

A Comparative Study on Online Advice-Seeking Strategies between Malaysian and Australian Women

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ABSTRACT

Advice discourse is common in our everyday life. As such, research on advice is diverse and covers advice-related communicative practices such as advice-seeking, advice-giving and reception to advice. Past research on advice has also examined various factors affecting advice-related practices such as the relationship between advice and politeness, gender, and characteristics of interlocutors. Although advice is a much-researched area, comparative studies that attempt to compare advice-seeking strategies in two similar contexts are scarce. The present study seeks to fulfill this gap, hence a comparative study that compares the strategies used by women in Malaysia and Australia when they seek advice on infertility treatment in a Malaysian online forum and in an Australian online forum is carried out. A total of 100 advice-seeking messages from each forum are examined using Locher's (2006) content analysis method that involves analysis of the discursive moves, relational work, and linguistic realisations of moves in the advice-seeking messages. The results show that although there is homogeneity in many aspects in both forums, there are still variations in the women's advice-seeking strategies due to cultural backgrounds, specifically on the frequency and levels of problem disclosure, as well as the use of local slangs and syntax constructions that are typical of their cultural community. The study provides insights about how cultural elements shape one's advice-seeking strategies, subsequently contributing to our understanding of cross-cultural pragmatics.

Keywords: women's forum; online advice-seeking; infertility; culture

INTRODUCTION

Advice discourse is common in our everyday life, occurring in a myriad of settings. As such, research on advice is diverse covering advice-seeking (Ortega et al., 2020), advice-giving (Bjørkdahl & Druglitrø, 2018), and reception to advice (Duan et al., 2018; Van Swol et al., 2019). Past research on advice has also examined various factors affecting these advice-related practices such as the relationship between advice and politeness (Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000), gender (Hampel, 2015), topics of discussion (Locher, 2006), culture (Morrow, 2012), contexts (Limberg & Locher, 2012), and characteristics of interlocutors (Gaertig & Simmons, 2018).

Nonetheless, despite advice being a much researched area as mentioned, studies that relate advice strategies to culture are fairly limited. These studies focused predominantly on

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the European (Chentsova-Dutton & Vaughn, 2012), American (Glide, 2015), Asian (Morrow, 2012), and the African (Hampel, 2015) regions. Similarly, cross-cultural comparison studies on advice strategies also centered on only a few cultures, for instance comparing the Russian and American cultures (Chentsova-Dutton & Vaughn, 2012), the American and Chinese cultures (Feng, 2015; Feng & Feng, 2011), and the East Asian and the Euro-Canadian cultures (Ji et al., 2016). Therefore, not much is known about the advice strategies of other cultural communities. As argued by Feng and Feng (2018), given the diversity of cultures and subcultures in the world, there is a need to investigate the advice strategies of other cultures, particularly those which have not been the target of inquiry in past advice research.

Furthermore, majority of past research on cross-cultural advice studies adopted the general perspective of looking at “social behavioral differences between national cultures” (Feng et al., 2016, p. 170). However, according to Feng and Feng (2018), culture is a multifaceted, complex construct, and therefore, context-specific with an interplay of various factors. As such, it is impossible to disregard the possibilities that other factors are responsible agents, rather than culture, to explain variations in advice strategies among individuals of different cultural backgrounds. Subsequently, it is recommended that comparative cross-cultural studies are carried out in similar contexts (Feng & Feng, 2011).

As yet, there have been no comparative studies that investigate advice strategies of different cultures in similar contexts. Therefore, the present study aims to add to the existing literature on cultural influence on advice by examining how women seek advice on an infertility treatment, i.e. in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), in a Malaysian online forum and in an Australian online forum. Both the Malaysian and Australian cultures are less-researched cultures in advice studies, and they represent two spectrums of the collectivism-individualism cultural dimension; the Malaysian culture as a collectivist culture (Melati Sumari et al., 2020), and the Australian culture as an individualistic culture (Kale et al., 2020). The research objectives are to:

- 1) investigate Malaysian women’s strategies when seeking advice in an online forum about IVF
- 2) investigate Australian women’s strategies when seeking advice in an online forum about IVF
- 3) analyse the similarities and differences between Malaysian and Australian women’s strategies when seeking advice in online forums about IVF

LITERATURE REVIEW

Some scholars equate advice-seeking as a help-seeking behavior (Maiuolo et al., 2019). The main aim is to obtain advice, suggestions, information or opinion about a perceived existing or future problem (Brooks et al., 2015). According to Buttny (2004), “problem” can be conceptualized as explicit or implicit identification and evaluation of actions and state of affairs as difficult or challenging. Therefore, the key point for distinguishing advice-seeking from other types of requests such as information-requests and opinion-requests is that advice-seeking involves problem-solution. There must be some implications that there is a problem, and the advice solicited is targeted at solving the problem.

