ac.id))

<sup>4</sup> Faculty of Communication Science, Padjajaran University ([purwanti@unpad.ac.id](mailto:purwanti@unpad.ac.id))

<sup>5</sup> Faculty of Communication Science, Padjajaran University ([funny.mustika@unpad.ac.id](mailto:funny.mustika@unpad.ac.id))

**ABSTRACT:** The research examines two main objectives presented in this study, that are to identify main barriers of a successful business communication strategy faced by Indonesian SMEs exporters to survive in the pandemic times on the first stage, and then continued with an investigation on the critical determinants of a successful business communication strategy to increase the survivability of Indonesian SMEs during pandemic on the second stage. Qualitative methodology was adopted to achieve the research objectives. Primary data were collected through structured interviews, while secondary sources such as international trade databases and historical statistical data from the Indonesian Bureau of Statistics (BPS) and the Indonesian Small and Medium Enterprises Ministry were used to triangulate the data. The population of the study was Indonesian exporters and trade support institutions. In total, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted using the convenience sampling method and snowball sampling. Analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews revealed that an effective international business communication strategy was a vital determinant to increase Indonesian exporters SMEs' survivability trade promotional activities. Major key determinants that affected the survivability of Indonesian SMEs exporters to the foreign market include the need for internalizing industries, intergovernmental engagement, international market recognition of Indonesian SMEs exporters, formidable business intelligence, dynamic and transparent communication within stakeholders, and strategic relationships. The study offers several recommendations to increase the potentiality of developing an effective international business communication strategy to increase survivability for SMEs exporters during the pandemic era.

**KEYWORDS:** International business communication strategy; survivability; COVID-19 pandemic era; exporters; Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs); Indonesian

---

**DOI: 10.48047/ecb/2023.12.si8.593**

## INTRODUCTION

Small and Medium Enterprises, from now on abbreviated to SMEs, are business entities and are productive economic enterprises owned by individuals or business entities. The types of SME businesses include various types, namely culinary, fashion, crafts, and services. In Indonesia, the number of SMEs, including micro-businesses, in 2018 was 64,194,057 (Statistic, 2020). The increase in the number of SMEs is currently proliferating in line with the emergence of many potential and business opportunities in various regions.

The increase in the number of SMEs has made a positive contribution to the Indonesian economy. In addition to contributing to the Indonesian economy, SMEs are businesses that can withstand the crisis. It was proven that when the crisis occurred in 1998, SMEs were able to survive. The advantages of SMEs in surviving the storms of crisis are for many reasons:

1. SMEs generally produce consumer goods and services that are close to people's needs.
2. SMEs do not rely on imported raw materials and use local resources in human resources, capital, raw materials, and equipment.
3. SME businesses generally use relatively low capital.

With these advantages, SMEs are less likely to feel the effects of the global crisis, usually marked by a deep decline in the rupiah exchange rate. However, when COVID-19 hit countries globally and including Indonesia, all economic, health, education, and transportation activities experienced disruption, including those experienced by SMEs.

SMEs affected by the COVID-19 pandemic are engaged in various types of businesses ranging from culinary, fashion, handicrafts, services, and agri-business-based businesses. These businesses have experienced disruptions starting from the procurement of raw materials, production, distribution, and marketing, terminating some employees or dividing employee working hours in rotation, availability of raw materials, reduced demand are conditions experienced by SMEs throughout Indonesia, including in West Java.

Several SMEs in West Java that has been affected by their business activities due to the COVID-19 situation include SMEs fostered by the Industry and Trade Service and the West Java Province Small and Medium Business-Cooperative Service. These highly reputable SMEs are creative industry

SMEs engaged in the production, distribution, and marketing of fashion, coffee and craft products. This creative industry grew 7.55% and contributed to GDP with a value of IDR 1,100 trillion in 2019 (Investor Daily Indonesia, 2020). Even this creative industry sector has a high workforce absorption, reaching 17 million people in 2019.

Referred to passages of information explained above, if we explored further and limit our focus to mapping the contribution of Indonesian SMEs exporters toward the economic development in Indonesia since the number is still limited; thus, the contribution is limited as well (below 30% of the GDP). Based on this fact, it is clear that the potentiality for export for Indonesian SMEs is still immense. Even in the era of a pandemic, Indonesian SMEs went crisis; however, the survivability of these SMEs exporters is still relatively high (over 50%).

During the pandemic, these exporters' SMEs tried to survive by carrying out several strategies and adapting their businesses, starting from production and marketing. The process of continuous business activities carried out by SMEs is inseparable from business communication carried out by the owner and management. This communication can inform and make potential consumers aware of the existence of the products offered by SMEs and can also try to persuade consumers to stay interested in the products offered. In addition, the role of communication in doing business is to direct consumers to differentiate the products offered by one company from another.

One of the SME respondents stated in one of their interviews that their business activities, which are more focused on exporting to foreign markets, are affected by the pandemic. Thus, it becomes a massive changer in personalizing their business strategy and their innovative business model during the pandemic COVID-19 era. In their interview, the other SME respondent stated that the pandemic COVID-19 era that hit Indonesia in February 2020 has successfully changed the business communication system carried out by their company, namely through online media.

The online media used are the website, marketplace, Instagram, email, WhatsApp, and Facebook. Another SMEs respondent stated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact was also felt by their company, thus required them to resolve the disruption of production activities to the point of stopping some employees or dividing employee work hours in rotation, availability of

raw materials, and reduced demand from within and outside the country.

