

Interpersonal Communication Motives used by Malaysian Teenagers on Flirting via the Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The medium of communication is rapidly shifting from face-to-face to the faceless communication. Today, people choose to send messages using technology to communicate with their family members, friends, colleagues, or even with strangers. This study focused on text communication via Twitter and the Facebook and it attempts to examine the types of motives in Interpersonal Communication Motives (ICM) used by Malaysian teenagers with particular focus on flirting. This study employed a qualitative approach where the data was collected from tweets and Facebook posts by Malaysian teenagers for a period of five months. This study employed the framework by Rubin, Perse and Barbato (1988) to study the six motives namely pleasure, affection, inclusion, escape, relaxation, and control using content analysis. The study suggests that both genders have specific interpersonal communication motives and their chosen lexical to fulfill their motives for flirting. In analyzing the motives, the choice of words used by these teenagers also plays a role. The data exhibits that both genders were likely use inclusion and pleasure motives for flirting through faceless communication. By using faceless communication through the selected social media, both genders managed to develop their close interpersonal relationships easily by expressing their feelings and less damaging, as they can escape rejection, injury or humiliation if their motives for flirting were not accepted.

Keywords: Faceless communication, electronic messaging, Interpersonal Communication Motives, flirting, social media

1. Introduction

Communication can be defined as a process of exchanging information between two people or more, whether it involves verbal or non-verbal signals. Non-verbal communication involves the usage of technology or electronic messaging to communicate. As time changes, people rather choose to communicate using technology or electronic messaging to construct their message, communicate with their family members, friends, colleagues, or even with the strangers. Communication using electronic messaging allows its users to communicate faceless, and this requires the appropriate lexical choice while constructing messages. This is because people are not able to perceive the other person's non-verbal signals or cues. The appropriate lexical choice should be considered as an important factor when it involves non-verbal communication.

According to Baruah (2012), the social media is one of the biggest trends and it is used widely by the users all around the world. In the midst of a social media revolution, it is obvious that social media are used widely for the purpose of communication. This is because of the features

of social media itself. Social media allows the users to exchange knowledge and information among the different groups of people, regardless of the distance. Baruah (2012) also stated that the term social media can be defined as the use of web-based and mobile technologies in order to turn communication into an interactive dialogue.

Texting allows its users to manage their close interpersonal relationships easily (Punyanut-Carter and Wagner, 2018). Users also tend to develop their text circles, which consist of close and distinct groups of people. The reason why text messaging may be gaining its popularity in 21st century, as opposed to other communication mediums, may be due to the opportunity to have constant accessibility. Text messaging also allows its users to construct effective messages because of its features. With such features, flirting using text messaging has gain popularity because people have much more time to construct effective messages. This medium also provides an ambiguous means for communication because people are not able to perceive the other person's non-verbal signals.

Flirting with electronic messaging brings less damaging than face-to-face (FtF) flirting. According to Punyanut-Carter and Wagner (2018:229) "flirting behaviors tend to be intentionally ambiguous". Such behaviors help people escape rejection, injury or humiliation if their motives for flirting are not reciprocated. Flirting by text messaging allows the person to interact with the other without being rejected, hurt, or feel embarrassed because they will not be able to perceive the non-verbal signs of the other person.

In this 21st century, social media is a popular medium used by youngsters to express their love and to flirt. According to Merriam-Webster (n.d.), flirt can be defined as to behave amorously without serious intent. According to Koziarevych (2014), flirting is a negotiation process that takes place after some initial attraction has occurred. Two people have to share with each other the information that they are attracted to, and they test each other on a variety of attributes. Flirting becomes an attraction-enhancing activity. It is possible to investigate flirting as a form of interpersonal relationships in the context of interpersonal theories operating under four basic assumptions:

- a) Relationships are always connected to communication.
- b) The nature of the relationship is defined by the communication between its members.
- c) Relationships are usually defined implicitly rather than explicitly.
- d) Relationships develop over time through a process of negotiation.

Punyanut-Carter and Wagner (2018) have defined flirt as using romantic signal and potential sexual interest to one another. Males and females have different perceptions and motivations for flirting.

