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Empowering Adult Inmates with Communication Needs in an East Malaysia Prison

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ABSTRACT

Communication skills are essential in our daily life because we communicate to pass information from one person to another. However, to have effective communication in a correctional environment, like prisons, is not easy. There are many distractions and barriers to communicate effectively in prisons. Although prison education should be seen as a way to educate inmates to successfully integrate in society upon their release, inmates face difficulties in getting enough reading materials, content and learning tools to enhance their communication skills. This may negatively affect their integration in society and employability after serving their sentences. Therefore, this study aimed to elicit the communication needs of the adult inmates in one of the local prisons in East Malaysia. We employed a textography research approach, where we combined textual analysis and an ethnographic method (interview), to investigate contexts, texts and practices of the prison studied. The findings showed that the inmates need to learn verbal and non-verbal

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communication, new technologies for communication and simple English conversations. This study is pertinent in providing insights for the development of suitable teaching and learning modules for prison learning institutions.

Contribution/Originality: The study contributes to the existing prison education literature. It provides insight into the development of appropriate teaching and learning modules for adult inmates in prison learning institutes, allowing them access to education for better future and life prospects.

1. Introduction

Universities and prisons might seem poles apart but both communities set out to transform lives for the benefit of society. Serving time in prison does not deter the inmates from pursuing their education although prison is considered an unconventional educational setting (Egbert, 1989). Inmates deserve a second chance to reclaim their life upon their release from prison. However, recent literature suggests that pursuing education within the prison learning institution is challenging. The challenges faced by these inmates comprise the lack of reading materials, content, learning tools, and suitable language earning modules (Coates, 2016). In addition, there are inmates who appear to show the utmost interest to pursue their education although they are serving their time in prison. Recent literature also suggests that educational activities in correctional facilities such as prisons are crucial factors in assisting inmates' employability when they reintegrate with their society after serving their sentences (Mertanen & Brunila, 2018; Vandala, 2019).

Malaysia Prison Department (henceforth MPD) is a correctional institution in Malaysia, which is responsible to provide a safe detention and rehabilitation institution for the inmates (Omar, 2014). MPD has implemented various rehabilitation programs for its inmates. The objectives of these rehabilitation programs are to develop positive attitude among inmates, reintegrate them into society and to equip them with vocational and soft skills. One of the rehabilitation programs is the Human Development Program (henceforth HDP) or *Program Pembangunan Insan* (Amos & Khairani, 2019). Based on a holistic approach, programs under HDB are designed specifically for the rehabilitation of the inmates. There are four main rehabilitation modules under the HDB, namely *Education and Guidance* module, *Therapeutic Community* module, *Academic* module and *Halaqah* (a religious gathering or meeting for the study of Islam and the Quran) module. Inmates are required to participate in the HDB, which comprises four phases. Table 1 shows the HDB program phases.

Table 1: HDB Program Phases

Phase	HDB Program	Details
1	Orientation	It is a two-month physical training by the prisoner discipline officers that aims to establish a balance between mental and physical activities, to instill positive attitudes, to be confident, and to cultivate a strong personality among the inmates.

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2	Reinforcement	It focuses on the aspects of identity formation and changes in inmates' behavior through therapeutic community, a religious gathering or meeting for the study of Islam and the Quran (*halaqah*), academic guidance and education.
3	Skills Development	It caters inmates with at least two years sentence. It educates inmates with vocational skills and involves several agencies. At the end of this phase, inmates will be awarded with vocational certificates, e.g., SLDN (National Dual Training System), SKK (Skill Competency Certificate), etc.
4	Pre-Release	It caters inmates with not more than one year sentence and those who have went through the Orientation, Reinforcement and Skills phases of the HDB program. It helps inmates to encounter social stigma and encourage them to blend in with the public through programs like *We Care and Community Care*.