The success of SMEs in surviving during the COVID-19 pandemic is inseparable from the business communication process built by SMEs when marketing their products to domestic and international markets. SMEs establish international business communications, namely to several countries, including Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, Australia, Thailand, China, Korea, Switzerland, Canada, Hong Kong, Turkey, China, Taiwan, and Spain. One of the business communications that is built is through networking.

The success in establishing the networking has dramatically influenced the increase in sales of products ordered by foreign consumers. The addition of international market access will have a positive influence on the company itself, as this is following what was stated by Chelliah ((Chelliah et al., 2010): 7) that involvement in the international market could have a positive impact on every company and sales results in foreign markets are proven to contribute to company revenue up to 70% of total sales. In his study, he stated that business communication is carried out not only for the national market but also for the international market. The cooperation that is built is the result of the networking that has previously been carried out.

Business communication established by SMEs with other companies both domestically and abroad has been successfully built through this network, where SMEs are always actively participating in the Trade Expo Indonesia (TEI) exhibition as well as overseas exhibitions facilitated by the Ministry of Industry and Trade, the Office of SMEs Cooperatives and associations. The business communication strategy is in line with what is done by several Indonesian SMEs in the coffee business to promote their exporting activities to several other countries, namely China, Turkey, Spayo, Korea, and Japan.

This pandemic situation, according to the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs, there are around 37,000 SMEs who report that they are very seriously affected by this pandemic, marked by around 56 percent reporting a decrease in sales, 22 percent reporting problems in the aspect of the financing, 15 percent reporting on problems with the distribution of goods, and 4 percent reported difficulties in obtaining raw materials, supply and demand (Phillipson et al., 2020). These problems are also increasingly widespread when linked to the large-scale social restrictions (PSBB) policy implemented in several regions in Indonesia. With the existence of the PSBB, economic activities, especially production, distribution, and sales, will

experience disruption, which will further contribute to the performance of SMEs and the economy. The same thing is also conveyed from research conducted (Rahma Ainuh Mardiyah, 2020), which states that many companies have closed their businesses to prevent the spread of this community pandemic, and many factories, shops, and other SMEs have been forced to close their businesses because of the pandemic.

There are import and export restrictions, closing international and local borders with neighboring and neighboring countries, disrupted supply and supply chains, most industries and production companies stop operating (Comite, 2020). In the business world, communication activities cannot be separated. Communication is a significant factor for achieving organizational goals. Communication is a process of conveying information and meaning from sender to receiver using one or more written, oral, visual, and electronic media (Courtland & John, 2013: 490).

In connection with business, business communication is communication used in business or business interests, including various forms of communication, both verbal and nonverbal communication, to achieve specific goals. The business communication process is an integral part of SMEs' marketing locally, nationally, and internationally. The results showed that communication is crucial in conducting international business cooperation. The process of building business communication with domestic consumers and consumers abroad is not as easy as we imagine ((Tian & Borges, 2011).

Michael Porter in Syam (2000: 41-46) emphasizes the importance of the quality and ability of lobby (communication) in global market competition. According to him, a competitive nation is a nation that has a commitment and critical attitude towards quality, mastery of technology, intensification of market-oriented research and development, as well as skills in marketing global business negotiations. According to Syam (2000: 41-46), three aspects are driven in the face of global competition, namely aspects of the economy, technology, and communication. The field of communication, which includes marketing communications, advertising, negotiations, public relations, and intercultural business communication, is still seen to be marginalized. To form cross-cultural (international) business people, the ability to communicate is necessary.

In the constellation of global economic competition, the ability to market goods is not enough to rely solely on the instinct of "selling." However, it is necessary to establish a professional

business culture that includes quality commitment, work ethic, competition, market orientation, creative and innovative attitudes, and intercultural business communication skills. (Syam, 2000)

John W. Gold in (Syam, 2000), a business communication expert at the University of Southern California, said that most of the ability to penetrate foreign (international) markets by developed countries is significantly influenced by the understanding of business people towards the communication culture of partners. Business requires communication skills, especially intercultural business communication skills.

Many communication and marketing experts agree with Gold, one of whom is Takashi Inoue. Cross-Cultural Communication: A Japanese Viewpoint (1989) emphasizes the importance of intercultural understanding in export-oriented business. After conducting various evaluations, Inoue concluded that the many business failures suffered by American (and European) businessmen - when doing business with Japanese people - were because they were too imposing on the American "way" without trying to understand the characteristics and culture of Japanese business communication. (Syam, 2000)

From the various previous researches, it is clear that understanding and application of knowledge of intercultural business communication in international business interactions is necessary. Global trade competition is not merely competition for the quality of products and services but also competition for marketing tactics and strategies. In the context of the global market - which is culturally very diverse, of course, the politeness aspect in communicating intercultural business needs to be scrutinized and understood as well as possible.

If this is corrected, SMEs may become lame and giddy. In addition to the natural barriers to trade and investment, cultural barriers can also be significant challenges and obstacles for SMEs who wish to enter international markets. In international trade, there will be cross-cultural processes, ethnic groups and regions will be more robust so that managers of companies must be informed about cultural differences nationally, locally, and ethnically to win the international market.

International business communication is cross-cultural communication, so that there will be difficulties in the process, such as differences in traditions, customers, language, ways of thinking, and point of view (Pikhart, 2014). From this statement, it can be explained that entering foreign trade is different from domestic trade where many

aspects need to be considered, namely skills in using international languages. Thus, the ability to use international languages, namely English, is a skill that SMEs must possess because currently, English is the language that is still used as the primary language in various international meetings.

