ONLINE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP STRATEGIES BETWEEN SAME GENDER AMONG MALAYSIAN CHATTERS

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Abstract

Strategies utilised by users of the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) will determine the level of their interpersonal relationship in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). However, strategies for establishing relationships between the same gender differ from one another. Therefore, this study intends to answer the question of whether or not differences exist in the utilisation of strategies in the form of online interpersonal relationships for chat partners of the same gender. This study undertakes a quantitative approach. However, in-depth interviews are used to obtain the strategies that are used to build interpersonal relations through CMC by IRC users. All the strategies are modified to create questions in the research instrument in order to conduct a study through a survey method. A multi-regression analysis was conducted to analyse the data. The results show that male IRC users interact with one another by using only one strategy, which is the strategy to create similar values/ understanding of the meaning of emoticons. When female IRC users interact with one another, they use three main strategies; strategy of relationship continuity through e-mail, strategy to create similar values/ understanding of the meaning of emoticons, and strategy of satisfaction fulfilment of the chat buddy. The results of this study provide implications toward face-to-face interpersonal communication-related theories and their applications in the context of CMC.

Keywords: Interpersonal relationship, Internet Relay Chat, Computer Mediated Communication

Introduction

The main issue which has emerged from the flourishing of Information Communication Technology (ICT) is the position of face-to face communication. Therefore, a comparison between these two contexts needs to be understood in order to discuss interpersonal relationships based on relevant theories.

According to Markle (1999), computer mediated interpersonal relationship is a category of internet relations. We can see a certain level of relationship or bond between one person and another as a result of a shared conversation sustained through the internet. On the other hand, face-to-face relationships occur in 'real life' which refers to a category of relationships which takes into account the place of interaction. In this relationship, there are physical meetings in a particular space or area where an individual's physical presence is a marker of face-to-face communication.

There is an obvious difference between computer mediated interpersonal relationships and face-to-face relationships. The internet reduces the need for proximity, while the use of texts reduces the highlights on physical attraction, anonymity, and confidentiality. Computer mediated interpersonal relationships place greater importance on self-disclosure as a way of sharing experiences (Wysocki, 1996; Cooper and Sportolari, 1997; Krout et.al, 1998; Wysocki, 1998).

There are many reasons as to why computer mediated communication (CMC) is different as compared to face-to-face communication. One of the main reasons is the debate concerning whether CMC is more interpersonal or impersonal. The main controversy

revolves around whether this difference aids in increasing communication, and whether the nature of communication is more personal or it decreases the level of intimacy which can be achieved. Among the aspects of CMC is the absence of contextual signals, the ability of recording conversations, the rate of code changing, and the level of formality and confidentiality of its users. The absence of social context signals is known as the Cues Filtered Out Approach which differs between CMC and face-to-face communication in determining the level of interpersonal relationships (Walther and Burgoon, 1992).

Many people consider the nature of CMC to be impersonal because its users are not exposed to facial expressions, gestures, voice intonation, appearance or physical ornaments. This makes it difficult to interpret the messages received or responses given. Therefore, an intimate interpersonal relationship cannot be built. According to Walther (1996), interpersonal relationships are identified by means of highlighting the self of CMC's users. Users of CMC do not know much about the feedback which they receive because CMC is weak in its nonverbal or signals. This is the source of low levels of interpersonal conversations as compared to face-to-face communication. Based on this theory, a person will not give much attention to other users because of their priority or interest toward a certain individual which does not fulfil their conversational needs. If a user is fully committed to conversations through the computer which are only in bits and pieces, other users might be offended because individuals usually pay more attention to themselves rather than to other people. This situation is caused by the difficulty in identifying non-verbal signals. Therefore, it is difficult to obtain trust and this obviously

prevents the formation of intimate relationships. It is this reason which prompted Walther and Burgoon (1992) to conclude that impersonal communication would occur in CMC. They argued that the parties are not familiar with one another and there is no physical contact.

