

Strategies Used and Cultural Considerations in Seeking Advice on In-Vitro Fertilisation Online: A Case of Malaysian Women

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing literature on computer-mediated communication (CMC), the online communicative behaviour of specific communities remains largely unexplored. This paper aims to contribute to the existing body of literature by examining the strategies Malaysian women use when seeking advice related to in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) in CMC. Messages posted in an online forum were analysed using the web content analysis method. The results of the study reveal that the advice-seeking strategies of the Malaysian women are tied in closely with their culture. This is largely shown in how the messages were constructed, as well as in the message content itself. As such, the findings suggest that despite the anonymity afforded by CMC, elements of cultural influence are still detectable in the ways Malaysian women seek advice online.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication; advice-seeking; women; infertility; cultural influence

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the computer and the Internet have diversified the ways we communicate, more and more people are opting for computer-mediated communication (CMC) as their main means of socialisation. Yet, despite the proliferation of CMC, few studies have actually looked at the influence of culture on CMC (Herring 2011). Many have only examined interactive behaviours and language production of computer-mediated discourse in general (Beißwenger & Storrer 2008). With the Internet that enables communication without any geographical boundaries, this begs the question as to what extent, and in what manner, culture and societal norms influence the participants' online communicative behaviour. This paper attempts to contribute to the literature on CMC by examining how an Eastern community seeks advice online in English. Specifically, the paper investigates how Malaysian women use an online forum to seek advice on in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), an infertility treatment procedure that combines the egg and sperm outside the body (Voorhis 2007).

ADVICE-SEEKING

Advice-seeking can be defined as the act of asking for solutions or suggestions to solve a problem one has. The problem can be a difficult situation the advice-seeker is in, or it can be as simple as an absence of some information or opinion which the advice-seeker needs (Rantilla 2000).

There have been several studies on advice-seeking. Some studies examined how expert advice is sought (Heritage & Sefi 1992, Locher 2006) while others investigated advice-seeking between peers (Kouper 2010, Morrow 2012, Placencia 2012). Other studies focused on advice-seeking occurring in different types of contexts such as in health-related settings (Baker, Emmision & Firth 2005, Leppänen 1998, Silverman, Perakyla & Bor 1992), educational contexts (Limberg 2010, Vehviläinen 2001,2009), and in computer-mediated environments (Kouper 2010, Locher 2006, Placencia 2012). These studies showed advice-seeking to be a complex speech act as strategies could range from explicit, direct advice-requests to implicit advice-solicitations embedded in the form of problem narrations (Locher & Limberg 2012).

Advice-seeking strategies were also found to vary, depending on the contexts in which the discourse occurred, the participants involved, as well as the topics of discussion (Locher & Limberg 2012). For instance, despite using an adapted version of Goldsmith's (2000) model of advice-seeking strategies in face-to-face interactions, Kouper's (2010) investigation of online peer advice strategies employed by mothers in an international forum yielded different results from Goldsmith's (2000) study. Instead of six patterns identified in Goldsmith's (2000) study, Kouper (2010) found only four from her data corpus. This indicates that advice-seekers do use different strategies when communicating in different environments.

In addition, due to the interactional features of CMC that differ from those in a face-to-face setting, some researchers employed different approaches in analysing online advice-seeking strategies, bringing out different categorisations of strategies. Morrow (2006) and Locher (2006), for example, adopted an inductive approach in investigating advice-seeking strategies in their data. In their system of analysis, the discursive moves, the relational work inherent in the messages, as well as the linguistic realisations of the moves were all taken into account when examining the messages. A discursive move is "the kind of contribution that the entry made to the ongoing interchange" (Miller & Gergen 1998, p. 192). For example, *I'm sorry* is a type of apology, and hence, can be classified as an *Apology* discursive move. The relational aspects of the message are words or phrases which are utilised to diminish or accentuate a point. For instance, capitalisation of words is often used to emphasise an idea, while subjectivity markers like *perhaps* and *maybe* are usually mitigating devices. Analysis of the linguistic realisations of discursive moves then involves looking at the syntactic structures of the moves. Subsequently, their analysis not only encompassed the explicitness levels and linguistic structures of the advice-requests, but also the manner in which the requests were made, as well as the moves leading up to the advice-requests and the moves that followed after them.

The types of participants also influence the ways advice is sought. An asymmetrical relationship between the advice-seeker and the advice-giver would result in different approaches in seeking advice, as opposed to advice sought from a fellow peer. Morrow's (2006) investigation of peer advice in a discussion forum about depression revealed expressions of feelings as a prominent feature in the problem messages. Metaphorical language was also a strategy used often to describe the symptoms of the illness. On the other hand, Locher (2006) investigated expert advice, and so, in her analysis of advice-seeking strategies, she found that the most prevalent type of advice-seeking was asking of questions, particularly the yes/no type of questions, followed by *wh*-questions and finally alternative questions. There were also many explicit requests for advice, and they normally appeared in conjunction with the *Hedging* and *Appealing* categories of relational work.

