



Hearing Hybridity: Sound, Language, and Cultural Identity in the Cinema of James Lee

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ABSTRACT

The beginning of the twenty-first century, Malaysian Chinese independent cinema has gained increasing visibility beyond national borders, and James Lee has become an important voice within this cinematic movement. While his work is often associated with independent production practices and unconventional visual storytelling, the expressive role of sound deserves closer attention. This study examines how Lee employs sound as an aesthetic and cultural resource through an analysis informed by in-depth interviews with the filmmaker. Rather than serving only to support images or advance the plot, sound in his films participates in the construction and communication of cultural experience. Situated within Malaysia's postcolonial and multilingual environment, Lee's sonic choices frequently move across languages, silences, ambient sounds, and surreal auditory elements. The article proposes the concept of sound-mediated unconscious cultural expression to describe the ways cultural meanings emerge through creative practices that may not always be deliberately articulated by the filmmaker. These soundscapes connect everyday local experience with broader transnational influences, producing a cinema shaped by cultural plurality and aesthetic experimentation. By bringing film sound theory into dialogue with discussions of cultural identity, the study demonstrates how listening can provide a valuable approach to understanding identity formation and cultural negotiation in multicultural cinema.

KEYWORDS: Malaysian Chinese Cinema; James Lee; Film Sound; Sonic Aesthetics; Cultural Identity; Multilingualism; Cinematic Soundscape; Postcolonial Cinema.

INTRODUCTION

In Ipoh, Malaysia, James Lee is widely regarded as an important early figure in the development of Malaysian new wave cinema. His contribution to Malaysian Chinese independent filmmaking extends beyond directing, reflecting a sustained engagement with different creative disciplines and a distinctive approach to cinematic form. Within the independent film community, his work has attracted considerable attention for its artistic individuality and has achieved recognition beyond Malaysia. Compared with many filmmakers working in the same period, Lee developed a particularly identifiable cinematic language. His restrained visual compositions, sparse use of imagery, and austere stylistic choices have been associated with the construction of a de-nationalized pan-Chinese imaginary [1,2]. Such an aesthetic does not simply represent a fixed national or ethnic identity; instead, it opens a space for exploring the experiences and sensibilities of Malaysian

Chinese communities within wider cultural networks. His films frequently engage with the inner lives of urban individuals, paying particular attention to emotional uncertainty, psychological tension, and the changing nature of relationships between men and women. Through this combination of formal experimentation and personal observation, Lee has contributed a distinctive artistic voice to contemporary Malaysian cinema [3-7].

Malaysia's multicultural environment also provides an important context for understanding the cultural concerns embedded in his filmmaking. Questions of language, ethnicity, belonging, and identity have shaped the country's cultural landscape, while cinema has often reflected the tensions and negotiations arising from these intersecting influences. Film scholarship, however, has traditionally given greater attention to visual representation, narrative structure, and symbolic imagery than to the expressive possibilities of sound [9-14]. This leaves an important dimension of cinematic

meaning insufficiently explored. In a recent online discussion on the nature of short films, Lee indicated that music can play a significant role in stimulating and shaping the creative process [15]. This observation draws attention to the importance of listening when examining his work. For a Malaysian Chinese independent filmmaker working across a culturally and linguistically diverse environment, sound offers more than accompaniment to the image; it can become a means through which cultural experience is sensed, negotiated, and indirectly expressed [16].

Accordingly, this study examines the relationship between sonic aesthetics and cultural identity in Lee's cinematic practice. It brings together perspectives from film sound studies and cultural identity theory and applies grounded theory as a methodological framework for developing the analysis. By focusing on the functions of music, language, ambient sound, silence, and other auditory elements, the research investigates how cultural meanings emerge through the sonic organization of his films. This approach seeks to move beyond an image-centred understanding of cinema and to demonstrate how sound participates in the complex expression of identity within a multicultural and postcolonial setting [17].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sound Aesthetics in Malaysian Cinema: Cultural Resistance and Representation in Independent Film

Film scholarship has traditionally privileged the image, with narrative interpretation, *mise-en-scène*, and visual symbolism receiving considerably greater attention than the auditory dimension. Yet sound is equally important to the production of cinematic meaning, shaping narrative development, emotional response, spatial perception, and cultural representation [1,2]. This imbalance is especially relevant to Malaysian cinema, where multiple languages, ethnic traditions, and cultural histories coexist. Within such a context, sound can register forms of difference and belonging that may not be fully communicated through visual representation alone. The present review therefore considers the relationship between film sound and cultural identity, with particular attention to Malaysian independent cinema and the work of James Lee [18,19].