Previous investigation on advice-seeking revealed that the speech act can be accomplished through several linguistic forms and these are often associated with levels of explicitness (Lindholm, 2019). The deployment of the word “advice” or other synonyms of “advice” in advice-requests typically makes the propositional content explicit as opposed to an individual’s narration of a problem (Kouper, 2010). Kouper (2010) also considered requests for information or opinion, be they in the declarative or interrogative structure, as implicit forms of advice-seeking. Due to the varying levels of explicitness, some researchers also

examined the relationship between linguistic forms in advice-seeking and face. Based on the western perspective, advice-seeking is generally viewed as a face-threatening act because it implies a lack of competence on the advice-seeker, and it is an imposition on addressee to respond to the request (Brown & Levinson, 1987). However, findings in past studies also showed evidence suggesting there are differences in how advice-seeking is perceived due to cultural influence (Eley et al., 2019). For instance, Asians have been reported to view advice-seeking as a solidarity strategy and hence, tend to seek advice from their close others (e.g. family and friends) rather than professionals, compared to the European Americans (Mojaverian et al., 2013).

Some researchers looked at the social functions of advice-seeking. Mirc and Parker (2020), for example, found reciprocity as a dominant micro-process of advice-seeking. Liljenquist (2010) claimed advice-seeking can project warmth, and Tovaes and Kulbayeva's study (2021) which examined advice in troubles talk between friends illuminated how advice played an essential role as a solidarity strategy in friendship.

Advice-seeking can also be understood from a number of perspectives, of which advice-seeking behaviours is one of them. Copeland et al. (2008) pointed out that an individual is more likely to seek advice from structural equivalents (e.g. peers) rather than from those perceived as inequivalent in status. Likewise, studies have also shown that individuals tend to seek advice from people who are more similar to them (prototypicality), such as the study by Ma et al. (2021) on seeking online relationships among sexually minority adolescents. Characteristics of the advice-seeker is another factor whereby past research looking at demographic and sociocultural variables found that subgroups of society which were more dependent and vulnerable (e.g. the aged and the sick) were more likely to seek help than their more independent and capable counterparts (Gall, 1985; Paige et al., 2021). A study by Gino et al. (2012) also revealed that people with higher anxiety levels and lower self-confidence were more inclined to seek advice as opposed to those who were less anxious and more confident.

As advice discourse can comprise the communicative practices of advice-seeking, advice-giving, and advice reception (Lindholm, 2019), some past studies did not focus on advice-seeking per se, but investigated the discourse in its totality which encompassed a combination of advice-seeking and other types of communicative practices. These studies are varied, with differences in terms of advice types, contexts, communication platforms, and topics. In relation to types of advice, Heritage and Sefi (1992), and Locher (2006) investigated expert advice, while Kouper (2010), Morrow (2012), Jariah Mohd. Jan and Pung (2016) and Wan Nur Asyura Wan Adnan et al. (2019) focused on peer advice. Contexts also differed, with some looking at institutional advice seeking, for example in medical contexts (Leppanen, 1998; Silverman, 1997), and in educational settings (Limberg, 2010; Vehvilainen, 2009), while others in day-to-day interactions with interlocutors of different power and intimacy levels (Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000). The findings of the studies generally revealed that the strategies used by advice-seekers were influenced by a number of factors such as the level of asymmetrical relationship between the advice-seeker and the addressee, topics of interaction, as well as cultural practices of the interlocutors. For instance, due to the steeper epistemic imbalance between the advice-seeker and the addressee in advice columns, advice-seeking was more likely to consist of explicit advice-requests and interrogatives requesting information (Limberg & Locher, 2012; Locher, 2006). By contrast, peer advice-seeking on health issues was found to comprise metaphorical language to describe symptoms of illnesses (Morrow, 2006), personal narratives (Wan Nur Asyura Wan Adnan et al., 2019) and frequent references to being "in the same boat" (Sillence, 2013, p. 10).

There were also variations in the frequency, reasons, and types of relational work in advice discourse depending on the level of authority, expertise, intimacy, as well as the shared cultural values among the interlocutors (MacGeorge & Van Swol, 2018). In addition, the ethos

of the online community has been cited by Kouper (2010) as a factor in governing the interaction pattern, and consequently, the ways advice is sought in computer-mediated communication. For example, in her investigation of advice messages in an online forum for mothers, Kouper (2010) found that advice-requests were often embedded within narrative structures. On the other hand, Sillence (2013) observed that a typical advice solicitation among breast cancer patients in an online support group took the form of a narrative with a number of different structures with background and justification.

Although there is much research on advice discourse, there are relatively few cross-cultural studies on advice strategies, and as yet, no comparative studies comparing advice strategies of different cultural communities in similar contexts. Hence, it is the aim of the present study to fill in this research gap via a comparative study that examines how women solicit advice on IVF, an infertility treatment, in a Malaysian online forum and in an Australian online forum. Infertility is considered a highly distressing problem in which help or advice is usually sought. In Malaysia, infertility affects approximately 10% to 12% of the population (Faezah Shekh Abdullah et al., 2012) while in Australia, it is slightly higher, at about 15% (Ried & Alfred, 2013). Since perceptions of infertility have been shown to be linked to culture (Nouman & Zanbar, 2020), and infertility is a distressing problem which often calls for help or advice (Abdollahpour et al., 2021), a cross-cultural study investigating advice-seeking strategies on infertility issues is deemed apt.