The correct choice of word can lead to the right meaning or information for the targeted audience or person. Weak word choice can lead to confusion and it can also lead to failure in communication or even miscommunication. According to Krizan, Merrier, Logan, and Williams (2011), choosing the words that are too difficult, too technical, or too easy with the person you are talking to can be a potential communication barrier. If the words choice is too difficult or too technical, the receiver may not understand the message that you are trying to deliver. But if the words choice is too easy, the receiver could become bored or be insulted by the conversation. The best word choice creates a vivid picture in the receiver's mind, while well-selected words appeal

to the senses. The right word choice can help to describe the sight, sound, touch, taste, or smell of your subject or message that you are trying to deliver.

As a medium to communicate, the right choice of word is crucial because it can be a medium that offers opportunities to learn the language, particularly in English, as it is used all over the world. With the rapid growth of the social media users, there is a need to select the right word choice for a smooth communication. The vast number of users of social media continues to generate an enormous amount of digital texts every day that are available for word choice to satisfy the motives to be explored for flirting via social media.

Hence, this current study examines the types of motives in Interpersonal Communication Motives used by Malaysian teenagers for flirting through social media and in analyzing the motives, the choice of words used by these teenagers also play a role.

2. Literature Review

According to Berger (2008), interpersonal communication is a process of exchanging information that occurs between two or more people. It is also an area of research that seeks to understand how people use verbal and non-verbal cues to achieve a number of personal and relational objectives. Berger (2008) also stated that interpersonal communication research covers at least six categories of research which are how humans adjust and adapt their verbal and non-verbal communication during face-to-face communication, how messages are created, how uncertainty affects behavior and information management strategies, deceptive communication, relational dialectics, and social interactions which are facilitated through technology.

Basically, interpersonal communication is the process of exchanging information, feelings, and meaning through verbal and non-verbal messages between two people or more. The element of interpersonal communication is not just about what is actually the people said and the language used, but it also includes how it is said and how the non-verbal messages are sent, whether the messages are sent through tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures and body language. In a situation where the two or more people are in the same place and they are aware of each other's presence, the communication is taking place of the role to communicate, no matter it is subtle or unintentional. "Without speech, an observer may be using cues of posture, facial expression, and dress to form an impression of the other's role, emotional state, personality and/or intentions. Although no communication may be intended, people receive messages through such forms of non-verbal behavior" (Skills You Need, 2017).

2.1 Motives

According to Punyanut-Carter and Wagner (2018), there are 6 motives of why people communicate with each other. The 6 motives in Interpersonal Communication Motives developed by Rubin, Perse and Barbato (1988) are pleasure, affection, inclusion, escape, relaxation, and control.

a) Pleasure

Punyanut-Carter and Wagner (2018) defined pleasure motives are ways to communicate for enjoyment and excitement. According to Merriam-Webster (n.d.), pleasure can be defined as a sensual gratification and frivolous amusement. Rubin, Perse and Barbato (1988) also stated that

pleasure motive was defined by all four arousal items and all four entertainment items. This factor reflected communicating because it was fun, stimulating, and entertaining, which include because “it’s fun, it’s exciting, to have a good time, because it’s thrilling, because it’s stimulating, because it’s entertaining, because I enjoy it and because it peps me up” (Rubin, Perse & Barbato, 1988:615).

b) Affection

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) has defined affection as a feeling of liking and caring for someone or something and tender attachment. Affection motives are ways to express one’s love and caring for another person (Punyanut-Carter and Wagner, 2018). According to Rubin, Perse, and Barbato (1988), affection motive is used to express caring and appreciation to other people. Based on their findings, this motive was marked by loadings of all four caring items and one social ritual item (to thank them). This factor depicted a use of communication to express caring and appreciation for others, which include “to help others, to let others know I care about their feelings, to thank them, to show others encouragement, because I’m concerned about them” (Rubin, Perse, and Barbato, 1988:615).