Studies have also revealed that the topics in which advice is sought affect the types of strategies employed by the advice-seekers. For instance, Aarons' and Jenkins' (2002) study on Latino youths revealed topics to be a factor influencing who these youths turned to when

seeking advice and information. In matters which were less sensitive, as a collectivist society, the Latino youths preferred to seek their parents, friends or peers for support and advice. However, in more sensitive and taboo topics such as sex and birth control, they were more likely to turn to professionals for fear of shame and embarrassment.

With regards to advice-seeking and culture in face-to-face contexts, previous studies have shown culture to be a significant influence on the ways participants seek advice. Collectivist societies were reported to view advice-seeking more positively than individualistic societies (Beasley 1998). Unlike individualistic societies, collectivist societies perceive advice-seeking as rapport-building rather than face-threatening (Johnston & Wong 2002). As such, collectivist communities tend to seek advice more frequently, and from people who are closest to them (Beasley 1998, Johnston & Wong 2002). In Beasley's (1998) study comparing New Zealand Europeans (an individualistic society) and the Maoris (a collectivist society) on issues related to motherhood, the Maoris preferred to seek advice and support from their family members, while the Europeans counterpart viewed advice-seeking as more face-threatening and thus, relied more on professional health practitioners for advice.

However, with reference to advice-seeking and culture in CMC, there are as yet, limited studies. Given the anonymity afforded by CMC, it is difficult to link the participants' communicative strategies to their cultures. For example, Kouper's (2010) study on online advice used an international forum as its data site. Therefore, unless interviews or surveys were conducted to gather further information on the participants, their identities remained hidden. Likewise, although Morrow's (2006) investigated research site (*NetDoctor.co.uk*) was native to the United Kingdom, and Locher's (2006) researched advice column (*Lucy Answers*) was an American column, their studies did not focus on whether the advice-seeking strategies used by the participants were culturally-related.

With regards to online advice-giving in languages other than English, there were attempts to relate culture to advice in discourse. Morrow (2012) examined an Internet Japanese advice forum discussing the topic *Divorce*, while Placencia (2012) analysed online peer-to-peer advice in Spanish Yahoo! *Respuestas*, a Yahoo service where subscribers are free to ask and receive responses to their questions. Although both Morrow's (2012) and Placencia's (2012) studies did point to some aspects of advice that suggested the influence of culture, such as the use of certain in-group markers (*amigo* meaning 'friend' in Spanish) and vocabulary that were culturally-bound (the interactional particle *ne* which denotes solidarity in Japanese), the focus of the two studies was on how advice was given, and not on how advice was sought. Hence, the findings of the studies still did not indicate whether culture influenced the members' advice-seeking strategies. Consequently, there remains a dire need for studies that examine online advice-seeking strategies in relation to the interactants' cultural beliefs and practices. Moreover, the present study's investigation is on how advice is sought on a particularly taboo and sensitive topic in that cultural community – infertility treatment. Research on this area would shed light on how the advice-seeking strategies and language used reflect the advice-seekers' anxiety level and the severity of the problem, as perceived by their society.

ADVICE-SEEKING IN MALAYSIA

Similar to studies on advice with a cultural focus, local studies in the Malaysian context largely focused on the advice-giving strategies rather than the advice-seeking strategies. Therefore, not much can be drawn to compare previous studies on advice-seeking in a non-CMC context and the present study on advice-seeking in a CMC setting. Nevertheless, previous studies on advice-giving strategies also revealed that the strategies were closely

linked to the culture of the advice-givers. As such, findings of these studies corresponded to the findings on advice-giving strategies in other cultures such as the Japanese culture in Morrow's (2012) study, and the Spanish culture in Placencia's (2012) research. For instance, Shaidatul Akma Adi Kasuma's (2012) investigation of an advice column in a Malaysian online newspaper found the imperative-directive as the most frequently used structure, suggesting the advice-giving act was viewed as a supportive, rather than a face-threatening act, which is a common perception of a collectivist society. In addition, the strategies also included many instances of mitigation, another typical feature of a collectivist society's communicative styles whereby interactions frequently take into account of the addressee's face. Other face-saving characteristics of Malaysian communicative patterns identified in local studies are to be humble (Asma Abdullah 1996), indirect (Kuang & Jawakhir Mior Jaafar 2010, Lailawati Mohd. Salleh 2005), encouraging (Asmah Haji Omar 1995, Jariah Mohd. Jan 1999), and cooperative or non-confrontational (Kuang, Wong & David 2011, Lim 2001).

As Malaysia is also a hierarchical society (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov 2010), people of higher status, either in terms of age or social achievement, are given more respect (Asrul Zamani 2002). In the investigated forum, there exists such power asymmetry in the sense that women who have more knowledge, or women who have gone through certain experiences, are considered to have a higher status than those who are seeking advice. When advice is sought from these women, it is therefore crucial that advice-seekers recognise this power differentiation between them and their advice-givers to ensure that their advice-requests are granted. A typical way of showing respect among Malaysians is to use hedging devices in their communication such as the subjectivity markers *I think* and *maybe* (Asma Abdullah 1996). These devices indicate a lack of conviction by the speaker, effectively reducing an utterance's power and strength.

