WOMEN AND ONLINE ENQUIRIES ON INFERTILITY ISSUES

Jariah Mohd Jan, Pung Wun Chiew

University of Malaya

Abstract

In certain parts of the world, a woman’s ability to produce children is especially pivotal. In Malaysia, for example, a barren woman suffers shame, humiliation and even risks losing her husband (Akhtar, 2011). As infertility is taboo in such society, women with infertility problem often suffer in silence (Evens, 2004). However, with the anonymity afforded by computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Herring, 2001), these women finally have a platform in which they can discuss and seek help without the anxiety of identity disclosure. However, not much is known on how these women communicate online. As yet, most CMC studies pertaining to language and culture have either focused on the western societies (Locher, 2006; Placencia, 2012), or the more researched eastern culture of the Japanese (Morrow, 2012). This study attempts to investigate how Malaysian women with infertility problem seek online advice on in-vitro fertilization (IVF), as well as the types of questions asked when seeking advice in terms of their forms and functions. Using web content analysis method, 251 messages posted to an online forum for Malaysian women were analysed for their advice-seeking strategies. The findings revealed that the women employed three main strategies when seeking online advice: (1) question-asking, (2) problem-narration, and (3) explicit advice-request. The findings also showed that when questions were asked in relation to the infertility treatment, closed questions were preferred to open questions. In addition, it was also found that the questions did not only primarily performed the function of information-seeking, especially in relation to the IVF protocol, but the questions were also frequently intended to bond or connect with the message-recipient.

Keywords: WOMEN, INFERTILITY, IN-VITRO FERTILIZATION, ADVICE, STRATEGIES, QUESTIONS, ENQUIRIES, ONLINE

Introduction

Although the ability to produce children is important to most families, not all societies place equal emphasis on fertility, nor view infertility as big a problem as other societies. In certain parts of the world, a woman’s ability to produce children is especially pivotal. In Malaysia, for example, as a patriarchal society, women are expected to bear children for their husbands, as a way to continue the family’s lineage. Failure to do so will result in blame and condemnation, irrespective of which spouse is infertile (Akhtar, 2011). Furthermore, infertility is even the cause of some divorces or extramarital affairs (Zuraida Ahmaad Sabki, 2010).

However, as serious as infertility problem is, it is not a topic that is openly discussed. A barren woman is usually looked down upon by society. Fearing criticisms and even ostracisms, women with infertility problems are often desperate, but are forced to suffer in silence. In a research conducted in 2012 called Starting Families Asia, it was found that many women were ignorant about infertility issues (The Star, 2012). About three quarters of Malaysian women believed infertility as a work of God and an untreatable
problem, while about half of them assumed that they were just unlucky. 80% of the women did not even question whether their spouse was a cause of their inability to conceive, and placed the blame entirely on themselves. This indicates there is a dire need to overcome the taboo associated with infertility so that these women are more well-informed of their problem, as well as who and where to seek help from.

As such, women with infertility problems are now turning to computer-mediated communication (CMC). With the CMC’s anonymity hiding the women’s identity and problem (Herring 2001), they do not need to fear condemnation from society. However, to date, not much is known about Malaysian women’s online communicative strategies. Most online advice research pertaining to culture has either focused on American (Locher, 2006), Spanish (Placencia, 2012), or Japanese (Morrow, 2012) cultures. Locher (2006) looked at advice-seeking and advice-giving strategies in an American online advice column, while Placencia (2012) investigated online advice offered in Spanish. Morrow (2012) then examined how online advice was given in Japanese.

Considering the lack of communicative studies on how Malaysian women interact in a CMC setting within the Southeast Asian region, the study aims to investigate how Malaysian women seek online advice on in-vitro fertilization (IVF). Specifically, the study sets out to find out the online advice-seeking strategies of women, as well as the types of questions asked by them in terms of forms and functions, when seeking advice online on matters related to in-vitro fertilization (IVF). The specific objectives of the study are: (1) to investigate the types of strategies employed by women when seeking advice on IVF online, (2) to analyse the syntactic structures of the questions asked by the women when seeking advice on IVF online, and (3) to examine the functions of the questions asked by the women when seeking advice on IVF online.