c) Inclusion

Punyanut-Carter and Wagner (2018) defined inclusion motives are ways used by someone to express their emotion and to feel a link to the other person. Based on Rubin, Perse, and Barbato’s findings (1988), inclusion motive included three companionship items and one expressive item (need to talk about the problems sometimes). This motive includes talk to people because “I need someone to talk to or be with, because I just need to talk about my problems sometimes, and because it’s reassuring to know someone is there” (Rubin, Perse & Barbato, 1988:615).. This motive reflected a use of interpersonal communication to be with and share feelings with others and to overcome loneliness. General definition provided by Merriam-Webster (n.d.), inclusion is the act of including or the state of being included.

d) Escape

An online dictionary, Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defined escape as an act or instance of escaping such as distraction or relief from routine or reality. According to Rubin, Perse, and Barbato (1988), escape reflected an avoidance of other activities and the use of communication to fill time. Based on their findings, escape motive was defined by three escape items and one pass item (have nothing better to do), which include “to put off doing something I should be doing, because I have nothing better to do and to get away from pressures and responsibilities” (Rubin, Perse and Barbato, 1988:615). Punyanut-Carter and Wagner (2018) defined escape motives as the reasons for diversion or avoidance of other activities.

e) Relaxation

According to Merriam-Webster (n.d.), relaxation is the act of relaxing or state of being relaxed. Rubin, Perse and Barbato (1988) defined relaxation motives are the ways to rest or relax. Their results was defined that this motive consisted of four relaxation items and illustrated the use of interpersonal communication for rest, relaxation and relaxation. This motive includes the use of interpersonal communication because “it relaxes me, it allows me to unwind, it’s a pleasant rest and it makes me feel less tense” (Rubin, Perse and Barbato, 1988:615-616).

f) Control

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) has defined control as an act or instance of controlling. According to Rubin, Perse, and Barbato (1988), control motive is meant to gain compliance. Based on their findings, control motive was defined by three control items that marked instrumental communication to gain compliance. This motive includes the use of interpersonal communication because “I want someone to do something for me, to tell others what to do and to get something I don’t have” (Rubin, Perse & Barbato, 1988:616).

2.2 Content Words

In analyzing and categorizing the motives, it is also important to understand how the choice of words used plays a role to understand the motives better. According to Beare (2018), content words consist of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. The noun tells us which object, the verb tells us about the action that is going on, or the state. Adjectives give us details about things, and people and adverbs inform us how, when or where to do something. Nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs give us the important information we need to learn and understand.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to achieve the objectives of the study. Data driven from the participants in the virtual context namely Twitter and Facebook was used for the study.