There are several studies on the effect of the Cues Filtered Out Approach which are limited to the earlier stages of CMC. When further research was conducted to test the relationship within a longer time frame, it was discovered through observation that the impersonal aspects fade away or disappear completely when the CMC users exchange a large number of long messages. This proves that individuals in groups that use CMC can build positive relationships as long as they set aside sufficient time for the relationship to mature and become more intimate (Walther and Burgoon, 1992). Among the important elements for the relationship to mature is to allocate a longer time period, practise an open attitude, and trust one another. Openness occurs when self-disclosure and the frequency of discussions or exchange of ideas toward different issues or topics are practised by users. When trust is established, the users will feel more comfortable to engage in in-depth disclosure of their personalities.

Another important aspect in building relationships through CMC is the ability to control one's feelings and be calm when trying to retrieve information that one is really interested in. This can be done by controlling the intensity of the message, and minimising the number of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization errors when communicating through CMC.

Controlling one's feelings can create a sense of comfort when communicating with other users. This will eliminate concerns and aid to detect their own mistakes while interacting through the computer. As a result, most of the messages conveyed are formal and the sender of the message always chooses words which indicate a high level of formality towards the receiver. This creates control or dominance in the conversation. Dominance can be explained via the communication balance shown by the users from the conversational depth aspect which can be measured through personal symbols conveyed by the sender of the message or through verbal codes (abbreviations). All these aspects can be used to identify the nature of communication (Walther and Burgoon, 1992).

Apart from Uncertainty Reduction Theory, the rate of information exchange in CMC is also important. When more messages are sent, the personal relationship increases and the users tend to feel more comfortable with other users. Interesting topics can be discussed to increase closeness. However, the Social Penetration Theory explains that formal communication which is less personal occurs in the early stages of all relationships. After a while, the personal nature becomes easier to be penetrated and explored by others (Altman & Taylor, 1973). This means that CMC is more personal after a longer period of interaction between users and perhaps even more personal when compared to face-to-face communication.

Based on the above reason, people are not concerned about formality and thus cause the relationship which was established through CMC to be more intimate in the early stages of the relationship as compared to face to face communication (Cummings, Butler and Kraut, 2002). Apart from that, CMC could possibly trigger interpersonal relationships which would not have started if the individuals concerned had not met face to face. CMC

could also encourage more positive communication because the users are allowed to convey certain characteristics about themselves. When replying to messages, the users have time to decide on the information they wish to disclose about themselves. This allows them to give a good picture about their identity. Privacy and anonymity which are encouraged through CMC can remove fear or worries a person may have about being judged or assessed based on other people's views. Communicating through the computer can enable users to feel free to state something about themselves and have a firm stand for what they feel is true (Spears and Lea, 1994).

It can be concluded that the differences in interpretation whether CMC is more personal in nature or otherwise depend on the extent of the users' conversation, the situation, length of conversation, self-exposure and informal communication in the chat space. For example, a normal conversation is more personal as compared to business-based discussions which are more technical or impersonal. This is similar to the aspect of self-disclosure where the individual controls obvious characteristics according to situations through self-categorisation as suggested by the Self Categorization Theory. This theory assumes that individuals can decide on their own category according to time and context. Individuals can choose whether to reveal about themselves or to refrain from revealing their true identities (Spears & Lea, 1994).

In the message flow process, the amount of time taken and the length of the message to deliver are also important. The rate of message exchange in CMC is relatively slow because the user needs to think on how to shape his or her response. Furthermore, verbalising something is faster than typing. Therefore, communication by means of CMC requires a lot of time to convey and receive messages as compared to face to face.

Based on the discussion above, the role of the strategy in establishing relationships is important in order to achieve an intimate relationship in the form of face to face communication or communication by means of CMC. Strategies used by IRC users will determine their interpersonal relationship in CMC. However, the strategy of establishing relationships between the same gender is different when compared to establishing relationships with the opposite gender. In Walther's (1992) study, it was discovered that females were more free to openly interact face to face during communication. Conversely, they felt closed when communicating through the computer. Meanwhile, males were more closed when communicating face-to-face and were more open when communicating through the computer. Hence, this research intends to provide answers to the question of whether there are differences in the use of strategies to develop interpersonal online relationships by teenage chat partners of the same gender who do not know each other before communicating online.