A major foundation for the study of cinematic sound is the concept of the **audio-visual contract**, which explains how viewers mentally connect what they hear with what they see and interpret both as part of a unified cinematic experience [1]. From this perspective, dialogue, music, and sound effects are not merely technical additions to the image. Each can contribute independently to the construction of time, space, atmosphere, and psychological meaning. The concept of empathetic sound further demonstrates how auditory elements may correspond with the emotional conditions

represented on screen, strengthening the affective relationship between spectators and cinematic events [1]. Different forms of listening—including causal, semantic, and reduced listening—also provide useful ways of examining how audiences identify sources, interpret linguistic meaning, or attend to the acoustic qualities of sound itself [20].

Further developments in sound theory have expanded these possibilities. Critical engagement with the soundscape concept has emphasized the importance of environmental sound and acoustic identity, while also drawing attention to the limited development of soundmarks as analytical tools within audiovisual studies [3,4]. The idea of the *acousmètre*, associated with a voice or sound whose source remains outside the visible frame, is particularly valuable for examining the relationship between invisibility, authority, mystery, and narrative power [3]. Such approaches may be especially relevant to independent cinema, where off-screen sound can suggest social forces, cultural presences, or forms of otherness that remain visually unresolved [21-25].

Other theoretical perspectives have challenged the assumption that sound occupies a secondary position in relation to the image. Sound may operate as an autonomous narrative system, contributing its own structure and meaning rather than simply reinforcing what is already visible [7]. The interaction between editing, sound, and visual rhythm has likewise demonstrated the importance of auditory design in shaping emotional intensity and cinematic space [26]. Multisensory approaches have added another dimension by proposing that audiovisual experience can evoke tactile and embodied forms of perception, making sound an important carrier of memory and cultural experience, particularly in cinemas situated outside dominant Western traditions [27]. Together, these perspectives establish a broad conceptual basis for examining the aesthetic and cultural functions of sound in James Lee's films.

The political significance of sound becomes even more apparent in postcolonial cinema. Sonic practices can disrupt image-centred systems of representation by introducing fragmented voices, competing languages, silences, and acoustic perspectives that resist a single dominant cultural narrative [8]. Language, accent, and vocal expression may also function as important markers of displacement, migration, and cultural belonging in transnational and diasporic filmmaking [9]. These approaches offer productive ways to consider Malaysia's postcolonial condition, where identity is shaped through continuing encounters among different linguistic, ethnic, and cultural communities [28].

Research on Malaysian cinema has provided important historical and cultural foundations for such an investigation. Existing studies have traced the transformation of Malaysian film from its colonial formations through the post-independence period and into the development of

contemporary independent production [10,11]. Scholarship has also examined cinema as a site where national identity is negotiated within a society characterized by substantial ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity [12]. Other work has explored genre mixture, gender, temporality, and stylistic experimentation in contemporary Malaysian films, including productions associated with Chinese Malaysian independent filmmakers [13]. Although these studies have substantially advanced knowledge of Malaysian cinema, sustained attention to sound as an aesthetic and cultural system remains limited [29].

A small number of studies have acknowledged the relevance of sound, language, and music in Malaysian filmmaking. Discussions of Malaysian and Asian cinema have noted auditory practices without developing a detailed analytical framework for sound aesthetics [30]. Studies of Southeast Asian independent cinema have considered linguistic choices as indicators of identity but have not systematically examined the wider relationship among dialogue, music, ambient sound, silence, and cultural representation [15]. Research on musical expression has similarly contributed to an understanding of sound in Malaysian film while offering limited attention to the specific practices of Malaysian Chinese independent cinema [16]. Consequently, a significant gap remains in the study of how sound operates within the films of independent Chinese Malaysian directors. Addressing this gap is particularly important for understanding James Lee's work, where sonic restraint, multilingual expression, and unconventional auditory design form part of a distinctive cinematic practice. [31-16]