Source: Omar (2014)

HDP offers vocational trainings for inmates (see Table 1: Phase 3 of the HDP), where they learn carpentry, tailoring, metal work, laundry, handicraft, rattan-works, printing, engine-repair and others (Omar, n.d.). These trainings provide employment for inmates. Nevertheless, these vocational trainings respond mainly to industrial needs that emphasize more on machinery and technical know-how (Aripin, et al., 2014; Omar, n.d.). Based on our preliminary investigations into the current HDB syllabus, interviews with prison officers and a site visit to one of the prisons, and the gap in the current literature suggests that the current HDB syllabus requires the inclusion of essential communication skills for inmates' social needs and employment upon obtaining their parole as they need to acquire and master these skills in enabling them to procure jobs after their release (Contreras, 2018; Tang, 2010; Zakaria et al., 2018). In view of this, we conducted a 'Needs Analysis' of the communication needs and skills of the adult inmates. Thus, the aim of this study is to elicit the communication needs and skills of the adult inmates, and the research question of the study is: *what is the communication needs and skills of the adult inmates?* This study is part of a larger research project on a "Communicative and Language Skills" program in HDB that is designed to prepare inmates for employability and social needs upon their release. The findings of this study may provide insights into the development of suitable teaching and learning modules for communication skills for adult inmates within prison learning institutions. Overall, it is hoped that this project may support and increase the adult inmates' access to education for better future and life prospects.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Inmates' Communication Skills

It seems that ex-offenders experience more communication difficulties more predominantly than that of people in general, partly due to the factors that ex-offenders lack adequate social skills which are vital in developing effective means of communication (Contreras, 2018; Emmers-Sommer et al., 2004). The communication problems may be linked to the prison communication ecosystem that disintegrates inmates from real-life

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communication. Face-to-face verbal communication and the building of relationships were often not regarded to be good to prisoners is one of the beliefs held by prison administrators (Forrester-Jones, 2006). Also, life in prison seems "*to repress effective communication among inmates in various ways: the prison physical environment is constrictive; authorities within the prison only allow minimal and necessary contact with visitors and medical officials; and that the penal system itself is designed to deny opportunities for inmates to communicate*" (Forrester-Jones, 2006, p. 223). Therefore, this restrictive communication may have resulted in inmates having difficulties to assimilate in societies successfully.

In addition, communication difficulties and cultural tensions may cause problems in the communication between prison staff and inmates. This was shown in a project called 'Teaching Language Behind Bars' that was funded by the European Commission under Life-Long Learning in 2012. The project aims to:

> *"..tackle the issue of communication in multilingual prisons and secure detention centres through capitalising on the role and potential both of educational activities within the regime and of professional staff training and development opportunities, helping both prison staff and foreign national inmates to communicate basic things in a common language, and encouraging a better cultural understanding of each other through the use of context-relevant educational and training material"* (Talbot, 2012, p. 19).

The project was designed to promote communication, especially in language abilities, and intercultural understanding between these two target groups, namely the inmates and prison staff. The findings of the project illustrated that not only the communication between prison staff and inmates were upgraded successfully, but also it has helped to reduce recidivism and increase inmates' employability.

Next, language skills are also needed for effective communication. It is the key to successful social life (Chow et al., 2018) that inmates have to be exposed to during their sentences. Several studies on prison language learning demonstrate the relevance of the inclusion of language communication in prisons (De Lucio et al., 2018; Egbert, 1989; Martin & Beese, 2017). For example, inmates in the United States are required to enroll in corrections-based English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, if they demonstrate poor English proficiency, as an attempt to provide them with language skills necessary to perform adequately in general education classes and when they blend into social settings upon release (Wilkinson & Mentor, 2017). In Malaysian context, on the other hand, proficient in English language is significant, as it can guarantee a job offer from an employer (New Straits Times, 2022). Thus, English language learning specifically basic English conversation is deemed necessary to be introduced and taught in prisons as it prepares the inmates for better job opportunities upon release.

The difference between verbal and nonverbal communication should also be taught to inmates. Any communication (spoken or written) that uses words to convey information to another is considered verbal communication (Indiana University Press Sites, n.d.). Tone of voice, rhythm and volume of speech, articulation of words, rhythm, intonation, and emphasis put on words, facial expression, degree of eye contact, gestures or touch, body language, and posture are all examples of nonverbal communication (Kudesia & Elfenbein, 2013; Mehrabian, 1972; Richmond, 2011). According to Mehrabian (1972), the words we use when communicating feelings and attitudes convey only a small percentage

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of our overall message. This is because body language accounts for 55% of our message (especially from movements of the small muscles around the eye, which can convey shock, disbelief, doubt, or disgust). Only 7% is conveyed by the words we use, while 38% is conveyed by our tone of voice. Often, how we say something is more important than what we say, especially when conveying emotions and attitudes. Anger, impatience, disappointment, sarcasm, confidence, affection, or apathy can all be communicated through voice tone alone. Nonetheless, both are required for effective message transmission (Hall et al., 2019).