METHODOLOGY

DATA COLLECTION

As the study intended to investigate culture as a factor in online advice-seeking messages, it was crucial to maintain as much homogeneity as possible in characteristics of the two chosen forums, with culture as the only discernible variable. Motherhood online forums were considered an appropriate starting point in the selection of research sites as: (1) motherhood is a common discussion topic so motherhood forums are available on the Internet for both cultures, i.e. Malaysian and Australian, (2) messages related to infertility treatment such as IVF can be found in motherhood forums as infertility is also an issue related to motherhood, (3) the characteristics of the participants can be more controlled since the targeted forum users are women who are interested in various issues related to motherhood, and (4) beliefs about motherhood are essentially culture-bound.

The next step was to choose the motherhood forums with comparable features such as (1) the degree of anonymity (e.g. public versus private discussions; user anonymity), (2) synchronicity of communication (asynchronous versus synchronous), (3) participation structure of discussion (e.g. one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many), (4) participant characteristics (e.g. gender, roles), (5) purpose of the forums (e.g. goals of interaction), and (6) themes of the discussion (e.g. infertility problems, infertility treatment, IVF). As such, the selected research sites were two similar motherhood online forums, in which they were both open-accessed, asynchronous, and motherhood forums targeting women with topics such as fertility, pregnancy, infertility treatment, and child-rearing. Online discussions were polylogic, meaning interactions could involve one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one, and many-to-many conversations. The only difference between the two forums was that one was an Australian online forum to represent the individualistic culture, and the other, a Malaysian online forum to represent the collectivist culture. According to Zheng (2021), the individualistic cultural context typically emphasises the values of independence and autonomy, while the collectivist culture places importance on interdependence and social networking. In this study, only messages in the discussion thread about IVF were used for analysis.

The participants were registered members of the forums who posted advice-seeking messages in the IVF discussion thread. These participants were women who were interested in the infertility treatment and were identifiable only through their usernames, thus maintaining their anonymity.

The data consisted of 100 messages from each forum with IVF as the discussion topic, totalling altogether 200 messages. These messages were collected from the time the IVF thread was first initiated in the forum until the number of advice-seeking messages reached 100. An adaptation of Kouper's (2010) typology of online advice solicitations was used to identify the advice-seeking messages.

DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis of the advice-seeking strategies emulated Locher's (2006) method in which the messages were examined qualitatively for the discursive moves found in the messages, relational work, and linguistic realisations of the discursive moves. The discursive moves in the messages are the moves that serve particular communicative purposes or functions such as to request advice, question, and so on (see Appendix). Relational strategies are the strategies used by interlocutors to establish their relationship with one another, and in this study, analysis was based on how certain linguistic forms were employed to show how the forum members related to one another (see Appendix). Analysis of linguistic realisations of discursive moves involved examining the syntactic structures of the discursive moves.

To ensure that the study adhered to ethical internet research, the study followed the guidelines set by the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al., 2020) in which all usernames or pseudonyms were changed. Other information that could be traced back to the participants such as email addresses, as well as names of doctors, hospitals, and clinics mentioned in the messages were also changed to protect their identities.

FINDINGS

The findings revealed that there were three advice-seeking discursive moves identified in both the forums - Request for Advice (RA), Request for Opinion or Information (ROI), and Problem Disclosure (PD). They differ in two ways: (1) the explicitness level of the advice request, and (2) how advice-solicitation is accomplished linguistically. The most prevalent relational work observed in the two forums was bonding. The moves and relational work are discussed in detail in the following sections.

THE REQUEST FOR ADVICE (RA) MOVE

The Request for Advice move (RA) is the most direct form of advice-seeking because the advice-seeker is explicitly asking what one should do. The clear propositional content can be signalled with words like "advice", "recommendations" and "suggestions", or the use of certain modals commonly associated with advice such as "should", "ought to" and "must". For instance, in Excerpt 1, the advice-seeker's emphatic declarative formulation of her request is congruent with her epistemic status as one with little experience ("it's my first one") and is in need of advice. The modal "should" expresses explicitly that the addressee possesses the authority to advise because of her knowledge or experience.

Excerpt 1

it's my first one so please anyone who is experienced let me know if there's anything else I should be having!!)

Among the three advice-seeking moves identified in the study, RA was the least used by the women in both forums. Other examples of RA found in the forums are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Examples of Request for Advice Move (RA)

No.	Forum	Examples of RA
1	Malaysian	Anyone have any advice for me?
2	Malaysian	Please let me know the doctor if you have one to recommend.
3	Australian	Should I be?
4	Australian	Has anyone got any good positive apps they can recommend?

Nonetheless, despite the varied linguistic forms that can explicitly express the propositional content of advice solicitation, it was observed that the linguistics forms were limited in both forums, especially in the choice of modals used. Only the modal “should” was found in the data, whereas the modals “ought to” and “must” were not seen, implying that some linguistic forms are preferred in peer discussion forums.

THE REQUEST FOR OPINION OR INFORMATION MOVE (ROI)

The Request for Opinion or Information move (ROI) is a less direct form of advice-seeking compared to RA. Instead of asking others what they should or should not do, the solicited advice is couched in the form of information- and opinion-seeking.