Cultural Identity and Sonic Practices in James Lee's Filmmaking

James Lee's films provide a valuable site for examining the relationship between sound and cultural identity in Malaysian independent cinema. His work presents a social and cultural environment that differs from the relatively unified ethnic perspectives often associated with dominant Malay-language cinematic traditions. Instead, his films frequently reflect linguistic diversity, class distinctions, urban isolation, and the heterogeneous experiences of Malaysian Chinese communities. The presence of different languages and dialects is therefore more than a matter of realism; it contributes to the articulation of a specifically Malaysian cultural environment [17,18].

Previous scholarship has identified multilingualism as an important feature of cultural expression in this cinematic context [17,18]. The movement between languages and dialects reveals differences within the Malaysian Chinese community itself, including variations connected to social background, generation, locality, and class. At the same time, such linguistic diversity can produce moments of distance and disconnection, particularly among urban characters

whose relationships are marked by uncertainty or emotional restraint. Sound thus becomes one of the means through which internal cultural complexity is communicated [37].

Lee's filmmaking style also gives particular importance to sonic economy. Minimal dialogue, carefully controlled compositions, and deliberately structured acoustic environments distinguish his work from more conventionally dialogue-driven cinema [17]. These features should not be understood solely as formal experimentation. Sparse speech, pauses, environmental sounds, and the arrangement of voices can generate symbolic and political meanings that extend beyond the immediate narrative. Existing analyses have offered useful observations concerning language and dialogue in his films, but comparatively little attention has been given to the contribution of musical scoring, sound effects, silence, and ambient sound. This leaves the full structure of his sonic practice insufficiently examined [38].

The history of musical localization in Malaysian cinema also raises important questions about cultural hybridity and sound [16]. Malaysia's film culture has developed through interactions among local traditions, colonial histories, regional influences, and global media forms. Examining music and sound design in Lee's films may therefore reveal how these overlapping cultural formations are negotiated at the aesthetic level. The extent to which his sonic choices reproduce, transform, or distance themselves from established practices of localization remains an important area for investigation [9].

Silence represents another underexplored dimension of Lee's filmmaking. In diasporic and transnational cinema, silence can carry political and cultural significance, particularly when it interrupts dominant patterns of speech and representation [9]. Lee's frequent use of extended pauses and limited verbal exchange may consequently be understood as a restrained sonic strategy rather than as the simple absence of sound. Silence can expose emotional distance, create tension, resist explanatory dialogue, or allow the surrounding acoustic environment to acquire greater significance. Its relationship to questions of marginality, identity, and cultural negotiation requires more systematic analysis.

Overall, the literature establishes a substantial theoretical basis for studying sound while also revealing a clear limitation in current research. Film sound theory has developed sophisticated approaches to audiovisual interaction, listening, off-screen sound, embodied perception, and cultural memory [1,3,5,7]. Studies of Malaysian cinema have explored national identity, historical development, visual representation, genre, and independent filmmaking [10–15]. Research specifically related to James Lee has also identified the importance of multilingualism and stylistic restraint [17,18]. Nevertheless, these areas have not been sufficiently brought together to examine how sound

aesthetics participate in the expression of cultural identity in his films [39].

The limited understanding of sound as a culturally meaningful aesthetic practice within Malaysian Chinese independent cinema. Existing work has largely concentrated on visual form, narrative themes, social representation, and industrial history, leaving dialogue, music, silence, environmental sound, and acoustic space comparatively understudied. A more focused investigation of Lee's films can address this omission by considering the politics of language, the organization of auditory space, the emotional function of silence, and the relationship between sound and cultural memory. Such an approach can broaden the application of film sound theory within multicultural and postcolonial contexts while contributing a more comprehensive understanding of Malaysian cinema and James Lee's distinctive creative practice.

This study employs a qualitative research design that combines in-depth interviewing, grounded theory, and textual analysis to investigate how film sound contributes to the construction and expression of cultural identity. The methodological approach was selected to connect the filmmaker's own reflections on creative practice with a close examination of the sonic structures present in the films. Particular attention is given to dialogue, music, ambient sound, silence, and other elements of sound design, together with their relationship to narrative development and cultural meaning.