Being a multi-ethnic country, advice-seeking would also naturally take into account that cross-cultural communication is bound to occur. As such, although there may be some terms used which are linked to the participants' various ethnicities, these terms are likely to be understood by all races (Vaish & Roslan 2011). In addition, due to the intermingling between different races, this results in cultural beliefs and practices, which are shared by several ethnic groups. For example, the pregnancy taboo of forbidding pregnant women to go to a funeral, or to slaughter any animals, are beliefs shared by three main ethnic groups in Malaysia – the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians. Hence, advice-seeking is not restricted to advice-requests from advice-givers of the same race, but also of other races.

Lastly, Malaysians are a patriarchal society. There are clear, demarcated roles for men and women, with the men as the family head, and the women playing their nurturing roles. The men are commonly perceived as the main breadwinner, while the women are expected to fulfil their wifely duty to bear children once they are married to continue her husband's family lineage. Failure to do so could result in divorce or in the husband taking on another wife (Zuraida Ahmaad Sabki 2010). Infertility is thus often perceived as the fault of women, irrespective of which spouse is infertile (Evens 2004). Hence, with regards to advice-seeking related to infertility, Malaysian women may reveal the pressure and stress that they experience in producing offspring, as well as their efforts to try to conceive. These efforts may include resorting to traditional foods, drinks and other traditional infertility-treatment methods since tradition and ancient customs are still very much observed and honoured in the Malaysian culture today (Aida Idris 2008). Among some of the traditional methods believed to be helpful to increase one's fertility are to take certain herbs and foods, as well as to go for acupuncture and massages (Henry 2001).

THE PRESENT STUDY

Considering the widespread use of the Internet and the limited studies on how advice is sought online by communities of a specific culture, the present study attempts to examine the manner in which Malaysian women seek advice online. It is a descriptive study, with the specific aims to find out (1) the strategies used by Malaysian women when seeking advice on in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) in a local online forum for women, and (2) whether these strategies are tied in with the Malaysian culture. Examination of the advice-seeking strategies uses the web content analysis method.

METHODOLOGY

THE RESEARCH SITE

The research site is one of Malaysia's most popular online forum websites for Malaysian women, i.e. Malaysian Motherhood Forum. It is an open-accessed forum. Although there are administrators managing the forum, the messages are not moderated before they are posted online. The purpose of the forum is to provide an avenue for Malaysian mothers to discuss issues which are of concern to them. These are women-related issues touching on health and beauty, child bearing, and child rearing.

Due to IVF being the forum's most popular discussion topic, it was chosen as the topic for investigating the Malaysian women's online advice-seeking strategies. One characteristic of the Malaysian culture is as such that posterity is given due importance (Akhtar 2011). Subsequently, infertility remains a taboo topic, especially among the women, as they are the ones bearing the brunt of the stigma of being infertile (Evens 2004). Because the Internet allows one to communicate without disclosing one's identity (Herring 2011), it is thus a good platform to enquire and seek advice on issues that may be embarrassing to do so in a face-to-face type of interaction, such as those concerning infertility.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The participants of the study were the registered members of the Malaysian Motherhood Forum. These members were likely to be Malays, Chinese or Indians, since they form the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia (Index Mundi 2012). They also share some common values among themselves (Asma Abdullah 1996), and thus, the study's investigation of cultural influence uses Hermeking's (2005) definition of culture, which defines culture as the general culture of the nation irrespective of its ethnic diversities. Presently, the forum has about 17,000 members.

THE DATA

The data consist of 127 messages posted by 53 members from December 2011 to January 2012. However, considering the nature of the forum not being an advice column, all messages were first filtered so that only advice-seeking messages were examined for their strategies. Advice-seeking messages were those that displayed the characteristics of the author asking for solutions or suggestions to a problem.

TABLE 1. Topics posted in the forum from Dec 2011-Jan 2012

No.	Topic	Number of posted messages
1	Anyone Doing IVF?	27
2	NEED HELP! Tell me what is this?	3
3	When to stop doing ivf/icsi?	2
4	Brown Discharge – Miscarriage?	1
5	Life After Ectopic Pregnancy	1
6	Egg Donation Programme	1
7	Placenta Encapsulation Service	1
8	Looking to adopt a Infant Child	1
9	My Baby Doesn't Like Me?	1
10	Your Parenting Style	1
	Total	39

As can be seen in Table 1, there were 39 advice-seeking messages, and of these, 32 (messages posted under Topics 1, 2 & 3 in Table 1) were related to IVF, illustrating the high level of interest and concern these women have for infertility treatment. As the study is about how Malaysian women seek advice on IVF, only the 32 messages related to IVF were used for analysis.