However, it is imperative to also stress here that ROI in the present study referred to only requests that performed advice-seeking because not all requests for information or opinion found in the forums had the element of soliciting advice. This is particularly evident in the Australian forum where some of the information requests appeared to function more as a solidarity strategy rather than an advice-seeking strategy. Take for instance, the following two questions taken from the Australian forum - “when is your BT?” and “how are u feeling?” - in which the addressor was mainly asking for updates from the addressee. Questions like these were found to be common in the Australian forum and they formed part of their communities of practice (CoP), defined as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayne, 2015, p. 1). These kinds of questions were coded as “Request for Update”, and not coded as ROI since they were merely requests for updates which did not have any element of advice-seeking. Only requests that were associated with the addressor’s problems were coded as ROI in the study.

As detailed in Table 2, the ROI in the investigated forums was accomplished through the open interrogative, closed interrogative, the declarative question, and the tag question syntax, and was usually related to various aspects of the treatment such as timing, complications, hospitals, doctors, and procedures. This finding is in line with findings of prior studies on how people with infertility problems engage in discussions in online forums in order to obtain information on the treatment (Aarts et al., 2012; Erčulj et al., 2019; Zillien et al., 2011).

TABLE 2. Examples of Request for Opinion or Information Move (ROI)

No.	Forum	Examples of ROI	Type of Syntax	Aspect
1	Malaysian	When do I start treatment?	Open interrogative	Timing

2	Malaysian	Right now I have moderate OHSS. <u>What can we do to ease it?</u>	Open interrogative	Complications
3	Malaysian	Hope u can give some comments if want to try at Hospital A this time round?	Declarative question	Hospitals or Doctors
4	Australian	Do you feel like you're in better hands?	Closed interrogative	Hospitals or Doctors
5	Australian	OMG progesterone side effects are here with a vengeance! Woke up with a headache and now hectic nausea... <u>Is this normal!?</u>	Closed interrogative	Complications
6	Australian	LH is important for ovulation right?	Tag question	Procedures

However, between the two forums, ROI was more prevalent in the Malaysian forum compared to the Australian forum, and most of the ROIs were in the form of open interrogatives. This can imply that there is a general need for more diverse responses among the Malaysian women regarding infertility treatment. Alternatively, it can also be a communicative strategy to maintain interaction and to strengthen solidarity. According to Heritage (2010), an open question or interrogative expresses a deeper epistemic gradient between the unknowing questioner and a knowing recipient, thus inviting elaboration and sequence expansion in an interaction. This can be illustrated by the open interrogative in Example 2, Table 2. The question “What can we do to ease it?” about Ovarian Hyperstimulation Syndrome (OHSS), a problem suffered by some women undergoing IVF, invites varied responses from other members who have had similar experiences.

Other types of ROI found in the study were those that implied a much flatter epistemic stance between the advice-seeker and the addressee (Examples 5 & 6, Table 2). In Example 5, the yes/no interrogative “Is this normal?” proposes that the advice-seeker already knows some information about “progesterone side effects” when the declarative syntax is deployed to emphatically announce her belief about her current situation. She believes that she is suffering from the side effects of progesterone which are extreme (“here with a vengeance”) and is seeking responses that either affirm or refute the question of whether such side effects are normal. Similarly, the tag question in Example 6 suggests that the advice-seeker has some prior knowledge about the function of luteinizing hormone (LH) in ovulation. The tag question functions as a request for confirmation of the preceding assertion made in the declarative component (“LH is important for ovulation”). This feature of ROI which seeks confirmation, reconfirmation, or refutation of the advice-seeker’s knowledge was especially apparent in the Australian forum, but less so in the Malaysian forum.

Nonetheless, a characteristic of advice-seeking messages which stood out in the Malaysian forum was the frequent deployment of ROI in a single message. Excerpt 2 shows how the advice-seeker asks multiple questions requesting information, with very little revelation of her problem(s), although her lack of or need for information on infertility treatment is evident. This finding may be an indication of a general lack of IVF knowledge among Malaysian women, or their reluctance to disclose and describe personal details about their problems.

Excerpt 2

...what is the schedule like given by dr B? the injections has to be taken for how many days? and is the first injection has to be done during the 1st day of menses? sorry for so many questions again...and thanks a lot in advance for the info...

THE PROBLEM DISCLOSURE MOVE (PD)

The Problem Disclosure Move (PD) is the least direct method of soliciting advice. It is based on the assumption that by revealing one's problems, it invites responses which may help solve the problems.

Analysis of the data found that solicitation of advice in PD used by the women in both forums was varied. It could appear simply as a statement of problem (Excerpt 3), or lengthy in the form of a description (Excerpt 4), a narration (Excerpt 5 and Excerpt 6), or a combination of both description and narration (Excerpt 7).