Research Objectives

1) To identify the strategy adopted by chatters males to develop online interpersonal relationships with partners of the same gender.

2) To identify the strategy adopted by chatters females in developing online interpersonal relationships with partners of the same gender.

Literature Review

The strategy to build interpersonal relationships through CMC refers to the manner or method of trickery used by someone to establish or strengthen relationships with other individuals using the computer as an intermediary medium. Based on this concept, there

are several interpersonal relationship building strategies which can be applied through CMC.

Most theories agree that interpersonal attraction refers to a person's positive or negative attitudes (Bersched & Hatfiels, 1978). Attitude here refers to a person's readiness to respond toward an object or to classify an object in a manner as suitable or unsuitable. However, it is difficult to measure interpersonal attraction such as eye contact in CMC whereas in face to face situations, the duration of eye contact, the proximity between the sender and receiver of messages and the tendency to use body language and personal space of the individuals during interpersonal communication can lead to interpersonal attraction. Mehrabian (1981) asserts that in the physical world, facial and vocal expressions, posture, body movement and gestures are all important. When words contradict with the message content, people will believe the action. Therefore, the scarcity of cues or the absence of nonverbal signals gives CMC a negative impact. According to Altman and Taylor (1973), a person will gradually continue with interaction and in-depth relationship maintenance through words, physical body response and response toward the surrounding. However, in the context of CMC, body language and surrounding feedback are scarce, and the only form of feedback available is through words or texts. Therefore, interpersonal interaction occurs through words when a person reads the sentences on the screen.

Bryne (1994) asserts that body language can be conducted in two ways. First, IRC users write their actions between an asterisk sign such as *sob,* *yawn,* *blush,* and more. Second, the users use command actions such as "/me" followed by the text. This sort of

physical body feedback is an example of interpersonal attractions which are used to create relationships.

Interpersonal attractions can also be identified based on the person who talks (types) more, and who responds more. This is a rational measurement because in CMC a person interacts with a stranger (a person whom they have not met in reality). Therefore, the individual is not encouraged to reveal his personal feelings toward the stranger at the beginning stages of the interaction, but in the end they tend to rely more on the implicit behaviour to enhance their understanding of others in order to build future relationships (Mehrabian, 1981). This shows that through CMC, disguises are frequently used to hide the true identity of the IRC users. Using a nickname in the early stages of the relationship is an approach of representing themselves. According to Baird (1998), in IRC the identities of the users would normally begin with the creation of nicknames which also happens to be an interpersonal attraction in CMC. So it can be concluded that the form of interpersonal attraction in CMC is not similar to the interpersonal attraction of face to face communication. Instead, in CMC the focus of attraction is conveying the message as an action through words and disguising identity.

Self-disclosure occurs when a person confides in his or her friends. According to DeVito (1999), self-disclosure leads the other party to self-disclose about themselves as well. Feelings are conveyed through self-disclosures. Interpersonal relationships are related to the principle of minimax (minimum and maximum) and the principle of balance. The minimax principle refers to the importance of minimizing costs and maximizing benefits during interactions between individuals, where the individual who provides more benefits to the other individual will maintain the relationship. The principle of balance indicates

that a person will continue to build the relationship if there is a balance toward what they provide. This balance includes the self-disclosure between the two parties. The findings of past studies conducted by Brehm (1992), Myers (1993) as well as Cooper and Sportolari (1997) indicate that there are three factors which contribute to the possibility of relationship formation. They are self-disclosure, physical attraction and similarities.