With regards to the language used for communication in the forum, all messages were posted in English. Although English is taught only as a second language in Malaysia (Jariah Mohd. Jan 2003), English is still “the preferred language” (Nik Safiah Karim 1987, p. 8) in most interactions. It is unbiased to any ethnic group, and therefore, “a neutral language for social integration” (Hiba Qusay Abdul Sattar, Salasiah Che Lah & Raja Rozina Raja Suleiman 2011, p. 73). Consequently, English is usually used in “intra-national communication” (Gill 2002, p. 40).

However, given English is not the mother tongue of most Malaysians, it was common to find grammatical errors in messages posted in the forum. Nonetheless, despite the grammatical errors in the messages, these errors were ignored so as to preserve the authenticity of the messages.

ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

The 32 IVF-related advice-seeking messages were examined for their strategies using web content analysis method, emulating Locher’s (2006) system of analysing advice-seeking messages. It is a method where content can refer to various types of information in the media, and content is analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively (Herring 2010). These messages were examined for their discursive moves, the relational work inherent in the discursive moves, as well as the linguistic realisations of the moves.

Considering the interpretive nature of the analysis, an inter-rater reliability test was carried out. The messages were first examined by two researchers with the purpose of differentiating the categories of discursive moves and relational aspects of the messages. This constitutes the preliminary analysis of the data. Thereafter, the labels and their descriptions were given to an independent evaluator to code the messages’ discursive moves and their relational aspects according to their descriptions. Following this, a comparison between the initial coding of discursive moves and relational categories, and the coding done by the independent evaluator was made using the percentage agreement statistic method. The comparison results revealed the percentage agreement for the discursive moves was 98.70% and 83.04% for the relational categories. As “a minimum level of 80% is usually the standard” (Riffe, Lacy & Fico 1998, p. 128), the results of the percentage agreement was considered reliable. Discussion between the researchers and the independent evaluator was eventually carried out to finalise the discursive moves and relational categories before these moves and categories were used for further analysis.

As for ascertaining whether the messages reflect the culture of the participants, investigation involved looking at two main aspects of the messages: (1) how the message was composed, and (2) the message content. The way the message was constructed comprised the author's choice of discursive move(s), the relational work inherent in the message, as well as the manner in which language was used to convey the author's intention. Analysis at this level comprised examining whether the ways the members sought advice in the forum resembled the communicative styles of the Malaysian culture, i.e. humble, indirect, respectful, and co-operative. Investigation of the message content then looked at aspects of the content that are related to the Malaysian culture. The analysis consisted of identifying parts of the content that reflected the advice-seeker being Malaysian, i.e. coming from a culture that is collectivist, hierarchical and patriarchal.

In line with Ess and the Association of Internet Researchers' (2002) guidelines for ethical decision-making in Internet research, all pseudonyms, names of people, as well as other contact information of the forum members, have also been changed. This is to protect the identities of the message posters as well as of those mentioned in some of the messages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study and discusses the findings in relation to (1) the types of strategies used by Malaysian women when seeking advice on IVF online, and (2) whether culture is reflected in the way the online advice-seeking messages are constructed.

STRATEGIES USED WHEN SEEKING ADVICE ONLINE

ADVICE-SEEKING MOVES

Analysis of the data identified 15 types of discursive moves in the messages analysed (Table 2). Most messages also contained more than one discursive move, hence, there were 231 moves in the 32 messages analysed.

TABLE 2. Discursive moves identified in the advice-seeking messages

No.	Discursive Move	No. of Occurrences
1	<i>Question</i>	62
2	<i>Problem statement</i>	23
3	<i>Request for advice</i>	18
4	<i>Comment on previous record</i>	18
5	<i>Explanation</i>	17
6	<i>Background</i>	16
7	<i>Metacomment</i>	13
8	<i>Appreciation</i>	12
9	<i>Goodwill wishes</i>	9
10	<i>Planning</i>	8
11	<i>Providing contact information</i>	4
12	<i>Suggesting advice to oneself</i>	4
13	<i>Future expectation</i>	4
14	<i>Congrats</i>	3
15	<i>Apology</i>	2
Total		231

Of the 15 types of moves, three are related to advice-seeking. These are the *Question* move, the *Problem Statement* move and the *Request for Advice* move (Table 2). Among the three types of advice-seeking moves, the *Question* move is the most used move. The questions asked do not indicate explicitly that advice is being requested. These are questions, which are related to the advice-seeker's problem, and there is a response required of the

recipient in terms of an answer. As such, it is a less direct strategy of seeking advice compared to the *Request for Advice* move, but is still a more explicit advice-seeking move than the *Problem Statement* move where advice-solicitation is couched in the narration of the advice-seeker's problem (Kouper 2010).