Literature review

The Internet was released for worldwide use in the 1990s (Starr, 1996), and since then, its use has “grown exponentially into a cultural phenomenon that reaches every age demographic” (Eisenchlas, 2012, p. 335). One main appeal of the Internet is its ability to enable participants to remain anonymous (Moraham-Martin & Schumacher, 2003). As such, the Internet provides an avenue for people to share more freely than they can in conventional communication methods, especially when seeking and giving advice on stigmatizing disorders such as AIDS, or embarrassing topics such as infertility (White & Dorman, 2001).

In studies on online advice, findings revealed that advice-seeking strategies do differ when advice is sought in different settings and in different contexts. For example, Kouper (2010) used an adapted version of Goldsmith’s (2000) method of analysing advice-seeking messages, and instead of six patterns found in Goldsmith’s (2000) study on advice-seeking strategies in face-to-face interactions, Kouper (2010) identified only four patterns in her investigation of how mothers sought advice in an international online forum: (1) explicit advice-request, (2) asking for opinions or information, (3) problem-disclosure, and (4) when advice is not solicited, but volunteered by the advisor. Among the three advice-seeking strategies of explicit advice-request, question-asking, and problem-disclosure, question-asking ranked top as the most prevalent in her data. This was followed by problem-disclosure, and finally, explicit advice-request.

In a different type of advice-seeking, i.e. advice-seeking from an expert, Locher (2006) analysed how advice was sought in an American online advice-column called Lucy Answers. Her analysis system was based on Miller and Gergen’s (1998) method of coding online messages whereby the examination of the online messages were broken down into discursive moves. Miller and Gergen (1998) examined 232 online posts on the topic of Suicide, and in their investigation, they found sixteen discursive moves, of
which three performed advice-seeking: (1) the Request for Help move, (2) the Problem Disclosure move, and (3) the Request for Information move. A discursive move was defined as the “kind of contribution that the entry made to the ongoing interchange” (Miller & Gergen, 1998, p. 192). Hence, if someone wrote “Please help me” in his or her message, that part of the message could be coded as a Request for Help discursive move. In Locher’s (2006) analysis of problem letters addressed to Lucy, i.e. the advice-seeking messages, she also identified three discursive moves which performed advice-seeking: (1) the Request Advice move, (2) the Question move, and (3) the Problem Statement move. Among the three discursive moves, the Question move appeared most often in her data, followed by the Problem Statement move, and lastly, the Request Advice move.

Nonetheless, instead of labelling discursive moves for the Supportive Interchange as appeared in Miller and Gergen’s (1998) research, Locher (2006) termed “the process of defining relationships in interaction” (p. 113), as relational work, and this constituted another analysis level. Relational work in Locher’s (2006) analysis encompassed mitigation strategies, face-threatening categories, and strategies that aimed to increase involvement. In her examination of advice-seeking messages, the Hedging relational category was found to be most prevalent, indicating a tendency for advice-seekers in the advice column to employ face-saving mitigation tactics. The second most utilized relational work was the Appealing relational category.

In addition, Locher (2006) further analysed the advice-seeking messages for the linguistic realization of discursive moves. In the Question move, the most preferred syntactic structure was the yes/no questions, whereas the least favoured syntactic structure for asking questions was the alternative question-type. The Request Advice move was then the second most employed move performing the act of advice-seeking, occurring mostly in the declarative structure, while the Problem Statement move was the least utilized advice-seeking move which appeared frequently in the narrative structure.