Research by (Kameda, 2005) conducted at companies in Japan states that English is an agent in globalization, so that all companies must accept and agree to it. Steven E Gump (2006: 4) states that English is the language used globally in business, so it is imperative to master it. Apart from language, those found in international business communications will be exposed to cultural differences.

Business actors must find the right way to promote their products or services to consumers and potential consumers. The market can accept the process of disseminating business messages with various situations and conditions of message recipients (consumers), both differences in background, perception, language, social, and culture. However, this can cause obstacles in the business communication process carried out by SMEs for both local, national and international markets (Sriussadaporn, 2006). Furthermore, he stated that international business is a business that involves two or more countries, where each country has different cultural traditions, languages, and policies, so that culture will be interrelated with business communication ((Yoshida, 2002); Chitakornkijasil, 2010; Tian, 2011). Culture is a crucial factor influencing the negotiation process and outcome. Furthermore, cultural values can influence international business negotiations in significant and unpredictable ways from the first to the last stages of negotiations (Leung et al., 2005: 367).

This research will focus on national and international business communication case studies on SME business communication when facing the COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of research, building business communication is an essential condition for every SME because it will impact the development of SME businesses. A current phenomenon, SMEs communicate their business using the media for local, domestic and foreign consumers, so it is necessary to study further how SMEs business communication changes in a pandemic situation. Therefore, this research focused on the two main research questions, that are :

1. What are the main barriers to a successful business communication strategy faced by Indonesian SMEs exporters to survive in the pandemic era?

2. What are the critical determinants of a successful business communication strategy to increase the survivability of Indonesian SMEs during the pandemic era?

Qualitative methodology was adopted to achieve this research objective, as it permitted the researchers to understand human behavior and

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Business is the interaction of various parties who have interests and complement each other in overcoming the problems at hand. The interaction of business stakeholders (producers, customers, communities, and distributors) is a community that exists in an open social system. Related to the practices of business activities that passed way over cultural borders, the negotiators involved will need to make cross-cultural business negotiations with many different people from many different cultures, thus requiring cross-cultural business communication strategies that are more dynamic and applicable to the situation. Tolerance for cultural change will influence business negotiations. The ability to adapt to different cultures is needed in conducting business negotiations to avoid conflicts that can occur due to differences in behavior styles, ways of thinking, and speaking styles.

Business communication is the activity of sharing information between people in a business. The information conveyed is in the form of opinions, ideas, and instructions presented personally or impersonally through symbols, signals, or actions. Business communication can be done verbally and nonverbally. The purpose of business communication is so that the target party can understand, accept and take positive action on the business message conveyed. The Face-Negotiation Theory, developed by Stella Ting-Toomey in 1988, provides a basis for predicting how humans will complete facial work in a different culture. Face or appearance refers to an image of a person in front of others and involves respect, honor, status, connection, loyalty, and other similar values.

Business communications carried out by SMEs are not only aimed at domestic businesses but also overseas businesses. Business communications carried out overseas, or international business communications will be different from business communications conducted domestically. SMEs that carry out business communications abroad will face the culture of each country. Cross-cultural business communication is communication used in the business world, both verbal and nonverbal, due

thoughts to identify preferences in the exporting trade promotion activities. The structure of this study consists of the introduction in the first section, followed by a literature review in the second section, and methodology in the third section. Findings and discussion will be discussed further in the fourth section and lastly, closed with a conclusion in the fifth section.

to cultural factors in a region, region, or country. Furthermore, based on references from Karfried Knapp (2004), *business communication* can be defined as an interpersonal interaction between group members who differ from one another in terms of the knowledge possessed by members and the form of their symbolic linguistic behavior. Intercultural communication is influenced by how people from different countries and cultures act, communicate and understand the world around them—culture influences communication subtly and profoundly.

Konijn (2008: 3) states in his study that currently, many communication systems used technology as a medium, not only for interpersonal communication but also organizational communication. The characteristics of interpersonal communication often assume that it must occur face-to-face. However, along with technology development, many means of communication have emerged and had greatly helped communication. The development of technology and the emergence of communication commonalities resulted in a shift in interpersonal communication, where previously communication was carried out without media or non-media. However, when this happens, evolution becomes mediated or mediated. The presence of this media can change communication (Hidayat D, 2012: 198). Media communication, computers are used for interpersonal communication and mass communication so that computer media communication can change the existing mass communication function by adding four functions of mass media, namely informing, explaining, entertaining, and transmitting culture. Computer media communication is fundamentally used for social interaction (Baldwin et al., 2004: 248).

Communication is the process of sending and receiving messages. Business communication is communication used in the business world, including various forms of communication, both verbal and nonverbal communication, to achieve specific goals. In the business world, a good communicator must have good communication skills, must also be able to use a variety of existing

communication tools or media to convey business messages to other parties effectively and efficiently so that the purpose of delivering business messages can be achieved (Purwanto, 2010: 4-5) According to Purwanto (2010: 5) business communication consists of five main elements, which are : (1) Community groups (businessmen, customers, Government, community organizations); (2) Information about needs and wants; (3) Availability of goods and services needed; (4) Ideas; and (5) Equipment, technology and space.

Business communication is very complex because it involves many parties. Any message conveyed through any media will be known by all who see it, whether it has a direct interest or not, and will respond to it. The response to the message can create a variety of impressions, both positive and negative responses that will relate to the sender's image. Business communication has four main unique characteristics, which are : (1) Oriented to give and get benefits; (2) Involving many parties; (3) Contains responsibility for the message conveyed; and (4) Mixed reactions. (Falefi & Purwoko, 2020).