The first stage of the research involved an in-depth interview with director James Lee. The interview focused on his approach to sound design, his creative decisions concerning dialogue, environmental sound, and musical scoring, and his broader understanding of sound as an aesthetic component of filmmaking. In-depth interviewing is particularly appropriate for examining subjective experiences, personal interpretations, and creative processes that cannot be adequately understood through observation alone [17,24]. This method therefore enabled the study to document the director's perspectives on the ways sound is conceived and incorporated into his cinematic practice.

The interview was recorded, transcribed, and prepared for systematic qualitative analysis. These procedures helped preserve the accuracy of the original responses and provided a structured dataset for coding. Before the interview was conducted, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant University Academic Ethics Committee. The research process was consequently carried out in accordance with established ethical requirements, with due attention to informed participation, participant rights, and the responsible handling of research materials [40].

Grounded theory procedures were subsequently used to organize and interpret the interview data [26]. This approach

supports the development of conceptual understanding from patterns emerging within the data rather than imposing a fixed explanatory model at the outset. The analytical process followed three interconnected stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During open coding, the interview transcript was examined closely to identify recurring concepts, significant statements, and preliminary categories associated with sound aesthetics, filmmaking practice, and cultural identity.

The axial coding stage focused on the relationships among the categories identified during the initial analysis. At this stage, the study examined how different aspects of sound design—including language, musical expression, environmental sound, and silence—were connected to particular creative intentions and forms of cultural expression. This process made it possible to move beyond isolated themes and consider the broader structure through which individual sonic choices interact within the director's aesthetic practice.

Selective coding formed the final stage of the grounded theory analysis. The major categories and their relationships were integrated into a more coherent interpretive framework and subsequently examined alongside selected films. Linking the interview findings to specific cinematic works allowed the study to investigate how stated creative ideas correspond with, or are transformed through, actual sound practices. This stage was particularly important for identifying the underlying connections between sonic construction and the representation of cultural identity.

The final component of the methodology consists of detailed textual analysis of selected films in conjunction with the coded interview material. Textual analysis provides a means of examining both explicit and implicit layers of meaning within cultural texts and is especially useful for identifying symbolic structures that may emerge through the interaction of sound, image, narrative, and cultural context [3,9]. In the present study, films are treated as complex audiovisual texts in which meaning is produced not through visual elements alone but through the relationship between multiple expressive systems.

Accordingly, the textual analysis concentrates on the placement and function of dialogue, music, ambient sound, sound effects, and silence within particular narrative situations. Attention is also given to the ways these sonic elements establish atmosphere, structure emotional experience, create auditory space, and signal linguistic or cultural differences. By comparing these textual observations with the interview data, the study develops a closer understanding of how creative intention and cinematic realization intersect.

Through the integration of in-depth interviewing, grounded theory, and textual analysis, the research adopts a multi-layered approach to James Lee's filmmaking practice. The

interview provides access to the filmmaker's own reflections, grounded theory facilitates the systematic identification of patterns within those reflections, and textual analysis examines how these patterns operate within the films themselves. Taken together, these methods enable a detailed investigation of sound as both an aesthetic practice and a medium through which cultural identity can be experienced, negotiated, and expressed.

DISCUSSION

To develop a detailed understanding of the director's perspectives on cinematic sound, the interview was organized around ten open-ended questions, identified as Q1–Q10. The discussion concentrated primarily on three major components of film sound: dialogue, ambient or

environmental sound, and music. Additional questions addressed personal experiences that informed the director's creative development, as well as reflections on the changing direction of Malaysian Chinese independent cinema. This broader interview structure helped situate individual sound practices within the filmmaker's personal and cultural understanding of cinema [40].

The first analytical stage involved open coding of the interview transcript. The recorded interview was transcribed, reviewed, and divided into individual question-and-response units. Each segment was examined repeatedly to identify statements, ideas, and recurring concepts associated with sonic practice and cultural or identity-related expression. Relevant concepts were assigned

Table 1: Open-Coded Analysis of Interview Data.