Kouper (2010) also investigated online advice-seeking strategies, but focusing on peer advice, as well as basing her investigation on a different research site and participants. Her analysis looked at how advice-solicitations occurred among mothers in an international online forum. Furthermore, Kouper (2010) also used a different framework of analysis from Locher’s (2006), where her typology of advice-solicitations consisted of: (1) Requesting for Advice, (2) Asking for Opinion or Information, (3) Problem Disclosure, and (4) Advisor Volunteering Advice. Although the labelling of the advice-solicitations differs from Locher’s (2006) advice-seeking discursive moves, they are similar in terms of the ways advice can be sought. Kouper’s (2010) Asking for Advice classification is synonymous to Locher’s (2006) Request Advice Move, while the Asking for Opinion or Information category in Kouper’s (2010) typology is akin to Locher’s (2006) Question Move, and the Problem Disclosure category to the Problem Statement Move. Although the Advisor Volunteering Advice was also labelled as part of Kouper’s (2010) advice-solicitations typology, there is really no initiation on the part of the advice-seeker to solicit advice, and therefore, it is not considered an advice-seeking strategy to be compared with Locher’s (2006) advice-seeking discursive moves. Like Locher’s (2006) findings, Kouper (2010) also found question-asking, i.e. the Asking for Opinion or Information category, to be the most employed form of advice-seeking by the participants in her study. In addition, the messages posted by the mothers also often included details about themselves, which Kouper (2010) described as orientation, reasons for their questions (justification), and appreciation in advance for the advice to be provided (appreciation).

As such, it seems that advice-solicitations commonly come in three forms: (1) explicit advice-request, (2) question-asking, and (3) problem-description. From the findings of Locher’s (2006) and Kouper’s (2010), it also appears that questions-asking is a popular online advice-seeking strategy, regardless of research sites, participants, and the nature of advice being sought (expert versus peer). Nonetheless, not much is known about how Malaysians seek online advice, especially when asking questions as a form
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of advice-solicitation. Considering the sensitive nature of the infertility topic, especially among women in Malaysia, this study aims to examine how Malaysian women ask advice online on matters related to infertility, and how these women ask questions as a form of advice-solicitation, as well as the functions of these questions, in a local online forum targeted at Malaysian women on infertility-treatment issues, specifically, in-vitro fertilization (IVF).

Methodology

Research site

The research site chosen to investigate how Malaysian women seek online advice on in-vitro fertilization (IVF) was one of the most popular online forums targeted at Malaysian women – Malaysian Motherhood (http://www.malaysianmotherhood.com). It was an asynchronous, text-based type of computer-mediated communication (CMC).

The forum was also open-accessed, allowing anybody to go into the forum to read any of the posted messages. However, to post any messages in the forum, one had to be a registered member. The role of the researchers in this investigation, however, was of a guest, as the intention was to preserve the authenticity of the data, analysing how women in the forum interacted and sought peer advice in an environment which they felt safe and assured of their anonymity.

The topics discussed by the women in the forum were mostly women-related, ranging from beauty care to child rearing. Nevertheless, infertility issues dominated the discussion, particularly issues related to IVF.

The participants

The participants for the study consisted of registered forum members who have posted messages related to in-vitro fertilization (IVF) from February 2012 to July 2012. During this time, there were 87 different pseudonyms interacting in the forum, indicating possibly 87 individuals were participating in the forum during the investigation period.

The participants were also most likely to be Malaysian women considering them being the targeted participants, as specified in the forum title, i.e. Malaysian Motherhood. As such, in terms of ethnicity, the participants were likely to be either Malays, Chinese or Indians, the three primary ethnic groups in Malaysia (Index Mundi, 2012).

Data and analysis procedures

The data for the study were the IVF-related advice-seeking messages posted in the forum from February 2012 to July 2012. Advice-seeking messages were those that ask for help or solution to a problem.