The synergy of the five main business actors (i.e., business owner, Government, academics, artisans, and customers) are based on communication between them in an effort. International business communication is cross-cultural communication, so that there will be difficulties in the process, such as differences in traditions, customers, language, ways of thinking, and point of view ((Pikhart, 2014). From this statement, it can be explained that entering foreign trade is different from domestic trade.

Many aspects need to be considered, namely skills in using international languages, thus the ability to use international languages, namely English, is a skill that SMEs must possess because currently, English is the language that is still used as the primary language in various languages international meetings. A previous study by Kameda (2005:1) mentioned that English is an agent in globalization, so that all companies must accept and agree to it. Steven E Gump (2006: 4) states that English is the language used globally in business, so it is essential to master it. Apart from language, those found in international business communications will be exposed to cultural differences.

Business actors must find the right way to promote their products or services to consumers and potential consumers. The market can accept the process of disseminating business messages with various situations and conditions of message recipients (consumers), both differences in

background, perception, language, social, and culture, and this may cause obstacles in the business communication process carried out by SMEs for both local, national and international markets (Sriussadaporn, 2006: 14).

Furthermore, he stated that international business is a business that involves two or more countries, where each country has different cultural traditions, languages , and policies, so that culture will be interrelated with business communication (Yoshida, 2002; Chitakornkijasil, 2010; Tian, 2011). Culture is a crucial factor influencing the negotiation process and outcome. Furthermore, cultural values can influence international business negotiations in significant and unpredictable ways from the first to the last stages of negotiations (Sharma et al., 2020).

This research will focus on international business communication case studies on SME business communication in Indonesia when facing the COVID-19 pandemic. The research environment in this study is built in the form of multiple case studies to eight exporters SMEs business in Indonesia, with a focus on SMEs business in West Java island. Our study related that exporters SMEs in the Western part of Java Island are more developed than exporters SMEs in another island in Indonesia, especially in the creative business industry. The number of survivability of exporters SMEs in West Java Island is also higher compared to the other exporters SMEs in another island in Indonesia.

In the context of research, building business communication is an essential condition for every SME because it will impact the development of SME businesses. A current phenomenon, SMEs communicate their business using the media for local, domestic and foreign consumers, so it is necessary to study further how SMEs business communication changes in a pandemic situation.

Based on the above background, during the COVID-19 pandemic, SMEs have experienced changes in conducting business communications. In this case, SME business communication has shifted from face-to-face towards mediated business communication to digital media. This shift has also led to changes in the numerous changes carried out by SMEs, including their business model. This phenomenon has brought specific significant changes to how the company operates, how they earned them profits, how they managed their business, how they negotiate and solve problems, the decisional process within the company, and the survivability and sustainability of the companies. The evidence from interviews with SMEs stated that the current business communication is online,

including social media, marketplaces, and websites. Based on this, the researcher wants to know the barriers and critical determinants of the successful business communication strategy to increase the survivability of Indonesian SMEs during the pandemic era.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a qualitative method with a case study approach because the researcher wants to construct the reality in the field regarding the construction of West Java SME business communication in dealing with environmental changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike the other qualitative method approaches, case studies intensively analyze and describe a single unit or a system based on space and time. The topics customarily examined in case studies are individuals, events, or groups. Through case studies, researchers are also expected to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and the meaning that surrounds it.

In this case, the author wants to examine as much data as possible from the research subject, which is none other than West Java SMEs and West Java SMEs managers. In this study, the author will study as much as possible the research subject, which aims to provide a complete and in-depth view of the research subject. The type of research used is qualitative research with the case study method. According to Yin (2009), the case study research method is the right strategy to be used in research that uses how or why research questions, the researcher has little time to control the events being studied, and the focus of the research is on contemporary phenomena, to track contemporary events.

In the case study method, researchers focus on the design and implementation of research. The type of design in the case study includes single cases and multiple cases. Single case selection usually occurs in significant theory critical testing, extreme or unique cases, and the disclosure of the case itself. Whereas multiple cases are used for more stimulating and more vigorous findings, many sources to research and require extra time. There are 4 (four) types of case study designs, namely (Yin, 2009): (1) holistic single case; (2) Single-case embedded; (3) holistic multi-cases; and (4) multiple embedded cases (Yin, 2018:47).

The case study design that the researcher applied in this study was a single case design because it only examined the determinants of SMEs exporters' business strategy communication to increase their survivability during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Researchers use qualitative methods to describe and analyze the actual situation of SMEs in the field according to the conditions when the research was carried out, namely when the COVID-19 pandemic occurred. The data in question are data on business communication, how SMEs do it, how SMEs adapt to the environment being faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how SMEs can survive and enter new habits. In this case, the role of the researcher functions as an entirely consistent research tool, and the research results are obtained directly through observation and in-depth interviews to provide a detailed and descriptive description of the understanding of the business communication process that occurs in SMEs.

In this study, the subjects in this study were SMEs owners in West Java Province in Indonesia who, during the COVID-19 pandemic, were still able to carry out their business activities and had carried out business communication activities abroad. Subject selection criteria in this study are build based on three criteria, namely: (1) SMEs who receive guidance from the Cooperatives and SMEs Office and the West Java Province Industry and Trade Office 2019; (2) SMEs that belong to the creative industry; (3) SMEs that have carried out trading activities abroad at least to three (3) countries outside of Indonesia and (4) SMEs that are still managed to continuing their operational activities on the time of Pandemic COVID-19 and gain the ability to survive past Pandemic COVID-19. Based on these criteria, we obtained eight SMEs participants that are suitable to become our informants.