Brehm (1992) states that the process of in-depth self-disclosure as to the level of intimacy between individuals must be based not only on the feeling of similarity and the feeling of being associated to one another, but also on the extent and frequency of the feeling of interest and romanticism. The physical aspects not only spark the interest but also facilitate the establishment of relationships through interaction and closeness. Wysock (1996) asserts that friendly relations exist between IRC users. This is caused by the high levels of self-disclosure to the point where users really know their partners and their unconventional physical attraction (not according to the norms). They feel the closeness and allow the norms of gender to shape their behaviour. Besides that, Altman and Taylor (1973) assure that the important aspect of social penetration is to take into account reciprocity which is an exchange of communication and self-disclosure. A person who increases self-disclosure gives others the possibility for disclosing their real selves. Baym (1995) writes about egalitarianism and that people are allowed beforehand to type the messages which they would like to convey. This shows that IRC users always create equal opportunities to interact in CMC. This equal opportunity is irrespective of gender. For example, CMC allows females and minority groups to interact freely without the barriers of status. Therefore, Walther (1992) sees that there is equality with the involvement of CMC that provides an equal opportunity which is democratic in nature.

However, understanding cannot exist if the message conveyed through CMC is not understood. Emoticons and acronyms require interpretation by the IRC users. Therefore, the balance of understanding signs on the computer screen between the users is important. If only one party understands the emoticons, for example, then miscommunication will occur which could affect the relationship. Baym (1988) admits that mistakes in interpretations cause difficulties in understanding the message. This causes a reduction in the interpersonal relationship through CMC.

It can therefore be concluded here that similarities through interaction opportunities without discrimination, attitude similarity and similarity in the meaning of the message are important elements which should be given attention in building interpersonal relationships through CMC.

Another tactic used to build relationships is using nonverbal communication parallel to verbal communication. In the contextual tactic of relationship building through CMC, individuals will frequently type symbols such as smiley faces for the sign of liking, or nodding for the sign of agreement during communication. In Mohd. Zin and Ab. Rahman (2000) found that individuals involved in IRC will try to interact creatively and innovatively. They produce unique symbols or signs to deliver their feelings and emotions. Latifah and Samsudin (2000) added that individuals who chat need to understand the symbols used online such as emoticons and acronyms.This is because all these elements are a part of cyber communication.

Emotions exist in CMC (Riva & Galimberti, 1998). An individual meets with others on the computer everyday, exchanges information, debates, disagrees with one another,etc. Rheingold (2000) explains that individuals in the virtual community use words to:

> *…exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk (p. 3)*

A large part of the mentioned activities involves emotions or is emotional in nature. Individuals use the computer as an intermediary medium of communication to relay and share their problems in life and their real personalities. This causes most of their message content to contain emotional elements.

However, Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire (1984) as well as Stoll (1996) found that CMC is insufficient for individuals to share emotions. CMC allows people to shape their own meaning, unstable and insufficient non verbal signs. Rheingold disagrees with Kiesler and Stoll due to the findings of his research in the WELL community.

> *Those who find virtual communities cold places point at the limits of technology, its most dangerous pitfalls… but these critiques don't tell us how Philcat and Lhary and the Allisons and my own family could have found on the WELL when we needed it (p. 24)*

The use of emoticons is a tactic in building interpersonal relationships through CMC because some individuals use modes without revealing their true names during communication in order to obtain a more personal relationship with others. Therefore, emoticons, a mixture of signs and symbols, help the users picture the physical identity of the sender of the messages which represent their mood or feeling. Sometimes emoticons are known as "smilies." For example, adding ;-) at the end of the sentence shows that this

individual is joking or feels happy. Nelson(1999) states that emoticons are frequently used in "meet and greet" situations. Some researchers state that emoticons are very useful to replace or to reduce non verbal signals in the context of CMC.

On the other hand, users of MUD (an example of an application in CMC) can type their explanations or narratives to picture their non verbal behaviour. They type these explanations by using quotation marks (") to deliver their message about their surroundings (Walther and Tidwell, 1995). Walther asserts that the process of emoting in CMC is used to introduce the message of love and care without using many cues as in face to face communication. Emoting in MUD is a way of using instructions as action and emotion in the form of language. Rheingold (1992) posits that instead of leaving the chat room, a user can simply disappear without encountering any embarrassment. This new dimension of emoting is considered a way to increase the content of socio-emotion during the communication process.