Excerpt 3 (Malaysian forum)

Im struggling whether it is necessary to do ovarian drilling as there is a risk too (PD)

Excerpt 4 (Australian forum)

My transfer is on Thurs at this stage and I'm wondering how the hell Im going to deal with the wait without eating my worries away (I eat when I'm worried or bored). I'm starting to think I need some mindful or meditation stuff to clear my mind or stop the crazy talk from taking over....(PD) Have you tried anything like that? (ROI) Has it helped? (ROI) Has anyone got any good positive apps they can recommend? (RA)

Excerpt 5 (Malaysian forum)

can i check with you, when you are on gonadotropin, do you have any symptoms? (ROI) i just started my gonadotropin yesterday. i was like so sleepy these 2 days eventhough i took a long nap in the afternoon. so i wonder if it is the side effects of gonadotropin. (PD)

Excerpt 6 (Australian forum)

Menopur I was on 187. Puregon I've been up 200ui. They keep telling me they only want one egg to ovulate. They don't want anymore than that. (PD) Not sure why they can't have more because then that may help my lining/Estrogen.??? (ROI) Confused. (PD)

Excerpt 7 (Malaysian forum)

...i got moderate OHSS. i was already feeling a bit bloating a day before ET but was worse during 7dpt. was admitted to hospital for 4 days for drips. and the 4 days was the most terrible days in my entire life. bloated, vomiting, swelling, backache,diarrhoea. have to drained out the fluid and i weight an extra 9 kg becos of all the fluid and i look like 4-5 mth pregnant. the bloating was terrible. it was like the tummy gonna explode and it was really really tight. it is really no joke. everynight unable to sleep. and after that i started to swell from the waist down...(PD)

Majority of the PDs consisted of details and required more than just a single statement. They also seldom occurred singly in messages and frequently occurred side-by-side with other advice-seeking moves. Excerpt 4 shows how a PD is followed by ROI and RA, the PD in Excerpt 5 is preceded by ROI, whereas the PD in Excerpt 6 has ROI embedded in it. This indicates the complexity of advice-seeking in that problem formulation in advice-seeking is not always straightforward. It also implies that engagement in deep discussions, which are typical of online health discussion forums (Mamykina et al., 2015), require elaborations which cannot be sufficiently conveyed in just a sentence or a question. In addition, lengthy, detailed PDs provide opportunities for further exchanges and negotiation of diverse perspectives. This finding supports previous research which suggests how by just "simply conversing about personal issues", one can get various types of help and support (Paik, 2014, p. 1).

PD made up a major part of the advice-seeking messages in the Australian forum. It appeared in almost every advice-seeking message and often in the structure of a narrative. In addition, the women also tended to elaborate and disclose detailed and intimate description of their problems. Conversely, in the Malaysian forum, PD was not as pervasive as ROI, and it was also more inclined to be briefer and straightforward. However, in instances where there was more elaboration, the problems usually had work or financial (Excerpt 8), and moral-obligation (Excerpt 9) associations. Excerpt 8 reveals the advice-seeker’s struggle with work and money, highlighting the fact that work and financial difficulties should not compromise getting infertility treatment. Excerpt 9 points to a woman’s moral duty and obligation to produce children after marriage. This aspect of the findings concurs with the cultural norms and values of the patrilineal, pronatalist east Asian society, whereby childbearing is seen as an “unquestionable moral significance” (Cheng, 2020, p. 2). Consequently, there is greater social stigma attached to infertility in developing, eastern societies compared to western societies (Rouchou, 2013). In this sense, it can be argued that experiences of infertility are shaped by cultural and interpersonal forces.

Excerpt 8

...Both of my hubby and i are not doing our own business... so.. **working life is really frustrated during IVF and all those shit i have to go thru... company is going to have vss.** but the name list is not announced yet... i don;t know what the hell i have to do now... i'm just worries.....

Excerpt 9

Yes i am very stress because i kept thinking that's my next agenda (after wedding) and on top of that, **all of DH's married friends are either preggo or have babies already.** So there's some sort of pressure especially during festive gathering and **everyone will be asking the 1 same question "So When Is Your Turn????"** ...

RELATIONAL WORK OF BONDING

In general, it is revealed that most of the advice-seeking moves performed the relational work of bonding. This was achieved mainly through the use of in-group markers, empathy statements, and expressions of common attributes shared among the forum members.

TABLE 3. Examples of In-Group Markers in the Advice-Seeking Discursive Moves

No.	Examples of In-Group Markers	Linguistic Forms
1	Ladies who have gone through PGD - do you recommend egg banking?	In-Group Marker (“ladies”)
2	My story is pretty messy because I've got stage 4 endo but I would love some buddies to go through the next cycle with.	In-Group Marker (“buddies”)
3	yes, like ABC say, not all will have to go through OHSS. we are really the unlucky one...	In-Group Marker (“we”)
4	The 2ww is very cruel!	Abbreviation for two-week-wait
5	I had a BFN on...	Acronym for Big Fat Negative (meaning failure to conceive)
6	i have done 2 cycles of IUI	Acronym for Intrauterine Insemination

IN-GROUP MARKERS

One common in-group marker used in the Malaysian and Australian forums was the word “ladies” to address one another (Example 1, Table 3). This address term served to foster greater solidarity among the members and played a significant role in constructing the members’ collective identity as a homogeneous social group, i.e. “ladies” or “women”. This is perhaps crucial considering society’s stigma against women with infertility problems. This sentiment about social stigma against women is expressed in both the Australian and Malaysian forums. For instance, as can be seen in Excerpt 10, one advice-seeker in the Australian forum insinuates how women are often blamed for infertility problems.