Studies on communication illustrate the significant values of verbal communication in teamwork communication (Rabøl et al., 2011), classroom communication (Downs, et al., 1988), critical care medicine (Brindley & Reynolds, 2011), and patients and medical care (Collins, et al., 2011). Other types of verbal communication, like reading, writing, and speaking, are notable in workplace (Kudesia & Elfenbein, 2013). Likewise, the influence of non-verbal communication in workplace is also mentioned in previous studies. It was found that factors such as status and power demonstration (see Hall, et al., 2005; Remland, 1981), the advantages of positive physical appearance (Jackson, et al., 1995; Westfall, et al., 2019), warm and effectual job applicant behaviors (Morgeson, et al., 2005; Muralidhar et al., 2020; Washburn & Hakel, 1973), appropriate and professional attire and uniforms (Peluchette, et al., 2006; Sanchez-Burks, 2002), and effective communication (Paranduk & Karisi, 2020) are unique and noteworthy role of non- verbal behaviors in workplace situations that need to be integrated in any correctional programs that aim to secure better employability for ex-offenders.

2.2. Digital Literacy and Internet Access

Digital technology has become essential in our everyday life. It provides us with resources and opportunities that being digital literate is a must for us to function in today's world. Furthermore, information is just on one's fingertips. To actively participate in some of the most fundamental aspects of life, such as education, employment, and social interaction, one should become digital literate and have access to the Internet. Moreover, digital literate people are more employable (Lucubrate Magazine, 2021). Thus, being digital illiterate and having zero access to the Internet can represent a significant handicap.

Several research in digital technologies in prisons highlight the merits of promoting online communication technologies among inmates (see Hopkins & Farley, 2014; Knight & Van de Steene, 2017; McDougall, et al., 2017). So, the assumption that prison walls frequently resemble impenetrable "firewalls" in cyberspace that are designed to prevent inmates from participating in digital communications (Smith, 2012) is no longer relevant to today's context. With the rapid development in digital technology and communication, a program to promote digital literacy among inmates is needed. In relation to this, Malaysian Prison Department has collaborated with Microsoft Malaysia to offer a three-year digital literacy program to juvenile inmates (New Straits Times, 2016). The program covers the areas of digital inclusion, entrepreneurship and capacity building that will equip the juvenile inmates with knowledge and skills for future employability and educational opportunities (New Straits Times, 2016). Also, in 2020, a new Digital Literacy Masterplan was introduced to Singapore' prisons that aims to improve the employability and reduce the recidivism rates among released inmates (The Straits Times, 2022). The program exposes the inmates to basic digital skills essential to workplace. Therefore, if prison institutions intend to prepare their inmates to be functioned socially and

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professionally upon their release, inmates should be given access to digital communications and internet.

3. Methodology

A textography research approach was used to gather the data for the study. This research approach combines textual analysis and ethnographic methods. It investigates the context of the study by understanding the text analysis and the practices of the studied setting (Sizer, 2019). It can also be used as the initial platform for needs analysis to explore the studied context by collecting and understanding the texts and practices of an area that is less familiar by the researchers (Sizer, 2019). In this study, document analysis (a textual component) and individual interviews (an ethnographic element) were used to analyze the communication needs of the adult inmates, aged range from 18 to 40 years old, in one of the prisons in East Malaysia. The study was conducted in two phases, namely Phase 1: focused on analyzing documents related to HDB or the Human Development Plan program (e.g., skills, lessons, and rehabilitative activities), and Phase 2: focused on investigating the communications needs of the inmates through interview session. The purpose of Phase 1 was to understand the educational context in prison, and to develop interview questions for Phase 2 of the study. The interview questions were used to elicit the communication needs required by the inmates, to help them reintegrating into society and finding job opportunities.