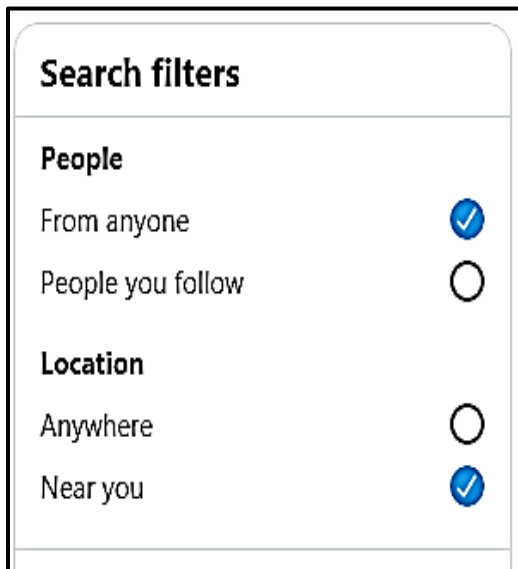


Figure 1

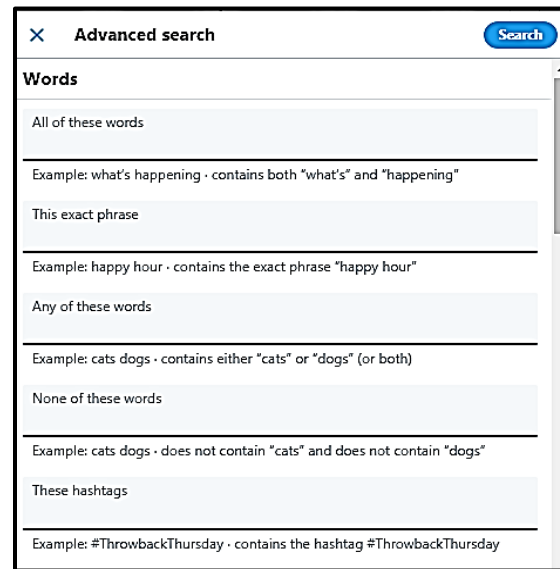


Figure 2

The raw data was collected from Twitter posts (tweets) posted by Malaysian teenagers. From the features of Twitter, the data is searched by using Twitter’s search filters and the advanced search provided by Twitter (Figure 2) itself. The location of the tweets is setting to “near you” in the search filter feature. The data is also collected from November 2019 until March 2020. The data word collected was inserted in the column of dates in the advance search provided by the features

of Twitter itself, in order to clarify the data collection is taken from the date mentioned. By filtering, all the selected tweets will only appear based on the date fixed earlier. The data was collected after the date was fixed and specified. All the data was chosen based on the objectives of the research, in which it focused on the motives and lexical choice.

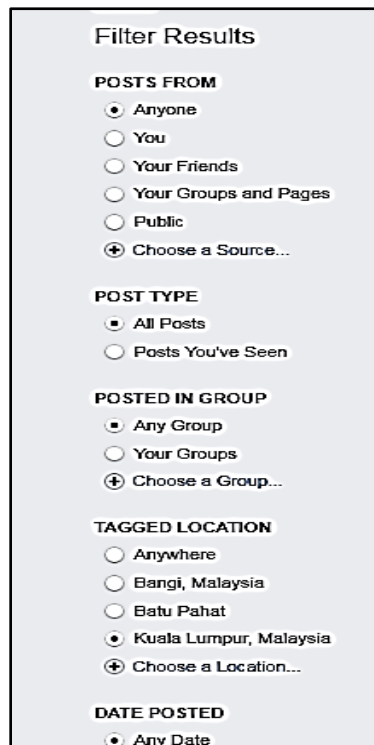


Figure 3

The raw data was searched by using Facebook's search filters provided by Facebook itself. The attached screenshot (Figure 3) showed that the Facebook posts were posted by Malaysian. The post type is set to all posts and the posts also can be found from any group. Location of the tweets is set to "choose a location" in the search filter feature. Using this filter, any location within Malaysia is set in order to widen the searching process. The data is also collected from November 2019. The data word collected was inserted in the column of dates in the advance search provided by the features of Facebook itself, in order to clarify the data collection is taken from the date mentioned. By filtering, all the selected Facebook posts will only appear based on the date fixed earlier. The data was collected after the date was fixed and specified.

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

Content words which include nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, are the main data of the study. These content words were collected from the Twitter and Facebook posts posted by Malaysian

teenagers. Twitter and Facebook are chosen among other social media platform because these platforms in the social media can be defined as the most used social media among Malaysian teenagers. Other platform such as Instagram was not chosen because of the main feature itself. Instagram is meant as a medium for posting photos, while Twitter and Facebook are the platform that used by its users to express their thoughts, describing things and compress their thoughts in the written form. Twitter and Facebook users among the Malaysian teenagers were the main respondent because it can be seen that they are well updated to a new trend. All the selected Twitter and Facebook posts were observed and identified to know their preference of words to flirt through the social media and were categorized into a few categories of content words. Based on the selected Twitter and Facebook posts, their motives for flirting also were observed and were classified into a few categories of motives.

The data analysis will be presented by identifying sources of data, collecting data, classifying data, distinguishing data according to objectives of the study, explaining data and establishing theory behind it.

The data collected were the motives of flirting found from the tweets and the supporting data is the lexical choices used. Then, classification of data was done for further analysis by categorizing the various types of lexical choice that involved. Classifying the various types of lexical choice was important to deliver specific details of language used when it comes to flirting. In order to classify the types of motive and categories of content words, the approach used in past studies was taken as a reference or model in classifying the motive and lexical choice on flirting via the social media.