Code	Analytical Category	Initial Code / Concept	Interpretation
R1	Sound aesthetics	Sound conveys emotional truth	Sound is viewed as an effective means of communicating emotions and inner experiences.
R2	Sound aesthetics	Sound beyond visual representation	Auditory expression is used to communicate meanings that may not be fully conveyed through images.
R3	Sound aesthetics	Minimal use of dialogue	Limited dialogue creates space for silence, atmosphere, and non-verbal emotional expression.
R4	Sound aesthetics	Dialogue as realistic expression	Spoken language is selected to reflect the natural communication patterns of characters.
R5	Sound aesthetics	Surreal ambient sound	Environmental sounds are creatively transformed to generate psychological or unconventional effects.
R6	Sound aesthetics	Emotional sound construction	Sound is arranged to strengthen emotional engagement and audience perception.
R7	Sound aesthetics	Contrast between music and image	Music may create meaning through emotional contrast rather than simple reinforcement of visual events.
R8	Sound aesthetics	Music as creative stimulus	Musical elements contribute to the development of creative ideas and cinematic atmosphere.
R9	Sound aesthetics	Collaborative sound production	Sound and music emerge through cooperation with other creative practitioners and production considerations.
R10	Sound aesthetics	Narrative function of sound	Sound operates as an active storytelling element rather than merely supporting the visual track.
R11	Identity expression	Natural cultural representation	Cultural characteristics emerge organically rather than through deliberate symbolic emphasis.
R12	Identity expression	Multilingual environment	The use of different languages and dialects reflects Malaysia's linguistically diverse social environment.
R13	Identity expression	Linguistic diversity	Variations in speech reveal differences within communities and contribute to cultural realism.
R14	Identity expression	Cultural authenticity	Local sound and language practices help establish a believable social and cultural setting.
R15	Identity expression	Beyond regional narratives	Stories seek emotional and thematic relevance that extends beyond a particular geographical context.
R16	Identity expression	Non-identity-centred creation	Cultural identity is not necessarily treated as an explicit or predetermined creative objective.
R17	Identity expression	Appreciation of independent creativity	Individual artistic expression and collaboration outside dominant mainstream practices are valued.
R18	Identity expression	Malaysian multicultural experience	The coexistence of multiple languages and cultural influences forms an implicit dimension of cinematic identity.

preliminary labels and organized into analytical nodes. The corresponding locations within the transcript were retained to maintain a clear connection between each code and its original context.

This initial process generated 18 significant coding points. These were subsequently numbered for systematic analysis. Codes R1–R10 were associated primarily with issues of sound aesthetics and cinematic sound practice, whereas R11–R18 addressed themes related to identity and cultural expression. The coding process paid particular attention to the director's understanding of dialogue, his approach to ambient sound, the selection and arrangement of music, and observations concerning the representation of Malaysian Chinese cultural experience [37,38].

For each code, a concise interpretive description was prepared and supported by relevant evidence from the interview transcript. This procedure enabled the analysis to preserve the relationship between the emerging conceptual categories and the director's original statements. The purpose of open coding was not to impose a predetermined structure on the material, but to allow recurring ideas and meaningful patterns to emerge directly from the interview data.

The open-coding results revealed two overarching conceptual domains: cinematic sound expression and identity expression. Several related themes developed within each domain. Taken together, these initial codes suggest a sophisticated understanding of sound as an expressive element rather than a purely supportive component of filmmaking. The interview material indicates a particular emphasis on emotional communication, surreal sonic effects, and contrast as important aspects of the director's aesthetic approach. In relation to identity, the responses point toward a relatively unobtrusive and organic mode of cultural representation, in

which Malaysia's multicultural environment is incorporated without excessive symbolic emphasis.

Thus, the first stage of coding established the conceptual foundation for the subsequent analysis. It demonstrated that sound and identity were not discussed as isolated dimensions of filmmaking. Instead, they appeared as interconnected aspects of a broader creative practice in which auditory choices, emotional expression, linguistic diversity, and cultural experience continuously overlap.