To select participants for Phase 2, we employed purposive and snowball samplings. Purposive sampling was utilized to identify respondents or participants that are most likely to provide pertinent and meaningful data (Kelly, 2010), as they are more knowledgeable and experienced about the issues or problems being studied by researchers (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Bernard, 2011). In addition, we employed this method because it can identify and select cases that will make efficient use of scarce research resources (Palinkas et al., 2015) like prison education. Using purposive sampling, we recruited four prison officers, who are in the rehabilitative unit, to elicit their perceptions on the elements of communication that may be incorporated in the rehabilitative teaching and learning activities among adult inmates in prison. We also interviewed one parole officer, to examine his views on the types of communications skills that parolees or inmates may need in order to secure job opportunities and to communicate effectively while working during the parole period.

Then we applied snowball sampling to select participants among the inmates. Snowball sampling is one of the most prevalent qualitative sampling techniques, with the features of networking and referral at its core (Parker, et al., 2019). In snowball sampling, the willing participants are asked to identify other contacts who fulfil the study criteria and who may also be willing participants, who in turn are asked to recommend more possible participants, and so on. Through snowball sampling, we recruited six inmates. These inmates were willing to participate and recommended by their parole officer who was also one of the participants in this study. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic movement restriction at the time of the study, Phase 2 was conducted online via Google Meet in December 2021 to January 2022. For ethical reason, the participants (the prison officers and parole officer) were identified as PO1, PO2, PO3, PO4 and PO5. Table 2 shows the prison officer participants' background.

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Table 2: Prison Officers' Background

Participants	Unit	Years of Work Experience
PO1	Rehabilitative	14 years
PO2	Rehabilitative	8 years
PO3	Rehabilitative	10 years
PO4	Rehabilitative	9 years
PO5	Community & Parole	16 years

To protect the confidentiality of the inmates, we identified them as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6. The interview data were then transcribed and analyzed according to Braun and Clarke's (2012, 2019) six steps of Thematic Analysis (TA), notably becoming familiar with the data by repeatedly transcribing and reading the data, coding the data, searching for, and reviewing potential themes, defining, and naming the themes, and generating a report of the data analysis.

4. Result and Discussion

Studies have shown the importance of communication (see Rabøl et al., 2011; Downs, et al., 1988; Brindley & Reynolds, 2011; Collins, et al., 2011; Kudesia & Elfenbein, 2013). Therefore, it is essential to clearly promote communication skills among inmates as for them returning to the community, effective communication skills are the key factors to new and successful lives and opportunities (Crabbe, 2016). The communication skills, like language (basic English conversation) communication and digital literacy are relevant to current social setting and workplace (see De Lucio et al., 2018; Egbert, 1989; Martin & Beese, 2017). However, the findings of Phase 1 (the textual analyses of the teaching and learning HBD documents) illustrate that basic communication elements (e.g., English basic conversation) and digital communication literacy are not included in HDB (see Table 1). These elements may be taught incidentally in HDB program, but they are not specified as teaching and learning communication skills in any of the phases of the HDB program. With global contemporary technology, HDB program should equip inmates with relevant workplace skills such as basic language communication skills and digital communication literacy. For the inmates to successfully integrating into the society, and performing well in a workplace, they need to be exposed to these skills.

The inmates should also be taught about digital communications to enhance their digital literacy. Studies in digital technologies in prison show the positive needs of integrating this topic to prison lessons (see Hopkins & Farley, 2014; Knight & Van de Steene, 2017; McDougall, et al., 2017). It is reported that by 2030, digital marketing demand will grow by ten percent (Doyle, 2019). Thus, with this increasing demand in the job market for people with literate digital communication, prison education should tailor a comprehensive communication module with basic and digital communications as part of its topics. The ability to navigate the digital platform is also essential for the inmates to function effectively and professionally later in a workplace. Although prisons are assumed to be designed to prevent inmates from accessing and participating in cyberspace (Smith, 2012), the inmates should be given access to the internet. They also need to be trained in digital literacy. Our neighboring country like Singapore's prison or Singapore Prison Service (SPS) has begun training its inmates digital literacy (Low & Poon, 2022). They have improved their rehabilitation programs with technology, where the inmates have accessed to electronic and smart devices so they can learn the digital literacy skills. The programs teach the inmates with basic digital literacy skills as part of their employability training.