Another technique to deliver messages in CMC is through the use of chronemics. The time, duration, and location of chat are elements of chronemics which show whether an interpersonal relationship is intimate or otherwise. However, different usage of chronemics tends to affect the interpersonal perception towards the users of CMC. Walther and Tidwell (1995) found that time is an intrinsic part of social interaction where it could communicate meaning at different layers.

> *Time is a resource in our culture, and may be akin to other resources, the exchange of which marks more intimate relations. How time is used helps to define the nature and quality of relationships with others (p. 362)*

In the context of CMC, there are two variables which are related to chronemics:

  i.   time of day when sending the message

ii.   time interval in replying the received message. The time interval to reply the

message provides a picture as to the level of intimacy and message domination in

CMC.

In IRC, the usage of time can be controlled and manipulated in CMC interactions

(Chesebro, 1985; Walther and Tidwell, 1995). The control and manipulation in CMC is

evident when the message sender knows that the receiver has read the message but did

not reply immediately and this may have an impact on the sender's feelings. The

deliberate delay in responding to messages implies that the receiver is not interested in

the sender's message. This sometimes can be interpreted as contempt and ridicule.

Walther poses a couple of hypotheses regarding interaction time and message content

concerning interpersonal relationships. The first hypothesis is that social content message

sent at night creates intimacy as compared to when the message is sent during the day.

Meanwhile, task or work related messages sent at night create less intimacy as compared

to when the message is sent during the day. The second hypothesis is that the delay in

responding to social messages increases intimacy as compared to immediate response to

the message. However, immediate response of task/work related messages decreases

intimacy between individuals interacting through the computer.

Highlighted text is non verbal communication which uses words in bold, which are

underlined, and with punctuation marks. These three elements function as a person's style

of speech in IRC (Byrne, 1994). Usually, the IRC users will spell the words according to

how the words may sound. For example, you = u, are = r, see you = cu, what = wat, don't

know = dunno, etc. This supports the finding of Werry (1996) which states that the usage

of 'r'and 'u' can be found in most IRC channels. This clearly shows that highlighted text is the choice of IRC users during interaction. In addition, IRC users also use acronyms when delivering their messages. A research by Azlina (2000) found that the IRC users frequently use OIC = Oh I see, BBL = be back later, BRB = be right back, BTW = by the way, LOL = laughing out loud, etc.

Another use of highlighted text is to create closeness or hostility in CMC. Bolded texts, underlined texts, exclamation marks (!), question marks (?), and capital letters are used to emphasise different words and phrases to show the tone of voice and emotions. For example, using capital alphabets in IRC indicates scream and the anger of the message sender. This tactic focuses on how relationships which are established online are extended offline. Parks and Floyd (1996) found that relationships established online do not remain online only. Based on the experiences of the Alt Angst Newsgroup participants, at least three out of five couples who have established romantic relationships online for a period of 6 months will switch to having a relationship in reality. This shows that whether relationships are established online or offline, life can be seen as permeable where humans always need to talk about differences and similarities and try to divide their lives into two forms of communication: virtual and reality communication.

Smolowe (1995) asserts that most people who surf the internet are looking for information and 80 percent of them are trying to build relationships and spending time with friends in a community. In addition, Parks and Floyd (1996) posit that interpersonal relationships through CMC are a common occurrence with more than 60 percent of their sample study stating that they established interpersonal relationships through Usenet

newsgroup. Furthermore, Chenault (1998) found that virtual communities exist in CMC

and interpersonal relationships also occur between interacting individuals.

CMC is a special phenomenon. People communicate with each other through various

ways. Baym (1995) states that CMC is not a behaviour one lends itself for social

purposes, but the interaction space is to show an unusual social reality. Social realities are

built during interaction between users through language or text and message sources from

other individuals. This shows that CMC is most frequently used as an early step to

establish interpersonal relationships prior to the face to face meeting.