Researchers need several informants to obtain comprehensive data; the available informants consist of several vital informants and supporting informants. According to Moleong (2014:132), informants are needed to provide information and data related to the situation and condition of the object of research so that he has much experience about the research background. A key informant can help researchers quickly get information and has an essential role in the data and information needed by researchers in research. Key informants are selected based on how much the informant knows information related to the research focus and how much he or she can answer or convey that information to the researcher (Ulfatin, 2013:176). The key informants in this study are:

- 1) Director or owner of SMEs is used as an informant to find out more about the condition of SMEs from the beginning of their establishment, process, and development and during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2) Marketing Manager, it will be obtained how SMEs carry out the marketing process and the strategies used

- 3) Staff, as data support, especially the technology used in communication
- 4) Department of Cooperatives and SMEs of West Java Province, to obtain data related to the development of SMEs, guidance, participation, and facilitation provided to SMEs
- 5) Department of Industry and Trade of West Java Province, as an agency that plays a role in facilitating SMEs in foreign trade
- 6) Management of the West Java Import-Export Association, as one of the partners and sources of information for SMEs in conducting trade abroad

In order to get accurate data, the researchers conducted interviews with several key informants. The interviews transcripts were then transcribed automatically by using ATLAS TI Qualitative Software to minimize any potential bias due to personal sense of judgment. The transcription process following the strict guidance of indicators lists that are written on the author's note based on the past literature review, where each statement in the transcripts are being coded related to the indicators.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Further to the data analysis and the following research questions, five (5) main barriers were identified as the challenges faced by Indonesian SMEs exporters during the pandemic era. The research questions in this study are presented below.

1. What are the main barriers to a successful business communication strategy faced by Indonesian SMEs exporters to survive in the pandemic era?
2. What are the critical determinants of a successful business communication strategy to increase the survivability of Indonesian SMEs during the pandemic era?

Related to the first research question, we found shreds of evidence of five (5) main barriers that hinder Indonesian SMEs exporters from performing an effective business communication strategy to increase their survivability during a pandemic. These identified barriers are (1) reputational Barriers, (2) political Barriers, (3) strategic Barriers, (4) language barriers, and (5) communication barriers. Based on the text mining analysis, it is evident that these five (5) main barriers are critical as the main challenges that need to be addressed to provide solutions to build a successful business communication strategy to increase the survivability of Indonesian SME

exporters during a pandemic. The detail of the results can be observed in Figure 2 below.

### (i) Reputational Barrier

In this study, we found pieces of evidence of two (2) sub-indicators related to the reputational barrier, which are : (1) difficulty in building brand image internationally and (2) misrepresentation of product labeling. These two (2) sub-indicators are significant elements of reputational Barriers that are correlated with each other. Two respondents in this study stated that they had found significant difficulties in exporting their goods and services to the foreign country due to the identity of their products, which is built based on specific religious values (i.e. hijab products that are build based on Islamic values). The perceived misrepresentation of specific religious values itself, linked to the potentiality of being misrepresented in the product labeling and thus increased the potentiality of additional difficulties in building a brand internationally. A detailed description of the reputational barrier can be seen in Figure 2 below.

### (ii) Political Barrier

In this study, we found pieces of evidence of one (1) main sub-indicators related to the political barrier, which is the less participation of intergovernmental engagement. Two of our respondents stated that they faced severe difficulties maintaining the stability of freight cost on the shipping process during a pandemic, with all the restriction zones mandates and governments dynamic policy that changes quite frequently. One respondent stated that they were faced with entry barriers to selling their products to another foreign country because their name is similar to that of local brands, which required them to pursue justice through the legal system. The respondent stated they hoped the Government could solve this kind of problem with intergovernmental engagement between the Indonesian Government and the targeted foreign country. Detailed descriptions of political Barriers can be seen in Figure 2 below.

### (iii) Strategic Barrier

In this study, we found evidence of two (2) main sub-indicators that are related to the strategic barrier, that are : (1) lack of strategic relationship with other collaborators and (2) less developed business system intelligence. One respondent stated that their business faced difficulties during the pandemic due to