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In addition, the data obtained from Phase 2 of the study (the interview sessions) were analyzed based on Braun and Clarke's (2012, 2019) six steps of Thematic Analysis (TA). Three emergent themes were derived from the interviews, namely the need to learn verbal and non-verbal communication; the need to be introduced to new technologies for communication; and the importance of being able to converse in English. Each theme is discussed as follows:

4.1. The Need to Learn Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication

It is observed that many prison officer participants felt the inmates lack real life communication. The type of communication present in prison was mainly between prison staff and inmates. Usually, it was a one-way communication where inmates only speak when they are asked to speak by the staff. This was pointed out by PO2 and PO3:

> "They *can talk to us but the way they talk to us is not like the way they talk to with their fellow inmates and the way we talk with our friends and colleagues. Most of the time they talk to obey our instructions and most of the time they listen*". (PO2)

> "It *is very difficult to see how they talk with their fellow inmates. They don't reveal things to us. What I can see, they usually listen to our instructions. Maybe, they do not want to create problems, so they prefer to speak when they are asked to speak*". (PO3)

This finding conforms with the idea that life in prison appears to inhibit effective communication among inmates in several ways: the prison environment is constrictive; prison authorities only permit minimal and necessary contact with visitors and medical personnel; and prison authorities only permit minimal contact with inmates and this predicament is also noted by (Forrester-Jones, 2006).

Many of the prison officer participants shared that it is very important to expose and teach the inmates important elements of communication, specifically using correct verbal expressions and appropriate body language. They also added that these new communication skills may help them survive in the real world upon their release. This was illustrated by these responses:

> *"They (the inmates) have been in here (prison) for years. They do the same routines every day. I think it is a high time for them to learn other skills like how to express themselves using correctly and use correct body language so that when they are released, people may not misjudge them". (PO1)*

> *"I think they need to be taught appropriate ways to talk, look at people and even to walk. I have seen some inmates who talk and walk in hostility. They are not aware that they are sending wrong messages or impressions to other people. They just talk and walk the way they used to when they were criminals. They must learn how to talk and the way they look at people in non-threatening manners and not showing their gangster-like behaviors". (PO4)*

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One prison officer participant even stated that he and his team prepared a crash course on basic communication skills and conducted role-plays for their inmates/parolees on how to communicate as restaurant staff. He said:

> *"I told them, don't look at their customers or stare at them that way menacingly when taking orders. Don't walk like a gangster. Don't make their customers feeling uneasy and uncomfortable. I even demonstrated to them how to take orders appropriately using correct body language". (PO5)*

Voice inflection, speech rate, volume, word stress, word rhythm, intonation, and emphasis, as well as facial expression, eye contact, degree of touch, gestures, and posture are all important factors in non-verbal communication and these elements (Burgoon, Manusov, & Guerrero, 2021) are crucial in ensuring smooth communication process at workplace communication (Kudesia & Elfenbein, 2013). Thus, with the responses, it can be suggested that verbal and non-verbal communication are essential elements that need to be promoted among inmates to assist them to be functional and thus enable them to fend for themselves upon their release to the community.

4.2. The Need to Learn New Technologies for Communication

The inmate participants showed concern for their limited knowledge in technology for communication. They shared that their feeling of being left behind and clueless about the communication technologies that are perceived to be ubiquitous by non-inmates. Nevertheless, the inmate participants expressed their unfamiliarity about the use of the communication technologies, and they felt 'unwelcome' because they were not able to utilize the technologies to their advantage. These feelings of uncertainty and insufficiency were reiterated by the responses below:

> *"Oh, I didn't know we have to take photos (to scan QR Codes using handphones) whenever we enter shops, malls, and restaurants. Really, I feel left behind. Sometimes, I feel I didn't want to go out just because I had to through all this experience". (P3)*

> *"I used smartphone before, but I didn't know that WhatsApp is being used everywhere even at my workplace. Before I entered the prison, I knew WhatsApp, but I seldom used it that much. Now I notice we can send voices, documents, photos using WhatsApp". (P2)*

> *"Wow! I can order food through Grab and Food Panda. It is easy but I don't really buy Grab food because it is expensive. May be one day I will work as food delivery person, but I must learn how to use it first". (P4).*

In addition, the inmate participants acknowledged the importance of digital communication literacy and internet access. They reiterated that being digital literate may enhance their confidence, self-esteem, and social skills before their release into modern digital society. The following responses recapitulated their acknowledgement on the importance of digital communication literacy and internet access.