TABLE 3. Types of questions in the *Question* move

The <i>Question</i> Move	No. of Occurrences	Question
a) Questions Asking for Information	49	Is there any traditional food I can take, to improve my health to get pregnant?
b) Questions Asking for Opinion	13	Share with what do you think?
Total	62	

As can be seen in Table 3, the *Question* move is further divided into two types namely, a) questions asking for information, and b) questions asking for opinion. Of the two types of questions, questions asking for information dominated the *Question* move. This shows that the advice-seekers viewed the forum more as an avenue where they could obtain information about infertility treatment, rather than exchanging opinions with one another.

Message 1:

Congratulations on your double good news...We had one fail IVF before. Our problem also no sperm, but different cause. **Do you mind to** share how did doctor extract sperm? Should I PM you?

Another significant characteristic of the questions formed in the forum was the use of hedges. Some of the hedges used were modals (*can, may, will* and *would*), subjectivity markers (*maybe, think, wonder* and *reckon*) and the consultative devices (*Do you mind to...? Don't mind to...? and Mind to...?*). These hedges are a type of relational work that function as a politeness strategy to mitigate a point. For instance, in Message 1, the consultative device used (*Do you mind to...?*) mitigates the impositive force of the advice-request "Do you mind to share how did doctor extract sperm?" The consultative device indicates permission-seeking by the advice-seeker, and optionality on the part of the advice-giver to offer her advice. The use of hedges thus demonstrates the regard for the message-recipient's face when advice was being sought.

TABLE 4. *Problem Statement* move with emotional distress expressed

No.	Problem Statement	Ways Emotional Distress is Expressed	Evidence in Message
1	Went minor surgery...and my left fallopian tube removed☺	Emoticon	☺
2	It was BFN again... I can't stop crying now ...I felt totally hopeless now...☺	Adjectival clause Emoticon	I can't stop crying now... I felt totally hopeless now... ☺
3	...just had my first ivf done in November and it's a NEGATIVE. to me, it's a torture journey.	Capitalisation of letters Adjectival clause	NEGATIVE it's a torture journey.
4	U named it, I think I have it ...and still ...Sob...	Interjection to represent sadness or word to vocalise the sound of sobbing	Sob

The *Problem Statement* move was the second most used advice-seeking strategy among the forum members (Table 2). There were various syntactic structures in realising this

move, but typically, the move described the advice-seeker's problem. What is more significant about the *Problem Statement* move is that in most instances, the move also expressed the advice-seeker's emotional distress. In the examples in Table 4, the advice-seeker's emotion was expressed through the use of emoticons, capitalisation of letters to boost the negative results of a test, adjectival clauses that described the advice-seeker's emotional state, and interjections or words to represent or vocalize sounds of emotional distress. These language and computer-mediated discourse features that amplified and conveyed the advice-seekers' emotional anguish were instrumental to invoke feelings of sympathy and pity in the message-recipients, which subsequently, would result in a higher likelihood of the advice-seekers getting advice responses.

However, there were only 18 occurrences of the *Request for Advice* move (Table 2), making this move, the least preferred advice-seeking strategy. This move was most frequently realised through the use of declaratives (N=12), followed by the imperative structure (N=5) and only one move was realised in the interrogative syntactic structure (Table 5).

TABLE 5. Syntactic Structures of the *Request for Advice* move

No.	The <i>Request for Advice</i> Move	No. of Occurrences	Evidence in Message
1	Declarative	12	I need some advice.
2	Imperative	5	Please help.
3	Interrogative	1	What else should I do??
	Total	18	

In several cases of the *Request for Advice* move (N=8), they were also hedged with an *Appealing* category of adverb in front of the imperative, especially the adverb *Please*. This reduces the imposition level of the request. In the examples in Table 6, because of the adverb *Please* or *Do* that precedes the imperative, i.e. "Please help" and "Do share...", the imperative becomes an appeal for help or advice, with an emphasis of politeness and/or urgency, thereby weakening the directive force of the advice request. Hence, like the function of hedging in the *Question* move, hedging in the *Request for Advice* move signified the need for phrasing advice-requests in a way that was viewed non face-threatening.

TABLE 6. Types of hedging used in the *Request for Advice* move

The <i>Request for Advice</i> Move	Hedging Used
Please help.	Please
Do share	Do

MOVES THAT SUPPORT THE ADVICE-SEEKING ACT

Other moves in the messages functioned to complete the advice-seeking act. The advice-seeking moves were supported by other moves that helped make the message acceptable. For instance, what was notable about the discursive moves was that advice-seekers did not normally seek advice very early on in their messages. Advice-seeking was frequently preceded by other moves, in particular, the *Background* move and the *Comment on Previous Record* move. The *Background* move provided description of the advice-seeker's context and situation, while the *Comment on Previous Record* moves were usually allusions to the message-recipient's situation, as described in previous message(s). For instance, Message 2 shows how the advice-seeking moves (the *Problem Statement* move and the *Request for Advice* move), are placed following the *Background* move, which gives specific information on her IVF experience and failure. Message 3 then starts off with the *Comment on Previous Record*, commenting on how glad the advice-seeker is in knowing that the message-recipient's twins are healthy, before seeking advice in the form of the *Problem*

Statement and *Question* moves. As these moves were a prelude to the advice-seeking move(s), they acted as a politeness strategy where the advice-seeker probably wanted to reduce the imposition of the advice request by giving a background information to her problem, or by commenting on the message-recipient’s situation first, before continuing with the advice-seeker’s problem.