Methodology

This study uses a quantitative approach. However, in-depth interviews were also

conducted to discover the strategies used in building interpersonal relationships through

CMC among IRC users. Face to face interviews were carried out with 2 couples (4

informants) who have been in an impersonal relationship for more than a year. The

interviews with the informants were recorded and transcribed for analysis. A total of 42

strategies were listed based on the analysis. All the strategies were modified to create

questions in the research instruments. Nine strategies resulting from factors analysis

(Table 1) were then inserted into the questionnaire.

Table 1: Cronbach Alpha of interpersonal relationship strategies

Strategies	Number of items (42 Items)	Cronbach Alpha
Strategy 1: Continuity of relationships through e-mail	6 items	0.86
Strategy 2: Usage of emoticons	6 items	0.75
Strategy 3: Usage of highlighted text (words/sentences)	5 items	0.77
Strategy 4: Sharing of same values/ understanding the meaning	5 items	0.84

of emoticons		
Strategy 5: Usage of Chronemics	5 items	0.76
Strategy 6: Interpersonal attraction through nicknames	4 items	0.82
Strategy 7: Personal self exposure	4 items	0.71
Strategy 8: Self exposure of family	4 items	0.73
Strategy 9: Satisfying chat buddy	3 items	0.80

The quantitative approach used in this research is by means of surveys. The research was conducted in cyber cafes which were easily accessible to the research enumerators in a number of carefully identified locations throughout Malaysia. The respondents for this research comprised of 1025 IRC users (Table 2 and Table 3). They were chosen through voluntary sampling based on criteria set by the researchers based on the objectives of the study.

Table 2: Profile of respondents (N=1025)

Profile	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	508	49.6
Female	517	50.4
Age (years)		
12 - 20	338	33.0
21 - 29	572	55.8
30 – 38	94	9.2
39 - 47	21	2.0
Mean =23.1317		
Standard deviation = 0.4693		

Table 3: Chi-Square analysis of chat buddy (N = 1025)

Gender	Chat Buddy (Percent)	
	Male	Female
Male	20.5	79.5
Female	79.1	20.9

$\chi^2 = 380.601$, $p = 0.000$

There were two variables which were measured. The dependent variable was the level of interpersonal relationship. The level of interpersonal relationship was measured by an instrument introduced by Parks (1996). They are: level of dependency (7 items), breadth of topic (5 items), level of intimacy (8 items), level of code change (7 items), level of understanding messages (5 items), level of commitment (5 items) and level of social networks (3 items). On the other hand, the nine strategies (as stated above) as a means of increasing the level of interpersonal relationships online were the independent variables of the study.

The data from the research was analysed using the Multi-Regression procedures to determine the strategies used by IRC users based on interpersonal relationships between the same gender.

Results

Strategies for developing online interpersonal relationships between the same gender (males with males)

This research shows (Table 4 and Table 5) that when male IRC users interact with other male IRC users, only one strategy which is the strategy to create similarity in values in order to understand the meaning of emoticons is used (β=0.19, p=0.007). This strategy (strategy 4) contributes 13.0 percent variance (R^2 =0.13) towards any changes of interpersonal level when interacting online. This contribution is significant at p=.05. However, it can only be predicted that the changes which occur in interpersonal relationships are small (13%).The increase in the level of online interpersonal relationship based on the interaction among male IRC users can be predicted with the following formula:

The level of interpersonal relationships online = 2.42 + 0.19 (strategy of establishing same values/ understanding of emoticon).