Consistent with the methods utilized in previous computer-mediated communication (CMC) studies, the present study employed web content analysis method in its analysis of the advice-seeking messages. The analysis made use of both Locher’s (2006) message-coding system, in which the messages were analysed for their discursive moves, relational work inherent in the messages, as well as the linguistic realizations of the moves, and Kouper’s (2010) classification of advice-solicitations, where advice-
solicitations could come in three forms depending on their explicitness level: (1) explicit advice-request, (2) questions asking for information or opinion, and (3) problem-narration.

The advice-seeking messages were first investigated for their discursive moves. These discursive moves were then examined to discern which ones perform advice-seeking, and which discursive moves, do not. Among the discursive moves, the Question move was further investigated for their syntactic structures, as well as the functions they performed.

With regard to ethical matters, the study conformed to the recommendations of Ess and the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) in Internet research. As the forum was open-accessed and public, making no restrictions as to who could access the archived messages, and the participants used pseudonyms which concealed their true identity, getting informed consent from the participants was not required. Nevertheless, to further protect the participants’ identity, even the pseudonyms used by the participants were changed in the study.

Findings and discussion

Analysis of the messages showed that a total of 1292 messages were posted in the forum during the six-month period from February 2012 to July 2012. Of the 1292 messages, 762 messages were IVF-related, of which 251 messages were advice-seeking in nature.

Examination of the IVF-related advice-seeking messages revealed that there were a total of 17 discursive moves. The Question move appeared most often in the messages (N=355), followed by the Problem Statement move (N=178) and the Background move (N=120) respectively. The three least occurring discursive moves were the Apology move (N=3), the Suggesting Advice to Oneself move (N=3) and the Providing Contact Information move (N=1) (Table 1).

Table 1: Frequency of Moves in the Advice-Seeking Messages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Discursive Move</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Question</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Problem Statement</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Background</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Appreciation</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Comment on Previous Record</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Request Advice</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Goodwill Wishes</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Explanation</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Congrats</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Future Expectation</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Requesting Recipient’s Update</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Updating Own Status</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Metacomment</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Apology</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Suggesting Advice to Oneself</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Providing Contact Information</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The discursive moves which were identified as performing the speech act of advice-seeking were: (1) the Question move, (2) the Problem Statement move, and (3) the Request Advice move. The Question
move is a discursive move whereby the question asked was related to the advice-seeker’s problem. The Problem Statement move is then the advice-seeker’s description or narration of her problem, while the Request Advice move is explicit advice-request.

Among the three advice-seeking discursive moves, the Question move was most popular among the women in the forum (N=355), followed by the Problem Statement move (N=178). The Request Advice move was the least utilized advice-seeking move (N=80) (Table 1). This aspect of the finding is also observed in previous online advice-seeking studies such as in Locher’s (2006) research on Lucy Answers, an American online advice column, and Kouper’s (2010) study on how mothers sought advice in an international online forum. This shows that perhaps there is really not much difference in how advice is sought online in terms of types (question-asking, problem-narration, and explicit advice-request), and choice (question-asking being the most frequently employed strategy and explicit advice-request, the least used strategy), irrespective of the nature of advice sought (expert versus peer), the research site, as well as the types of participants involved.

When the Question move was further examined for its linguistic realizations, it was found that the move appeared in two main ways: (1) closed questions and (2) open questions (Table 2). Sometimes labelled as a narrow question (Wragg & Brown, 2001), a closed question invites shorter and more limited responses. On the contrary, there is no restriction to the length and array of answers to an open question (de Rivera, Girolametto, Greenberg, & Weitzman, 2005; Hargreaves, 1984). Between the two types of questions, the women in the forum were more fond of asking closed questions (N=224) compared to open questions (N=131) (Table 2).

Table 2: Types of Questions in the Question Move

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Type</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Closed</td>
<td>did u suffer any OHSS during your cycle?</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Open</td>
<td>What is the process for first appointment?</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further analysis of the closed questions revealed that they could also come in two forms: (1) yes/no questions, and (2) alternative questions (Table 3). The more frequently asked closed questions were however, the yes/no questions (Table 3), and this finding was also observed in Locher’s (2006) study on how advice was sought in the problem letters posted in Lucy Answers, the American online advice column.