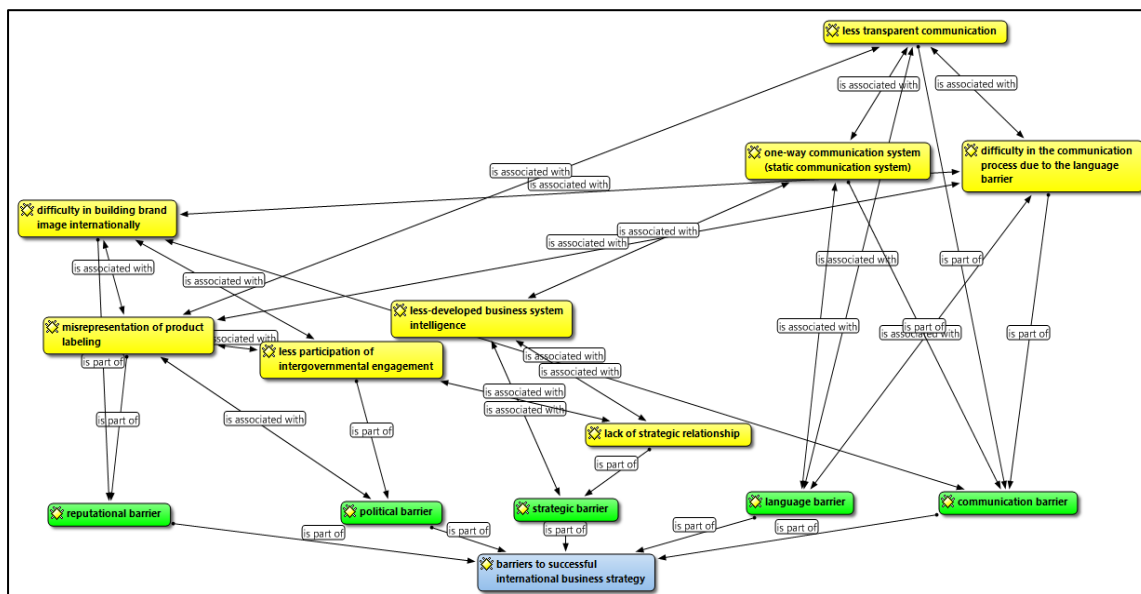


Figure 1 Key Barrier of a Successful International Business Communication Strategy and the Survivability of Indonesian SMEs Exporters in Pandemic Era

changes in their business model that required them to be more agile and flexible with their business decision-making process. They are also facing the urgent need to perform open innovation and continued with their products and services development in a limited timeframe, compared to before the pandemic. These changes made them increase their business risks and thus impacted another additional challenge to maintain their survivability. The continuous changes in the market itself required more volatile and more dynamic business system intelligence. They thus required the specific talents who can operate these business intelligence systems, specific talents that require higher employees remuneration programs, which brought another challenge to Indonesian SMEs. The latter is not as financially strong as the major

companies in Indonesia. The respondent stated that these problems would not hinder their SMEs' access to collaborate with other big industries in the areas. The related phenomena are treating such as for SMEs in the fertilizer industry; if they can collaborate with the significant farm and fertilizer industry in Indonesia, they will develop chances to grow together through the transfer knowledge process. The big company can increase their reputational performance and gain a position within the community; meanwhile, the SMEs can learn and further develop their methodology with access to a more advanced technological system. A detailed description of the strategic barrier can be seen in Figure 2 below.

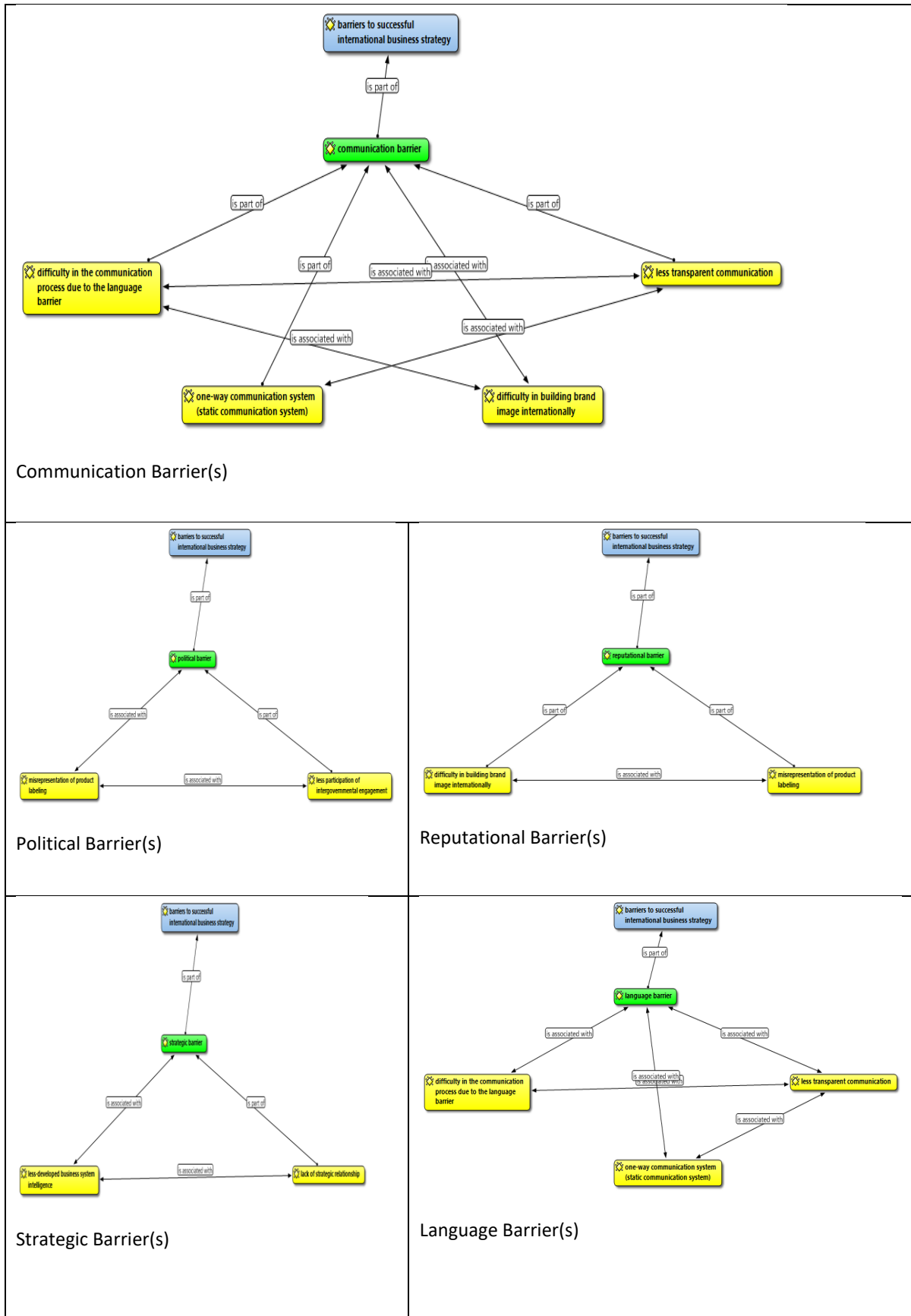


Figure 2 Description of Each Barrier of a Successful International Business Communication Strategy and the Survivability of Indonesian SMEs Exporters in Pandemic Era