> *"I envy looking at my colleagues when they use handphone to search for information. Everything is on their fingertips. They can send money fast,*

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shop easily, and pay using useful application. I wish I am as good as them". (P1)

"I feel useful and happy once I know how to send money to my parents, although not much. It just made me feel I am doing good to my parents and my siblings". (P6)

These accounts indicate that digital communication literacy and internet access are central elements in a knowledge society, the society that inmates will be reintegrating into. Digital skills enable efficient communication in a variety of ICT-influenced circumstances and provide the opportunity to comprehend and analyze digital media and media material critically (Barros, Monteiro, & Leite, 2021). Moreover, access to information technology and the Internet is essential for learners in search for information and life-long learning skills which can be promoted through digital communication literacy. This corroborates with the studies by Knight and Van de Steene (2017) and McDougall et al. (2017) stating that digital communication technologies facilitate the social skills, self-esteem, rehabilitation, and reintegration of incarcerated individuals into society.

4.3. The Importance of Communicating in Simple English

English learning is one of the means in providing the incarcerated population with meaningful educational opportunities. In this research context, the inmates participants exhibited interest and drive in the ability to converse in simple English conversation. In the following inmate participant's accounts, we could see that the inmate participant (P3) shared how he missed a chance to work in an oilrig due to his very limited English conversation skills. Unlike his other colleagues who can speak fluently in English and thus, they were given the opportunities to work in oilrigs and gained extra salary, his offshore work experience was restricted to working on harbors and quaysides. He said:

"I could have worked in oilrigs and gotten extra money. I have the skills needed to work on oilrigs. I attended trainings and short courses. However, I could not speak English fluently and therefore I was never chosen to work on the rigs. There (the oilrigs), we need to communicate with people from other countries like the nigger (Blacks) and white people. I still feel I lost a lot because my English is bad". (P3)

Some inmates participants also demonstrated their interest in learning English because they perceive that people respect them and think that they are capable in their job if they could speak simple English. This was pointed out by P2 and P6:

"If I can speak English, even a simple one, people could see that I am confident, and I can entertain more customers at the restaurants where I work" (P2)

"I feel good when I can answer my Chinese boss in simple English even if with my broken (limited) English. I am scared to speak English but when I was able to answer my boss in one or two English words, it already made me feel motivated and confident". (P6)

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The findings indicate that the inmates participants' perceptions of English language learning, specifically in oral communication skills are reassuring. They are optimistic about seeking communication with other persons who can speak English, procuring better jobs if they can speak in English fluently in confidently and nurturing learning to speak English for any future purposes. The results were further corroborated by those of De Lucio et al. (2018) and Emam (2019) which highlight the ability to speak English was identified as one of the most important external criteria for securing employment and boosting the self-esteem of incarcerated people.

5. Conclusion

This study elicited the inmates' communication needs and skills. The document and interview analyses have yielded three communication elements required by adult inmates before their release in modern challenging world. Their lack in these three elements has resulted in these following communication needs, namely the need to learn verbal and non-verbal communication, the need to be learn to new technologies for communication, and the need to able to converse in English. Considering the absence of basic communication elements (e.g., English basic conversation) and digital communication literacy in the existing HDB programs, as well as the participants' opinions and experiences, a module or program tailored to the communication needs of adult inmates is urgently required. In addition, these adult inmates should be exposed to further communication elements and digital tools that inspire them to confidently reintegrate into society and search for job opportunities to financially support them and their families. Therefore, it is important to note that the sample size is a limitation of the study. In addition to being small, the samples were statistically unrepresentative of the entire prison population. Despite this, the findings of this study provide fertile ground for further research into the needs of inmates, given the paucity of related studies conducted in the context of prisons in relation to programmes designed for inmates in prison. In the future, it is recommended that further studies be carried out on this topic and that a larger sample of participants be used to fortify the findings.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers obtained the permission from Malaysian Prison Department to conduct the study in Kota Kinabalu Prison, and the participants had consented to provide data for the study.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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