Excerpt 10 (Australian forum)

And anyone else here think there's sooooo much pressure on the woman?! **Even my mc they said was likely a problem caused from my egg and not DHs sperm...**

Similarly, the description in Excerpt 11 posted in the Malaysian forum implies how society puts pressure on the woman to bear children although the cause of infertility is clearly due to her “darling husband” (DH), and not herself. This finding shows how women with infertility problems are still stigmatized in society, irrespective whether they are of western or eastern culture.

Excerpt 11 (Malaysian forum)

So there's some sort of **pressure** especially during festive gathering and **everyone** will be asking the 1 same question "**So When Is Your Turn????**" ... **the cause of DH's low sperm count (results show severe oligospermia)**

Another in-group marker which appeared in the forums was the word “buddies” (Example 2, Table 3), or “cycle buddies”. This is a more exclusive in-group identity marker compared to “ladies” because it distinguishes different groups of women in the forum, for example, women who are contemplating on IVF and women who have completed at least one IVF cycle. It carries dual functions of projecting the women’s collective identity as those undergoing IVF, and solidifying their relationship because they have been viewed as “companions”. In this way, the women can have a sense of belonging in the forum, but more importantly, they can also build friendships with similar others which may not be possible in face-to-face settings owing to the highly sensitive nature of the problem.

Similarly, the first-person plural “we” can also be understood to refer to different levels of inclusiveness. At the macro level, “we” may represent the forum members or women with infertility problems, but at the micro level as in Example 3 in Table 3, “we” specifically refers to women with OHSS symptoms.

An obvious characteristic of the two forums that set them apart from other types of forums was the extensive use of acronyms and abbreviations associated with IVF (Examples 4-6, Table 3). While these acronyms and abbreviations are foreign to a layperson, they are frequently used for those undergoing IVF treatment. Acronyms and abbreviations are usually used “because they are short, space-saving, convenient and easy to use” (Koh et al., 2015, p. 334). In this study, it appears that learning, knowing and using these acronyms formed part of the CoP of the forums, as illustrated by one of the women’s post: “Hi I’m totally new to all of this, so I’m not even sure of all the abbreviations at this stage!”. This finding shows that using acronyms and abbreviations constituted a part of the social dimension of the forum’s interactions for the members to project their collective identity as women undergoing IVF.

Nevertheless, women in the Malaysian forum also employed other ways of bonding which were distinct from the Australian women. In Malaysia where English is taught as a

second language, the messages in the Malaysian forum sometimes comprised local slangs and syntax constructions influenced by other languages and dialects. This seems to be typical Malaysian strategies for seeking closeness with others and for creating their in-group identity as Malaysians. An example is the particle “liao” of Chinese origin meaning “already”, but is understood widely by Malaysians regardless of their ethnicity (Vollmann & Wooi, 2019), while “gone case” is a Malaysian English slang used to describe a hopeless situation (Excerpt 12).

Excerpt 12

i am now starting to worry too. like you, my symptoms are slowly disappearing and i wonder is it becos is a **gone case liao**. my BT is this coming fri. very scare right now...

EMPATHY

In both the forums, empathy constituted an integral aspect of the women’s interactions. These empathetic statements were related to mutual emotions and psychological states that the women could identify with, particularly anxiety (Excerpt 13) and stress (Excerpt 14). This finding is congruent with past research on infertility whereby the aforesaid emotions are considered common psychological reactions to infertility (Pozza et al., 2019) and the association between these negative mental states and infertility has often been researched and cited in past studies (Abdollahpour et al., 2021).

Excerpt 13

I’m like you, the **waiting** for the cycle to begin is **the worst**...

Excerpt 14

...i suspect u r **too stressed out** in wanting a bb soon, **juz like me** yrs back ...

In the case of the investigated forums where women were discussing IVF, the empathetic statements seemed to perform three functions: (1) expressions of distress, (2) facilitation of common ground among interlocutors, and (3) encouraging further description and disclosure of problems. For instance, in Excerpt 13, the declarative “I’m like you” indicated shared understanding of anxiety felt by both the advice-seeker and the addressee, while at the same time was a prelude to further disclosure of the advice-seeker’s anxiety about starting the IVF cycle (“the waiting for the cycle to begin is the worst...”). This finding suggests that in health-related peer discussion forums, empathy extends more than just sympathy and understanding for it also relieves the advice-seeker’s distress by giving her the opportunity to describe her own experiences. According to Leon (2010), empathy not only allows one to understand another’s suffering but is in itself, a strategy to alleviate one’s own suffering, thereby creating a healing and restoring experience (Ferber, 1995).

SHARED COMMON ATTRIBUTES

Expressions of common attributes were associated with shared problems, characteristics, and actions taken by the women. Similar to empathy, some expressions of common attributes were signalled by words and expressions suggesting mutuality such as “like you”, “same”, and “too” (Table 4). Others were just descriptions of their attributes which were common with other women.