Axial Coding

The second stage, axial coding, extended the preliminary findings obtained through open coding. The initial codes were compared, regrouped, and examined for conceptual relationships. Rather than treating the 18 codes as separate observations, this stage sought to identify broader patterns and determine how individual ideas were connected. Through this process, six principal categories were developed: the ontology of sound, techniques of sound expression, the narrative function of sound, methods of sound creation, language and cultural representation, and cultural positioning and expression.

These six categories were then examined in relation to two central analytical dimensions: the sound aesthetics axis and the identity expression axis. The analysis considered possible causal, contextual, and interactive relationships among the categories. In doing so, axial coding made it possible to move from a descriptive list of themes toward a more integrated interpretation of the filmmaker's creative approach [35].

To clarify the relationships among these categories, a structural framework was also developed to illustrate their hierarchy and interaction. The diagram demonstrates how different concepts identified during coding converge around

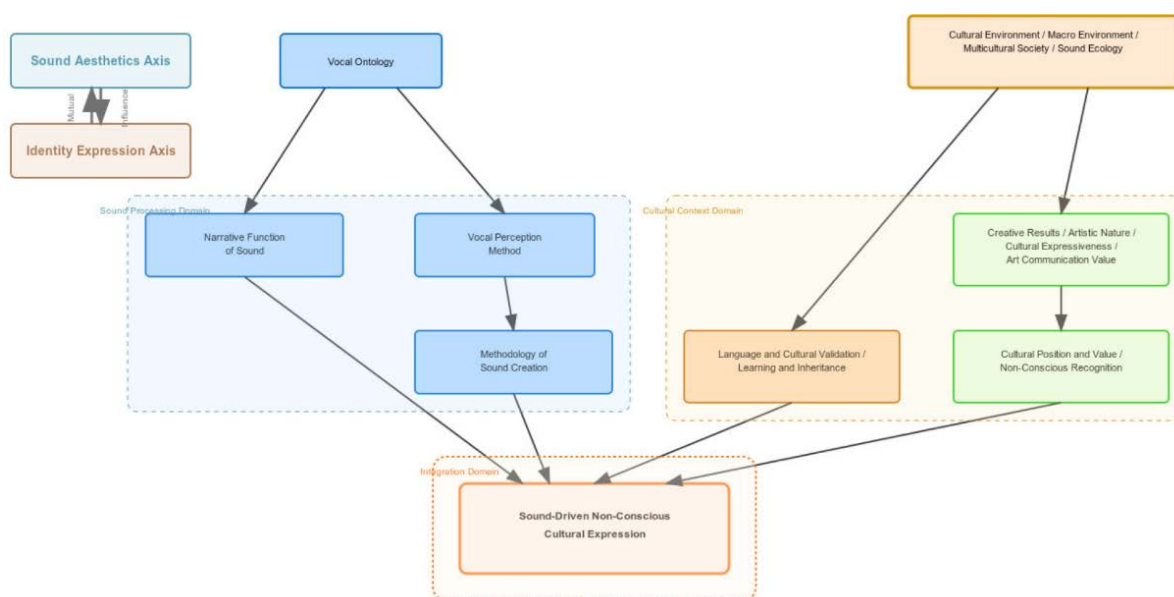


Figure 1: Diagram of sound aesthetics in relation to identity expression.

the broader relationship between sonic aesthetics and cultural expression.

Within the sound aesthetics axis, two closely related dimensions emerged: the director's understanding of the nature of sound and the techniques through which sound is expressed. The interview findings suggest that his conception of what sound can communicate strongly influences the way it is used in filmmaking. Sound is regarded as capable of conveying forms of truth, emotion, and atmosphere that may not be expressed as directly through visual imagery. Consequently, auditory design becomes an active means of communicating themes rather than a supplementary layer attached to the image [24].

This perspective also explains the importance assigned to surreal sound treatment and emotionally charged sonic contrasts. Ambient sound, in particular, can be manipulated beyond strict realism to intensify psychological experience or alter the viewer's perception of a scene. Such practices reinforce the narrative role of sound by positioning it as part of the storytelling structure itself. Sound, from this perspective, contributes to the development of meaning, emotional tension, and cinematic atmosphere.