(iv) Language and Communication Barrier

In this study, we found shreds of evidence of an interdependent relationship between the language barrier and communication barrier, and consists of three (3) sub-indicators that are related to the language and communication barriers, that are: (1) Difficulties in the communication process due to the language, (2) one-way communication system, and (3) less transparent communication. Two of our respondents stated that they faced difficulties in the negotiation process with the targeted foreign importer companies due to the complex process in communication.

One respondent even stated that they failed the negotiation process because they could not communicate directly with the targeted company without the additional support from a confident professional language interpreter. Meanwhile, professional language interpreters required many fees; meanwhile, SMEs are not equipped with strong financial conditions, contrasted with private industries.

Two respondents stated that even though they used the Google Translate apps, the communication process seems ineffective and works statically; based on this problem. Therefore it required them to look for services from professional language interpreters to build communication process in a dynamic and transparent. A detailed description of language and communication barriers can be seen in Figure 2 above.

The interconnectedness between Several Barriers(s)

The interconnectedness between several crucial barriers can be observed in Figure 1 above. This study found shreds of evidence of linkage between misrepresentation of product labeling (reputation barrier) with political, language, and communication barriers. Misrepresentation of product labeling is associated with political barriers due to less participation of intergovernmental engagement in promoting Indonesia exporters SMEs. Meanwhile, it is also related to the language and communication barrier due to less transparent communication and difficulty in the communication process.

Similar to the misrepresentation of product labeling, Indonesian exporters SMEs faced difficulty building brand image internationally due to their connections with the political, language, and communication barriers. The only difference is that difficulty in building brand image internationally is also related to the strategic barrier, aside from the last three barriers mentioned above. Difficulty in building an international brand

image is associated with political barriers due to less participation of intergovernmental engagement in promoting Indonesian exporters SMEs. Difficulty in building an international brand image is also associated with less advanced business system intelligence and strategic relationships with other collaborators. Meanwhile, the difficulty is related to the communication and language barriers due to less transparent communication and difficulty in the communication process.

Next, In this study, we found evidence of interconnectedness one-way communication system (static communication system) with the reputational and strategic barrier. The one-way communication system is related to the difficulty in building brand image internationally (reputational barrier); this is majorly caused by SME's less-developed business system intelligence to handle rapid market volatility and lack of strategic relationship with the other collaborators.

Related to the second research question in this study, we found evidence of crucial determinants of a successful business communication strategy to increase the survivability of Indonesian exporters SMEs during the pandemic that is slightly built based on the barriers identified above. Major key determinants that affected the survivability of Indonesian SMEs exporters to the foreign market include the need for internalizing industries, intergovernmental engagement, international market recognition of Indonesian SMEs exporters, formidable business intelligence, dynamic and transparent communication within stakeholders, and strategic relationships. Based on our previous results, it is clear that to construct a successful business communication strategy to increase the survivability of Indonesian exporters SMEs during pandemic required at least seven (7) points of sub-indicators, that are :

- (1) increase Indonesian SMEs capability to communicate in using a foreign language, at least increase the ease of use for the English language given its status as global language wide world,
- (2) increase participation of intergovernmental engagement, and work together as collaborators for the two central countries (exporters-importers) for growth for the shared values between the two countries,
- (3) strive and struggle to build Indonesian SMEs brand image internationally, across the border of a nation as well as continents, to increase the Indonesian SMEs reputation throughout the world,
- (4) increase the capacity for cultures-education-program, especially to promote Indonesian SMEs products, and thus enable a foreigner to be familiar with Indonesia and Indonesian SMEs products.
- (5) Increase the strategic relationship between Indonesian exporters SMEs with private industries

in Indonesia, especially the big companies, to enable them to conduct the knowledge transfer process from the industry to SMEs. Meanwhile, the industry may gain the additional benefit of a profound social reputation within society.

(6) Increase the capability of Indonesian exporters SMEs to operate major-state-of-the-art business system intelligence by conducting the knowledge transfer process and educational transfer process to Indonesian exporters SMEs, to increase their knowledge and capability, flexibility. Lastly, their competitive advantage skills enable the Indonesian exporters' SMEs to survive during pandemics.

## LIMITATIONS

The limitation of this study is the limited number of participants for the survey. Since it only consists of eight (8) key respondents, the opinions are pretty homogenous and therefore limited in variations and can not be generalized further. In order to validate the results of this study, for the future direction of this study, the authors will decide to build an FGD online and quantitative studies in the form of online questionnaires.

## CONCLUSION

The research was carried out qualitatively as a case study design with eight (8) Indonesian SMEs exporters who can maintain their exporting business outside of Indonesia during the pandemic. Despite the small number of participants, the study contributes to confirming two (2) main significant findings, that are : (1) the barriers that affected a successful business communication strategy faced by Indonesian SMEs exporters to survive in the pandemic, and (2) the critical determinants of a successful business communication strategy to increase the survivability of Indonesian SMEs during a pandemic.