The data was analyzed and interpreted for the motives was analyzed and interpreted using the Interpersonal Communication Motives provided by Rubin, Perse and Barbato (1988), for the lexical choice the data was analyzed and interpreted using the categories of content words.

4. Findings

What are the types of motives in Interpersonal Communication Motives used by Malaysian teenagers for flirting through the social media?

The data is analyzed based on the posts.



Screenshot 1

From screenshot 1, the motive that is used by the Facebook user is *pleasure*.

In the post, the user might intended to have fun with her followers on Twitter by posted “*half Malay half yours <3*” on her Twitter. She might find that it was fun to post such tweet. She might also feel that such tweet brought enjoyment and excitement to her as she received so many replies from her followers on Twitter and her followers even replied with the same kind of tweet but in different context, for example “*half man half gorilla*” as responded by @sid_dek, one of her followers. This showed that that was a pleasure for her to tweet such a thing and received many funny replies from her followers. It also showed that her intended to just entertain her followers and she behaved amorously without serious intent. She also used pleasure motive to portray her sensual gratification and frivolous amusement.

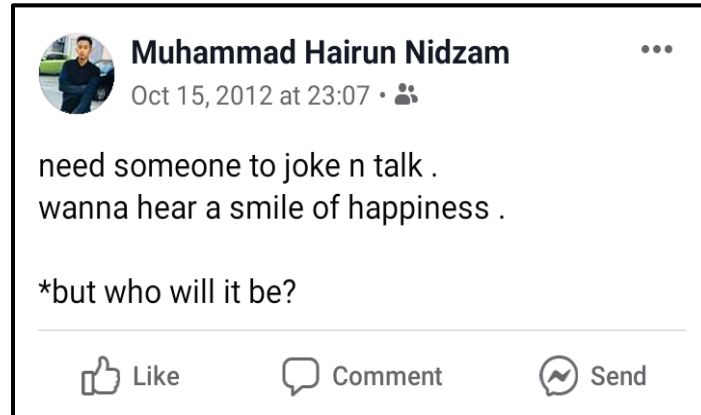


Screenshot 2

From screenshot 2, the motive that is used by the Facebook user is *affection*.

In the post, the user used affection motive because she wanted to express her love and care for another person. It can be seen that she wanted to let someone she liked know that she liked him, by mentioning his special characteristics to show her affection to him. Affection motive in her post can be seen through the sentence “*You are too kind, you are too cute, you are being such a supportive person. That is why I like you.*” Her post clearly stated her affection motive by liking and caring for someone. This motive reflected that the user used this motive to express her care and appreciation for someone she liked.

In the same screenshot, the user used the adverb *too*. Adverbs act as change agents, which they answer the questions; where, why, when, how, how much, or to what extent/ degree. In the post, the user used an adverb *too* to describe the degree of her feelings. For instance, “*You are too kind, you are too cute*” in her own post. The use of adverb *too* clearly portrayed that she intended to flirt with someone she liked by highlighting some of his special characteristics. Her post clearly answered the question “Why?” and the use of adverb *too* in her post could attract her targeted person to read her confession.



Screenshot 3

From the screenshot 3, the motive that is used by the Facebook user is *inclusion*.

In the post, the user used inclusion motive because he needs someone to talk to. It can be seen through his post which he posted “*need someone to joke n talk. wanna hear a smile of happiness.*” on his Facebook account. However, at the end of the post, he asked to himself “*but who will it be?*” and this statement clearly stated that he really need someone to talk to because he probably had nobody to talk to and he wanted to reassure if someone was there for him at that moment. This motive reflected that the user used this motive to share his feelings with others and to overcome loneliness. He also used this motive to express his emotion or his loneliness and to feel a link to the other person. He also posted a question “*but who will it be?*” hoping to get a reply.



Screenshot 4

In screenshot 4, the motive that is used by the Facebook user is *escape*.