Table 3: Types of Closed Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question No.</th>
<th>Closed Question Type</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Expected Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
<td>Do u need to take DHEA medicine before IVF start?</td>
<td>“Yes” or “No” (and explanation for the answer)</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>The doc send you to the therapy or upon request?</td>
<td>Choice of alternative (and the reasons for the choice)</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With regards to open questions, responses to these questions were normally elaborate and extended, as opposed to closed questions. The open questions in the forum were commonly typified by the wh-
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questions ("how", "what", "when", "which", "where" and "why") (Table 4). Among them, the "how" questions appeared most frequently (N=73), and this was followed by the "what" (N=29), "when" (N=10), "which" (N=8), "where" (N=8), and "why" (N=3) questions respectively (Table 4).

Table 4: Types of Open Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Open Question</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Evidence in Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>How</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>How’s their service? How r u handle it??</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>What</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>What about yours? What are the do’s and don’ts…?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>When</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>…when can we continue to eat? When actually you start showing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Which</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>…which doctor you go to? Which doctor you consult?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Where</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Where you go for Chinese herbs and acupuncture? …where is the most convenient hospital that i can try to get my treatment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Why</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>…why is it that long? Why dint u go for FET?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further examination of the “how” questions revealed that majority of them were associated with the IVF protocol, specifically, the procedure and duration of certain aspects of the treatment (N=27) (Table 5). This shows that the women in the forum were especially keen to know what the IVF protocol entails. Three other common “how” questions were then those concerning the condition of the message-recipient when undergoing the treatment (N=13), the number of eggs or embryos the message-recipient had produced for the treatment (N=12), and how the message-recipient handled some of the problems encountered during the treatment (N=8) (Table 5). As such, the women in the forum were not only interested in what the IVF protocol entails (e.g. “How long is the treatment?”), but also the message-recipient, in particular, her condition during certain points in the treatment (e.g. “How are you with…?”), “How did u deal with it?”), and her fertility profile (“How many egg has been retrieved?”) (Table 5). Hence, the “how” questions that were related to the message-recipient often had a bonding function, i.e. the Bonding relational work.

Table 5: Types of “How” Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>“how” question related to…</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>processes and time-length of certain procedures</td>
<td>How long is the treatment?</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>condition of the message-recipient undergoing the treatment</td>
<td>How are you with …?</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>quantity of eggs or embryos produced for the treatment</td>
<td>How many egg has been retrieved?</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>manner of coping with some difficulty or pain during the treatment</td>
<td>How did u deal with it?</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>“How” question related to…</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>cost of the treatment</td>
<td>How much is the IVF cost…?</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>quality of a clinic’s, hospital’s or doctor’s service/success-rate</td>
<td>How is Dr Ghandi’s success rate?</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>age</td>
<td>How old are you…?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The “what” questions were then normally about IVF-related procedures, as illustrated in Message 1 below. The “what” question in the message (“What kind of test they will do to me as a first timer?”) was a question asked to find out the kinds of tests the advice-seeker might be put through in her first visit to the doctor. The question is thus, information-seeking on the IVF treatment.

Message 1

Hi Irene baby,
Thanks for the reply... I really wanted to do IVF too... but my hubby said he can't stand to see me suffering thru IVF process as I told him all the ladies stories from this forum... he suggested to let Dr Lee diagnose our problem first and let Dr to decide which one is the best for us...
Me and my hubby have decided to drop a visit to CityJaya IVF KL for the first time tomorrow… Do I need to specify saying that I need to meet Dr Lee?

**What kind of test they will do to me as a first timer?** Anyone still remember?
Are they able to diagnose our problem at the very first time?
Please advise… Thank you.