Message 2:

(Background) I have just completed my 2nd IVF and got the beta results today...It was BFN again... **(Problem Statement)** I thought I will be able to digest the result much easier after the first failure but I am wrong. I cant stop crying now while typing the message here. Again, we failed. I wonder why God was so unfair to us to give us one failure after another. I felt totally hopeless now...All our dreams to get our own baby seems so hard to be realized... **(Request Advice)** What else should I do?? I just wonder how can I gather courage again to start on this never ending journey...☹

Message 3:

Sally,
(Comment on Previous Record) glad to know that your twins are doing well ☺ **(Future Expectation)** hope mine will do the same. **(Metacomment)** btw **(Background)** drJaafar also advised me to go for amino, as I am 42 and hv high risk of down syndrome baby. **(Problem Statement)** im a bit scare of the amino. was told that no anaesthetic will be given. **(Question)** is it painful? **(Explanation)** somemore we have to have 2 punctures for twin babies.

Furthermore, moves that helped complete the advice-seeking messages were also largely moves that expressed the message author’s friendliness and sociability. For instance, like the *Comment on Previous Record* move, the *Congrats* move was also a response move, linking the previous message to the current one, and was typically placed at the beginning of the message. As the forum functions as a supportive platform, when some success is achieved, members congratulate each other as recognition of an objective achieved, hence the *Congrats* move. At the same time, members who have been successful in conceiving become elevated to the position of an expert, an advice-giver. Message 4 illustrates how the author congratulates the message-recipient for being successful in conceiving (“Congratulations on your double good news”), and then, proceeds to give a background to her problem (the *Background* move) before seeking advice from the message-recipient (the *Question* move).

Message 4:

(Congrats) Congratulations on your double good news...
(Background) We had one fail IVF before. Our problem also no sperm, but different cause. **(Question)** Do you mind to share how did doctor extract sperm? ...

Expressions of friendliness and sociability were also demonstrated through the *Goodwill Wishes* move and the *Appreciation* move (Table 7). As a support-seeking and support-lending forum, many members included goodwill wishes at the end of their messages. In addition, there were also many instances of appreciation, where the advice-seeker thanked the advice-giver(s) in advance for the advice.

TABLE 7. *Goodwill Wishes and Appreciation* moves as expressions of friendliness and sociability

Moves as Expressions of Friendliness and Sociability	Examples
<i>Goodwill Wishes</i>	Babydust to all forummers here including myself...
<i>Appreciation</i>	Appreciate ur help...

THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE WHEN SEEKING ADVICE

With regards to relating the advice-seeking strategies to culture, the strategies were very much influenced by the fact that (1) IVF is a sensitive topic among Malaysian women, and

(2) the environment in which the interaction took place, i.e. the online forum. Two aspects of the messages were involved in the investigation - the manner in which the message is constructed, and the message content.

MESSAGE CONSTRUCTION

There are four ways how message construction reflects culture: (1) the domination of the *Question* move, (2) the use of hedging devices, (3) the inclusion of other moves besides the advice-seeking moves, and (4) by directing the advice-request to the general audience.

Domination of the Question move. Although asking questions was also the most employed advice-seeking strategy in Locher's (2006) and Kouper's (2010) studies, the finding that points to the *Question* move being the most used move in the present study may also have a cultural implication. In Morrow's (2006) study on peer advice, as opposed to the present study's findings, expressions of feelings was more prevalent than question-asking. The difference in how certain topics are viewed could be a factor. Depression was the topic of discussion in Morrow's (2006) research, while in the present study, IVF and infertility. Being a taboo topic among Malaysians, seeking advice by describing infertility problems may therefore be more face-threatening because the advice-seeker has to reveal her problem. Despite it being a more indirect strategy of seeking advice, describing one's infertility problem is particularly embarrassing for Malaysian women since they are expected to produce offspring once they are married and given the prominence in continuing the husband's lineage line (Akhtar 2011, Evens 2004). Moreover, any problem in doing so is perceived as the women's fault, although it may be their husbands who are infertile and not them (Evens 2004). On the other hand, it is easier to ask questions as they need not elaborate or disclose much about themselves. In addition, the questions asked can be general, which are also relevant and applicable to other women. This is especially so for questions requesting for information which dominated the *Question* move (Table 3).