TABLE 4. Examples of Shared Common Attributes in the Advice-Seeking Discursive Moves

No.	Examples of Shared Common Attributes	Linguistic Forms	Types of Attributes
1	Seems that my hubby has the same problem with yours...	same	Male infertility
2	I have just got my BFN too . My ET date was same day as u.	too; same	Failure to conceive; Same date for Embryo Transfer (ET)
3	i haven't done IVF,am thinking of doing it, but, i m not sure if i can take all this so bravely like you all	like you	Courage to undergo IVF

It is interesting to note that among the attributes shared by the women, one aspect was about how their husband or partner was a reason for their inability to conceive, as illustrated in Example 1, Table 4. This provides evidence that the women were not only dealing with their own infertility problems, but also discussing their husband's infertility. This finding is noteworthy because it suggests: (1) the complexity of the infertility problem, and (2) the value of the forum to a larger reader audience than the targeted women. For instance, while discussing male infertility, pointers on increasing male fertility may be shared, as indicated by one of women's response: "will get DH to try cordyceps, thanks AA for the info". As such, men with infertility problems would also be able to benefit from reading the discussions in the forum.

Another common characteristic shared by the women is their need for support during their struggles when undergoing treatment. As shown in Excerpt 15, the advice-seeker expresses her doubt on being able to handle the treatment by herself, and thus needs her mother in the absence of her husband. This finding underlines the pivotal role of spousal and family support for women going through infertility treatment.

Excerpt 15

my DH is away for work this week so **my mum is here with me, I didn't trust that I would be able to do it to myself.**

However, findings from the study also show that the partners assumed different roles between the two cultural groups. While the women in the Australian forum tended to count on their spouses for instrumental support (Excerpt 16), the women in the Malaysian forum relied on their husbands for emotional support (Excerpt 17).

Excerpt 16

I can't stab myself. The few times I had to it took an hour and tears lol. **Hubby stabs and I inject.**

Excerpt 17

i would cry whenever talking to my DH and hubby about it. when menses come each mth, without having to say anything, once saw my DH, my tears won't stop...

In addition, some women in the Malaysian forum expressed the difficulties they faced in convincing their husband to check for male infertility (Excerpt 18), or to improve their fertility (Excerpt 19). This shows that some Malaysian couples still view women as primarily responsible for their childlessness problems although infertility can also be caused by male factors. Cultural influence is also discernible in the conviction that blending modern western

medicine and traditional alternative medicine is effective to help with infertility problems, as shown in Excerpt 19.

Excerpt 18

I manage to drag DH for SA test to finally find the source of our problems. Results shows low sperm count and morphology.

Excerpt 19

I'll probably feed DH with weekly ginseng, birdnest and herbal pills (previously prescribed by the DOC to help with this problem but **DH did'nt take it**)

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study revealed a few salient points about the interconnections between communication platforms, advice-seeking strategies, language use, and cultural influence. The investigated forums were peer discussion forums with less obvious asymmetrical relationship among forum members. Advice-seeking is therefore less likely to show much epistemic imbalance between the advice-seeker and the addressee. In the case of peers, the participants' epistemic status is related to the domain of who has the relative access and rights to claim knowledge (Anniina et al., 2019; Heritage, 2013), and in the present study, epistemic authority rests on who has more experience and knowledge about IVF. This is different from the classic online advice column whereby expertise is more straightforward with advice requests being directed to a panel of health or medical experts (Sillence, 2013). Moreover, with IVF as the discussion topic, the forums are also predominantly functioning as online social support forums. The emphasis of such forums is support giving via sharing of experiences and information (Erčulj & Žiberna, 2021) rather than the typical advice-request and advice-giving format in an advice column (Locher, 2006). As such, the nature of the communication platform may be an explaining factor for the low occurrences of explicit advice requests as opposed to the indirect advice-seeking strategies of ROI and PD. Heritage (2012) has discussed how different grammatical forms in advice requests have epistemic implications between the advice-seeker and the addressee. An explicit advice request proposes a steep epistemic imbalance between the advice-seeker and the addressee in terms of knowledge and status, but the epistemic imbalance is not as prominent when advice requests are implicit.

Likewise, the communication platform is a possible reason for why the choice of modal verb in RA is limited to "should", with the exclusion of other modal verbs of obligation. According to Tsurikova and Evanson (1995), the modal verbs "ought to" and "must" are stronger modals in the scale of advisability to necessity. In addition to communicating advice and advice requests, "ought to" suggests a public duty (Tsurikova & Evanson, 1995), thus containing social and moral overtones (Hinkel, 1995). The modal verb "must" expresses stronger obligation compared to "should" (Kizilay, 2019), which conveys "obligations, duties, directives, recommendations and the like" (Collins, 2005, p. 251). When discussing topics which are private, intimate, and even embarrassing such as infertility problems and IVF, language use in such forums is likely to contribute to common ground between interlocutors and rapport (Ireland et al., 2011), thereby avoiding the use of strong forms of modal verbs.