The identity expression axis similarly developed around two connected areas: language and cultural representation and cultural positioning and expression. One notable pattern is the relatively natural manner in which multilingualism appears within the director's creative outlook. Cultural identity is not treated primarily as a predetermined message that must be explicitly communicated. Instead, linguistic and cultural diversity enters the films as part of the social reality from which the narratives emerge [38].

An apparent tension can be observed between the pursuit of stories with wider, non-regional relevance and the continued presence of distinctly Malaysian linguistic diversity. However, the coding analysis indicates that these positions are not fundamentally incompatible. The effort to address experiences that can resonate beyond a specific geographical setting does not require the removal of local cultural characteristics. On the contrary, the natural inclusion of multiple languages and dialects can strengthen the authenticity of the cinematic world while allowing its emotional concerns to remain accessible to wider audiences.

The relationship between the two central axes further highlights the importance of authenticity. The preference for credible and meaningful sound is connected to the treatment of language as a natural component of everyday life. The multilingual environment of Malaysia is therefore not presented simply as an identity symbol. Its presence also contributes to realism and gives the films an auditory texture grounded in a recognizable social environment [26].

Another significant relationship identified through axial

coding concerns the connection between surreal sound aesthetics and a creative approach that does not explicitly foreground identity. These elements may initially appear contradictory, but the analysis suggests that they are mutually reinforcing. Surreal auditory strategies enable emotional and psychological experiences to move beyond narrowly defined cultural categories, while the organic presence of local languages and cultural practices ensures that the films remain connected to a specific lived environment. Universal emotional expression and cultural particularity consequently operate together rather than in opposition.

The analysis also identified the importance of collaboration in the director's approach to sound production. Musical choices are shaped by practical and creative considerations, including suitability for the narrative, copyright requirements, budgetary limitations, and collaboration with other practitioners. Although there is no consistent preference for a particular category of independent music, the interview material reflects an appreciation for creative individuality and professional cooperation. Interest in independent musicians is therefore connected less to a fixed stylistic commitment than to the value placed on distinctive artistic expression outside conventional mainstream frameworks [33].

Finally, the use of emotional contrast in music corresponds with the broader effort to challenge predictable modes of cinematic expression. The juxtaposition of contrasting sound and emotion can expand the interpretive possibilities of a scene, just as narratives that move beyond narrowly regional definitions can broaden cultural communication. In both cases, established boundaries are tested through aesthetic choices that encourage audiences to experience familiar subjects in less conventional ways.

The axial coding process reveals a dynamic relationship between sound aesthetics and cultural identity. The director's sonic practice combines deliberate experimentation—particularly through emotional intensity, contrast, and surreal effects—with a comparatively unforced incorporation of Malaysia's multilingual and multicultural realities. These tendencies form a coherent artistic approach rather than two competing creative positions.

The findings further suggest that cultural identity in this cinematic practice is communicated indirectly. It does not depend solely on explicit cultural symbols or direct statements of identity. Instead, it becomes perceptible through the organization of voices, languages, music, silence, ambient environments, and emotional sound structures. This approach allows the films to remain connected to the cultural realities of Malaysia while also pursuing experiences that can extend beyond a single national or regional context. Through this interaction between local specificity and wider emotional resonance, sound becomes a central medium through which a distinctive cinematic identity is created [26].

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that sound occupies a central position in the cultural and aesthetic language of James Lee's cinema. Through dialogue, multilingual exchanges, ambient sound, silence, music, and deliberate audiovisual contrasts, his films construct meanings that cannot be fully explained through visual analysis alone. The findings support the concept of sound-mediated unconscious cultural expression, in which cultural identity emerges organically rather than through explicit symbolic assertion. Lee's use of multilingualism reflects Malaysia's everyday cultural hybridity, while his surreal sonic strategies create emotional experiences capable of extending beyond regional and linguistic boundaries. The coding analysis further reveals a close relationship between sound aesthetics, authenticity, creative collaboration, and indirect identity expression. These elements form an integrated framework in which local cultural specificity coexists with transnational emotional resonance. The study contributes to film sound and cultural studies by showing that sound can function simultaneously as an aesthetic device, narrative structure, and medium of cultural negotiation. Future research may extend this framework to other multicultural and postcolonial cinemas.

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