Use of hedging. Locher's (2006) examination of advice-seeking messages posted in an American online health advice column also revealed hedging as a widely used relational category. Although this may imply that hedging is a typical communicative strategy when seeking advice, it is also notable to point out that the nature of advice being sought is different for the two online forums. Locher's (2006) study dealt with expert advice, while in the present study, the nature of advice-seeking and advice-giving was peer-to-peer. Thus, the level of regard for the advice-giver in terms of expertise knowledge was different for the two forums. The power asymmetry that existed in the present study (peer-to-peer) was very much less than that in Locher's (2006) study (expert-non expert).

Moreover, in Locher's (2006) study, hedging was only more frequently found in direct requests. When advice was sought in the form of question-asking, the use of hedging was less prevalent. In contrast, in the present study, it was revealed that hedging was extensively employed in all the three advice-seeking moves. The modals and subjectivity markers were the most popular hedging devices in the *Question* move, while in the *Request Advice* move, the adverb *Please* was most often used. In the *Problem Statement* move, mitigation was accomplished through a rather different means: through expressions of distress that transforms the advice-request into a plea for help. The use of hedging indicates humility and reverence, in that the advice-seeker is giving the message-recipient due autonomy to decide whether to grant the request. A high level of respect was being accorded to the message-recipient despite her lack of medical authority. As hedging devices are also strategies that reduce face-threat (De Rycker 2014), communication that uses such devices is a characteristic of Malaysian communicative style.

Inclusion of other moves besides advice-seeking moves. The findings also point to the fact that advice-seeking involves more than just the advice-seeking moves (see Messages 2-4 & Table 7). These are moves that support the act, functioning as either a prelude to the advice-seeking move(s) (*Background move, Comment on Previous Record move*), or a solidarity tactic to bond with the message-recipient (e.g. *Congrats move, Goodwill Wishes move*). These moves could function as pleasantries prior to the main business of an interaction, which are common in the Malaysian setting (Lailawati Mohd. Salleh 2005). The preface to the advice-seeking act has an element of indirectness attached to the intended illocutionary force, while the bonding strategies suggest camaraderie between the advice-seeker and the message-recipient. Both indirectness as a face-saving tactic, and expressing sociability as a unifying strategy, are also typical features of Malaysians as a collectivist society (Kuang & Jawakhir Mior Jaafar 2010, Kuang, Wong & David 2011).

Targeting the general audience. The women also employed the strategy of directing their messages to the general readership, rather than just a specific member. Hence, this method of seeking advice from their peers shows the communal nature of the forum members.

Message 5:

Hi...Juz finished reading all the posts...u named it I tried it. Coq10, conceive well gold, DHEA, royal jelly, **bai feng yuan**, vit e, folic acid, ensure mlk, immunocal, **tcm, acupuncture, reiki healing...chinese temple, indian temple**...all oso go and pray...hahaha...desperate til in such situation and yet my only wish to have a child is not granted.

In addition, by targeting the general readership, it indicates the women as being receptive to varied ideas and opinions, including the traditional beliefs of other ethnic groups. For instance, the author in Message 5 has tried numerous methods, which she believed might help her conceive, including traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) (e.g. taking the *bai feng yuan* herb and going for acupuncture), traditional Japanese *reiki* healing, and praying in both Chinese and Indian temples. This reflects the cultural trait of Malaysians as a society that is generally receptive to the cultural beliefs of other ethnic groups, and one has a low preference for avoiding ambiguity (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010).

THE MESSAGE CONTENT

In relation to the message content, the findings revealed two main aspects of the message content that are culture-bound: (1) the trust in the efficacy of traditional methods to improve fertility, and (2) the women's heightened sense of duty to produce offspring.

Trust in efficacy of traditional methods to improve fertility. One notable feature of the messages is how tradition still plays a big role as a solution to their infertility problem. In six of the 32 advice-seeking messages, instances referring to the authors resorting to traditional remedies to improve fertility were detected.

Message 6:

Thanks for the word of encouragement...I am just overly disappointed ...I was doing everything I can for the 2nd attempt...**Chinese Herbs, Acupuncture**, Supplements, etc...U named it, I think I have it ...and still BFN...Sob...

As shown in Message 6, the author was not only undergoing IVF for her infertility treatment but was also taking Chinese herbs and going for acupuncture (“Chinese Herbs, Acupuncture”), two traditional methods for helping one to conceive. This illustrates the

author's confidence that if she were to combine both traditional and conventional methods of treating infertility, she would have higher chances of getting pregnant.

Determination and heightened sense of duty to produce offspring. Moreover, some of the messages also demonstrate the determination of the women to succeed in getting themselves pregnant. For instance, in Message 7, the fact that she has been trying to conceive (TTC) for five years (“been TTC for 5 years”) and is contemplating on undergoing the 4th intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI) (“been thinking of doing the 4th icsi”), it shows how important being able to produce a child of her own is. In addition, although it is her husband who is more likely to be the main cause of her failure to conceive (“Hubby low sperm motility”), she still takes it upon herself to ‘improve’ her body so that she has better chances to conceive. Consequently, she has tried various methods of increasing fertility such as taking Chinese herbs and certain vitamins, undergoing acupuncture, adjusting *feng shui*, and going for massages (“All sorts of treatment such as Chinese herbs, acupuncture, feng shui, vitamins, massage”). This is an illustration of the patriarchal characteristic of the Malaysian society in which there are clear roles for men and women, and one main duty of married women is to produce children. This emphasis on having own children is a typical Asian characteristic whereby it is a stigma for married women to remain childless.