In the post, the user posted a picture together with a caption which he might have intended to attract attention from his virtual friends. The user also might have had nothing much to do at that moment and he needed someone to fulfill his motive of escape. He posted that he needed someone to talk to because he was bored. This can be clearly seen in his post “*I need someone that’s can talk to me right now because I’m too bored.*” Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) has defined bored as feeling unhappy because something is not interesting or because you have nothing to do. His post clearly stated that he needed something to do or someone to fulfill his motive of escape. He used escape motive as the reason for diversion or avoidance of his other activities. He used this motive as an act or instance of escaping such as distraction or relief from his routine or reality because of boredom.

In the same screenshot, the user also used the adverb *too* to describe his degree of boredom to portray that he had nothing to do at that moment and he needed something to do or someone to fulfill his motive of escape. His post clearly answered the question to what extent/ degree of his boredom. The use of adverb *too* in his post could attract his virtual friends to get something done for him in order to overcome his boredom.



Screenshot 5

From screenshot 5, the motive that is used by the user is *relaxation*.

In the post, the user used relaxation motive to express his feelings to someone he liked. It can be seen through his post which he posted “*Only ur voice can make me stay calm.*” on his Twitter account. His statement clearly stated that he was in state of being relaxed whenever he heard her voice. He used this motive because it makes him to feel less tense by hearing to voice belongs to someone he liked at that moment. This motive also reflected that the user used this motive to express his feeling of being relaxed and less tense because of her voice.



Screenshot 6

From screenshot 6, the motive that is used by the Facebook user is *control*.

In the post, the user used control motive because she wanted to gain compliance from someone she liked, at that moment. This motive can be seen from her statement on Twitter "*I want to have jog date. I want to have date every day every time with you.*" Her statement clearly pointed out that she portrayed an act or instance of controlling in her tweet by using the term "*I want*". In general, people are likely use the term *I want* as an act to control someone to do or to get something for themselves. This motive reflected that the user used this motive in order to gain compliance from someone she liked.

In the same screenshot, the verb *date* refers to "What is happening/has happened/will happen?" Any word that functions as action in a sentence also labeled as a verb. In the post, the user used a verb *date* shows her physical or mental action of herself. In her statement, she wanted to have *date* (an action) with someone she liked. Her post might answer the question "What will happen?" because she expressed her feeling to probably to have date with someone she liked. The term *I want* in her post probably acts as a cue that a date (an action) will happen sooner or later.

5. CONCLUSION

The data collected from Twitter and Facebook posts have been analyzed and categorized under Interpersonal Communication Motives (ICM) by Rubin, Perse and Barbato (1988). The study aimed to examine the categories of motives which include pleasure, affection, inclusion, escape, relaxation, and control. The data exhibits that both genders used inclusion and pleasure motives. This motive reflected the use of interpersonal communication to share feelings with others and to overcome loneliness. Based on the findings, both genders were likely exposed themselves that they needed someone to talk to, they needed someone to talk about their problems and to overcome their loneliness. For the second motive, Punyanut-Carter and Wagner (2018) have defined pleasure motives are ways to communicate for enjoyment and excitement. According to Merriam-Webster (n.d.), pleasure can be defined as a sensual gratification and frivolous amusement. This factor reflected communicating because it was fun, stimulating, and entertaining, which include "because it's fun, it's exciting, to have a good time, because it's thrilling, because it's stimulating, because it's entertaining, because I enjoy it and because it peeps me up." (Rubin, Perse & Barbato, 1988:615)

The study suggests that both genders have specific interpersonal communication motives for flirting and their chosen lexical to fulfill their motives for flirting. In analyzing the motives, the choice of words used by these teenagers also plays a role. By using faceless communication through the social media, both genders have chance to develop their interpersonal relationships by expressing their feelings. Using this medium, they also managed to be included in giving pleasure to themselves and by expressing their feelings without being humiliated. Faceless communication via the social media allows both genders to construct effective messages with its feature of an ambiguous means for communication because their targeted person is not able to perceive their non-verbal signals. That means flirting through faceless communication is less damaging, as they can escape rejection, injury or humiliation if their motives for flirting are not accepted.

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