Strategies for developing online interpersonal relationships between the same gender (females with females)

This study found (Table 4 and Table 5) that three strategies are used to develop online interpersonal relationships when female IRC users interact with other users of the same gender. They are: strategy for continuing relationships through e-mail (β=0.24, p=0.00), strategy for creating same values in order to understand the meaning of emoticons (β=0.14, p=0.01), and strategy for satisfying the chat buddy (β=0.17, p=0.00). The contribution of these three strategies are 49.5 percent variance (R^2=0.495) towards the change in the level of interpersonal relationships. To predict the increase in the interpersonal relationship level when female IRC users communicate with the same gender online, the following formula can be used:

The level of online interpersonal relationships = 1.08 + 0.24 (strategy for continuing relationships through e-mail) + 0.14 (strategy for establishing the same values/ meaning of emoticons) + 0.17 (strategy for satisfying the chat buddy)

Table 4: Summary from the Multi-Regression Model: value Percentage of Variance (R^2)

Sex	Sex of Chat Buddy	Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Male	Male	1	.361	.130	.113
Female					
	Female	3	.704	.495	.478

Table 5: Multi-Regression Test: Beta (β) Values for Each Strategy Which Contributes to the Level of Interpersonal Relationship Online.

Sex	Sex of Chat Buddy	Model		Unstandardized Coefficience		Standardized Coefficience	T Value	Sig.
				B	Std. Error	Beta		
male								
	male	1	(Constant)	2.42	.238		10.16	.000
			Strategy 4	.19	.069	.36	2.78	.007
female								
	female	3	(Constant)	1.084	.233		4.64	.000
			Strategy 1	.241	.048	.44	5.00	.000
			Strategy 4	.149	.060	.21	2.50	.014
			Strategy 9	.170	.048	.27	3.51	.001

Notes: Strategy 1: Continuity of relationships through e-mail, Strategy 4: Sharing of same values/ understanding the meaning of emoticons, Strategy 9: Satisfying chat buddy Dependent Variable: Level of Online Interpersonal Relationships

Discussion and conclusion

The level of interpersonal relationship through CMC can be linked to the strategies used during the interactions. Based on the Uncertainty Reduction Theory and the Social Penetration Theory, personal self-disclosure plays an important role in understanding others during face to face communication. Furthermore, it could also influence the level of interpersonal relationships. What occurs during face to face communication also occurs in Computer Mediated Communication because the self-disclosure strategies and disclosure about family-related activities contribute towards interpersonal relationships. Both self-disclosure strategies are used by male and female IRC users when interacting with other IRC users of the same gender respectively. This shows that the Uncertainty Reduction Theory and the Social Penetration Theory is applicable in both online and face to face communication.

Besides that, the strategy of using emoticons especially when seeking understanding and sharing meaning can be positively related to the level of interpersonal relationships. This strategy is used by male IRC users when interacting among themselves. Meanwhile,

female IRC users also tend to use this strategy when interacting with other female users. This strategy is considered a replacement for nonverbal communication during face to face communication because in CMC there is an absence of nonverbal signs especially in relating emotions to its users. Therefore, this problem is reduced by using emoticons which represent similar emotions of the user during face to face communication. However, the effects are not the same. This means that the application of the Theory of Impression Management is realised by the IRC users.

The application of the theory is strengthened when IRC users also use the strategy of interpersonal attraction at the early stages of the relationship by using nicknames. The results show that this is common among female IRC users because attractive female nicknames are an attraction for female IRC users to build interpersonal relationships with them.

Although the Social Presence Theory summarises that CMC displays low levels of sociality as compared to face to face communication due to inactive auditory and visual elements, other individual attractions are used such as emphasis on impression management. In the Theory of Self Impression, the physical appearance in CMC can be done by showing their cyber identity through the control of nonverbal information in the form of text. Nicknames are a strong form of attraction when establishing an effective interpersonal relationship as a form of cyber identity.

The tactic which has contributed the most towards interpersonal relationships is the continuity of relationships through e-mail. This strategy is the main predictor in determining whether the interpersonal relationship advances to the intimate level. This

research found that female IRC users generally tend to use this strategy to extend

relationships with other females. It can be concluded that the interpersonal relationship

needs to be continued from time to time using synchronised methods such as e-mailing

after synchronised interaction such as IRC. This is because interaction via e-mail

maintains the level of social relationships by allowing the interpersonal relationships to

continue. Using e-mails to advance an IRC interaction establishes and maintains a strong

interpersonal bond.

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