The findings from the study also showed the different perceptions and approach adopted by the women when seeking advice on infertility issues, highlighting differences in cultural values as well as the ethos of the online forums. Unlike the individualistic Australian culture (Kale et al., 2020) which prioritises personal motives over group interests (Kwan et al., 1997), the collectivist Malaysian culture (Melati Sumari et al., 2020) view family as central in care and treatment of family members (Park & Chelsa, 2010). Disclosure of intimate problems

such as infertility problems to out-group agents may be viewed as a betrayal to the family (Mojaverian et al., 2013). Furthermore, the Malaysian culture may not be as open as the Australian culture with regards to infertility due to the higher levels of stigma against women with infertility problems (Fatimah Sham et al., 2020). Thus, women in highly stigmatized cultural contexts such as Malaysia, may be more wary to divulge information about their infertility problems albeit in an anonymous, online setting. Hence, this reinforces the notion of how advice-seeking behaviours are grounded in the interlocutors' cultural beliefs and the prevailing ethos of the forums' CoP. Cultural values and attitudes towards certain types of problems are instrumental in determining how interlocutors seek advice and their levels of trust and willingness to disclose their problems when seeking advice.

Despite the differences in culture between Malaysia and Australia, the findings also pointed to the universality of women's concerns regarding infertility problems and treatment. Irrespective of culture, infertility is still largely seen as "a woman's problem", be it in an individualistic Australian society or in a collectivist Malaysian society, and this puts an immense amount of pressure on women who are unable to conceive. This finding suggests the social stigma which perceives infertility being the woman's fault, remains deeply ingrained and pervasive. This calls for a need to spread awareness and education about infertility as a public health issue which can affect both men and women equally to reduce the stigma against women with infertility problems.

Finally, the present study also revealed the multidimensional aspect of the online forums. They are not only an avenue for one to seek advice, but are also a valuable resource for women to find information and seek myriad opinions. This is perhaps extremely crucial, especially in the Malaysian context, since women with infertility problems are still very much stigmatized in this part of the world. This makes infertility a taboo topic, and consequently, the women may not have anyone to turn to for advice and help (Fatimah Sham et al., 2020). Moreover, the findings also showed discussions that extend to male infertility, thus, suggesting that the forums may benefit men with infertility problems as well. Therefore, online peer health discussion forums can be a useful platform in which individuals can access valuable knowledge about infertility treatment, as well as differing opinions of others so that they can make better, more informed decisions about their medical condition. In addition, they are also a social space for users to share experiences, seek social support, and establish solidarity with one another, which help create and maintain the forum's CoP.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the study has made some significant contributions to the existing literature on advice-seeking strategies, particularly with reference to culture, by comparing the advice-seeking strategies of a collectivist culture and an individualistic culture in two almost homogeneous online forums in terms of targeted audience, purpose, and discussion thread or topic. Previous studies that relate advice strategies to culture are fairly scarce, focusing on only a few geographical locations and societies in the European, American, Asian and the African regions. The findings of the study provide evidence that some aspects of online peer advice-solicitation remain relatively parallel across the two cultures, especially with regards to their preference for indirect advice-seeking strategies, their CoP which emphasises solidarity through projection of inclusive collective identities portraying them as women with infertility issues belonging to the same cultural community, and their complaints on the stigma against them. Yet, the findings also demonstrate that there are some differences in the participants' advice-seeking experiences, as well as their advice-seeking strategies pertaining to their level of trust, openness and willingness to share information about themselves which suggests influence of different cultural contexts.

One limitation of the study is it did not consider the individual difference variable (e.g. personality) as well as other possible cultural factors that influence communication such as perceptions of hierarchy and power. Therefore, future studies could include the aforementioned factors when investigating advice-seeking strategies from a cross-cultural perspective.

In conclusion, the comparative study on online advice-seeking strategies between Malaysian women and Australian women provides insights into how cultural elements shape their advice-seeking strategies, thereby contributing to our understanding of cross-cultural pragmatics. The study will be of interest to researchers and academics in the fields of women studies, language, pragmatics, and communication.

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APPENDIX

Locher's (2006) Discursive Moves in Advice-Seeking Messages

Discursive Move	Explanation
Apology	The advice-seeker apologises (e.g. sorry to disturb you...)
Background	Background information about the problem
Comment on previous record	A comment on a question-answer sequence previously published on the research site (e.g. I was reading your message about...)
Compliment	A compliment
Explanation	An explanation of a point just made
Metacomment	A text-structuring comment (e.g. I have three questions...)
Problem statement	A statement or narration of a problem (e.g. I can't handle my stress...)
Question	An explicit question
Request advice	A request for advice (e.g. Any advice is helpful)
Thanks	Thanks to the advisor for his/her response

Note. Adapted from "Advice Online" by M. A. Locher, 2006, Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Company, Copyright 2006 by John Benjamins Publishing Company

Locher'S (2006) Categories of Relational Work in Advice-Seeking Messages

Relational Aspect of Messages	Explanation
Appealing (face-enhancing)	Display of emotions or distress and appeals to the advisor for sympathy
Bonding (face-enhancing)	Seeking to connect with the advisor
Humor-bonding (face-enhancing)	Humor that is intended to bond with the advisor or other users
Boosting (face-threatening)	A word or phrase used to give a point more weight
Criticizing (face-threatening)	Criticism of a previous answer by the advisor, or other readers
Hedging (face-saving)	The use of mitigators (e.g. I wonder if you could...)
Humor-hedging (face-saving and face-enhancing)	Humor which mitigates the advice-seeker's situation or the imposition on the advisor (e.g...besides another word I probably can't sleep)

Note. Adapted from "Advice Online" by M. A. Locher, 2006, Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Company, Copyright 2006 by John Benjamins Publishing Company

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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