Related to the first research objectives, we found shreds of evidence of five (5) main barriers that hinder Indonesian SMEs exporters from performing an effective business communication strategy to increase their survivability during a pandemic. These identified barriers are (1) reputational barrier, (2) political barrier, (3) strategic barrier, (4) language barrier, and (5) communication barrier. Based on the text mining analysis, it is evident that these five (5) main barriers are critical as the main challenges that need to be addressed to provide solutions to build a successful business communication strategy to increase the survivability of Indonesian SME exporters during a pandemic. Meanwhile, for our

(7) Government may increase the capacity to perform consultancy for Indonesian exporters SMEs, related to several crucial topics that have been identified as significant barriers in this study, such as the language barriers; the Government of Indonesia may be focused on training and development of English-skills-for-business-strategy program. Related to this issue, Government may also assist in professional languages interpreter for the Indonesian SMEs exporters, when they requested assistance and are in dire need of one interpreter, to perform a successful business negotiation with their targeted clients.

research objectives, we found shreds of evidence of major key determinants that affected the survivability of Indonesian SMEs exporters to the foreign market include the need for internalizing industries, intergovernmental engagement, international market recognition of Indonesian SMEs exporters, challenging business intelligence, a dynamic and transparent communication within stakeholders, and strategic relationships. The study offers several recommendations to increase the potentiality of developing an effective international business communication strategy to increase survivability for SMEs exporters during the pandemic era.

The limitation of this study is the limited number of participants for the survey. Since it only consists of eight (8) key respondents, the opinions are pretty homogenous and therefore limited in variations and can not be generalized further. In order to validate the results of this study, for the future direction of this study, the authors will decide to build an FGD online and quantitative studies in the form of online questionnaires.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study is part of research funded under support by The Institute Technology Bandung

## REFERENCES

- Baldwin, John., Perry, S.D., & Moffit, M.A. 2004. *Communication Theory For Everyday Life*. Boston: Pearson Education Inc.
- Chelliah, S., Sulaiman, M., & Yusoff, M. (2010). Internationalization and Performance: Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 5(6), 7.
- Chitakornkijasil, P. (2010). Intercultural Communication Challenges and Multinational Organization Communication. *International Journal of Organizational Innovation*, 3(02), 6-20.
- Courtland, L. B., & John, V. T. (2013). *Business Communication Today*. Eleven Edition. Pearson Education .
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design pendekatan kualitatif, kuantitatif, dan mixed*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pealajar .
- Elly A. Konijn, Sonja Utz, Martin Tanis, and Susan B. Barnes. (2008). *Mediated Interpersonal Communication*. Routledge 270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016
- Investor Daily. 2020. Creative Industry ontributive to PDB 2019. <https://investor.id/business/kontribusi-industri-kreatif-terhadap-pdb-2019-diproyksikan-755>
- Kameda, N. (2005). A research paradigm for international business communication . *Corporate Communications : An International Journal*, 10(2), 168-182. doi:10.1108/13563280510596970
- Karfried Knapp. (2004). *Intercultural Business Communication. Language-Teaching-Research-1362-1688* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1362168804lr143xx>
- Konijn A, Sonja Utz, Martin Tanis, Susan B. Barnes. (2008). *Mediated Interpersonal Communication*. 1st Edition. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203926864>
- Leung, K., Bhagat, R. S., Buchan, N. R., & Erez, M. (2005). Culture and International Business: Recent Advances and Their Implications for Future Research. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 36(04), 357-378. doi:0.1057/palgrave.jibs.8400150
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. California: Sage.
- Moleong, L. J. (2014). *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif, Edisi Revisi*. Bandung: PT Remaja Rosdakarya.
- Pikhart, M. (2014). Implementing New Global Business Trends to Intercultural Business Communication. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 152, 950 – 953.
- Purwanto, Djoko. (2010). *Business Communication*. Publishing PT Erlangga
- Rahma Ainul Mardiyah, R. Nunung Nurwati. 2020. Impact of The COVID-19 Pandemic on The Increase of Unemployment Rate In Indonesia. *Social Welfare Science*, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Padjadjaran University
- Robert K. Yin. (2018) *Cases Study Research and Application. Design and Methodes*. Sage Publishing Asia Pasific Inc.
- Sriussadaporn, R. (2006). Managing international business communication problems at work: a pilot study in foreign companies in Thailand. *Emerald Cross Cultural Stephen W. Littlejohn. Karen A Foss*. (20016). *Ensiklopedia Teori Komunikasi*. Penerbit Kencana. Jakarta
- Stephen W. Littlejohn. Karen A Foss. (20016). *Ensiklopedia Teori Komunikasi*. Penerbit Kencana. Jakarta
- Syam, N. W. (2000). *Komunikasi Bisnis Antarbudaya dalam Era Globalisasi*. *MediaTor Jurnal Komunikasi*, 1(01), 41-46. doi:<https://doi.org/10.29313/mediator.v1i1.679>
- Tian, K. (2011). *Cross-Cultural Issues in Marketing Communications: An Anthropological Perspective of International Business* . *International Journal of China Marketing*, 02(1), 119.
- Ulfatin, N. (2013). *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif*. Malang: Bayumedia Publishing.
- Yoshida, S. (2002, June 19). *Globalization and Issues of Intercultural Communications: Doing Successfull Business in Asia*. *International Business Executives*. Kyoto, Japan: ABI/INFORM Collection. <https://investor.id/business/kontribusi-industri-kreatif-terhadap-pdb-2019-diproyksikan-755>