Message 7

Hi... life is full of emptiness, frustration, depressed when effort is not been awarded : (. **All sorts of treatment such as Chinese herbs, acupuncture, feng shui, vitamins, massage...etc...**before the ivf procedure, hope to get answers and advice...

been TTC for 5 years. Me 35. Hubby low sperm motility.

02 IUI BFN

03 IVF : oct 2010 1st icsi 07 mature egg only 01 fertilized BFN

May201 2nd icsi 07 mature egg only 02 fertilized BFN

Oct 2011 3rd icsi 09 mature egg with 04 fertilized BFN

been thinking of doing the 4th icsi but afraid of failure again...

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study has shown that the three main strategies employed by Malaysian women when seeking advice in an online forum for Malaysian women are inherent in three discursive moves – the *Request for Advice* move, the *Question* move, and the *Problem Statement* move. The most preferred strategy is to ask questions, while the least used strategy is to directly request for advice. It also appears that Malaysian women in the investigated forum prefer to hedge their questions through the use of modals (e.g. can, may) and other mitigation techniques (e.g. *I wonder...? Do you mind to...?*). Problem disclosure in the *Problem Statement* move is also frequently accompanied by expressions of the advice-seeker's emotions to highlight the advice-seeker's distress. The language and computer-mediated discourse features that magnify the advice-seekers' anguish perform the necessary *Appealing* relational function so that the severity of the problem and the need for help are intensified. Even explicit requests for advice are sometimes hedged with adverbs such as *Please* and *Do*. Thus, the prevalent occurrences of *Hedging* and *Appealing* relational work in the advice-seeking moves function not only as a mitigation technique, whereby the advice-request becomes weaker as a directive force, but also, to convey the advice-seekers' urgency for assistance so as to propel a response from the message-recipient.

With regards to culture, this study points to some important and relevant findings on whether culture has any bearing on how participants communicate online. The findings reveal

that the participants in the investigated forum do adhere to the fundamental values that they share as Malaysians such as (1) being face-saving by preferring to ask questions requesting for information rather than to describe their infertility problems which may be embarrassing, (2) being respectful and humble by using hedges when requesting for advice, (3) being friendly and non-imposing by incorporating moves that act as pleasantries and express the advice-seeker's sociability, as well as (4) being communal by targeting their messages at the general audience rather than a selected few members. Although aspects of face-saving, politeness, friendliness and communal may be observed in other online interactional settings, there are variances in how these are accomplished in terms of manner and degree. For instance, in Morrow's (2006) study, problem-narration was the main advice-seeking strategy used, but in the present study, question-asking was more prevalent possibly due to the taboo surrounding infertility among women in the Malaysian society. The use of hedging in Locher's (2006) study as a face-saving strategy was then only more common in direct requests, but in the present study, hedging was found to be frequent in all the three advice-seeking strategies of direct requests, question-asking and problem-narration, thus augmenting the importance of face-saving in the Malaysian society. Having pleasantries and being inclusive are then two bonding tactics of Malaysians, which are different from the Spanish in Placencia's (2012) study through the in-group marker *amigo* meaning 'friend', and the Japanese in Morrow's (2012) study in which the interactional particle *ne* was employed.

In terms of the message content, the influence of Malaysian culture is observed through the women's confidence in using various traditional methods, including those of other ethnic groups, to improve their fertility. Another aspect of the message content that shows evidence of cultural influence is the pressure and the high level of responsibilities that the women put on themselves in getting pregnant, although the problem may not lie with them, but with their husbands. These two characteristics of the message content show how crucial continuing the husband's lineage is, and also how the intermingling of various ethnic groups in Malaysia allow different cultural beliefs and practices to be shared and adopted.

Nonetheless, as mentioned earlier, the study's findings on Malaysian women's advice-seeking strategies are largely descriptive due to the novelty of research on computer-mediated communication in relation to culture. Although there are some similarities in certain aspects of the results between the present study's and that done by Locher (2006) and Kouper (2010), the nature of the forum, the purpose of the forum, as well as the topic of discussion among the three forums are different. As such, future studies following this study could incorporate a comparison of the study's findings with those investigating peer-to-peer advice-seeking strategies on IVF by women of a different culture. Such comparative studies would be able to find out whether online advice-seeking strategies vary among communities of different cultures when advice is sought by women, and to what extent these strategies differ. In addition, future studies could also incorporate a larger corpus of data, or an investigation of more than one online forum site, for a more comprehensive analysis of the advice-seeking strategies used by Malaysian women.

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