Questions asked about time were then the “when” questions. Like the “what” questions, these questions were also frequently associated with the IVF protocol. In Message 2 below, the advice-seeker asked the “when” question (“when can we continue to eat?”) to find out when she could consume Royal Jelly and bird’s nest again after the Embryo Retrieval (ER) procedure, and whether taking them after the Embryo Transfer (ET) procedure would be safe.

Message 2

Hi, Priceless. Congratz on ur pregnancy... May i know how come cannot consume Royal Jelly and bird's nest after ER,… **when can we continue to eat?** after ET? Awaiting for your reply, Thanks

Nonetheless, it was also observed that some of the “when” questions asked by the women in the forum were not only motivated by information-seeking on the IVF protocol, but also by their need to reach out and connect with the advice-giver, i.e. having characteristics of the Bonding relational work (N=5). For example, in Message 3, the advice-seeker had just undergone a transvaginal sonography (TVS) to determine the condition of her ovarian follicles (“yesterday went for TVS”) and to measure the uterus’ lining (“My endo lining is ok at 8mm ready”). In contrast, the advice-giver was already at the two-week-wait (tww) stage, whereby the fertilized eggs (the embryos), had been transferred into the uterus, and she was waiting to see if implantation occurred (“Good to hear that you are enjoying your tww”). Therefore, the “when” question in Message 3 (“When will you be testing?”) allowed the advice-seeker to know the exact date the pregnancy test would be carried out, so that she could post another message to the advice-giver in future to find out about the test results after the test had been conducted.
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Message 3
Hi Sensen22,
Good to hear that you are enjoying your tww. **When will you be testing?**
As for me, yesterday went for TVS, my right ovary responded well have 6 follicle in good size & only 3 in left, the rest are still small ones. My endo lining is ok at 8mm ready. Dr Ghandi upped my dosage to 262.5iu & scheduled my tvs again on 23/3. Keeping my finger crossed

The “which” questions then frequently were about information sought about choice of doctor (e.g. “Which Dr shall you go for your IVF?” in Message 4), or hospital (e.g. “Which hospital in KL did you go to?” in Message 5) to seek treatment in.

Message 4
Hi Bunnie
**Which Dr shall you go for your IVF?** I'm planning to do IVF too but a bit confuse which Dr shall I choose.

Message 5
Hi Berharga,
**Which hospital in KL did you go to?**

Nonetheless, as illustrated in Message 4 and Message 5, some of the “which” questions did not only seek information which was related to the advice-seeker’s problem directly, but were also aimed to discover the advice-giver’s own choices about doctors and hospitals. For example, the response to the “which” question in Message 4 (“Which Dr shall you go for your IVF?”), allowed the advice-seeker to know the advice-giver’s choice of doctor, and the response to the “which” question in Message 5 (“Which hospital in KL did you go to?”) allowed the advice-seeker to know the advice-giver’s choice of hospital. The advice-seeking strategy of finding out about the hospitals and doctors equipped the advice-seeker with the knowledge to make better-informed decisions pertaining to their own infertility problem and treatment. Considering the exorbitant cost of the IVF treatment and the women’s desperation to be successful at getting pregnant, making decisions about which hospital or which doctor to seek treatment from was particularly important for the women in the investigated forum. This is because when such questions were directed at several message-recipients, the advice-seeker was not only able to keep up with their treatment’s progress, but she could also gather information about the doctor’s expertise level, and the hospital’s success-rate, and ultimately, she would have a more informed idea about which doctor or hospital she would like to seek treatment from.

Similarly, the “where” questions asked by the women in the forum were also mainly about the place for getting treatment from so that the advice-seeker could know which clinics or hospitals provide IVF treatment and their success-rate. For instance, the message-recipient in Message 6 below had successfully conceived, and the advice-seeker was asking details about her pregnancy and treatment, including where she sought the treatment, i.e. the “where” question in “Where did you do you ivf?”.
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Message 6
Congrats on your bfp. Really happy for you dear... How long are you now? Update us after your scan. Hubby must be really happy huh?.... Where did you do your ivf? ET day what & how many was transferred? Is this your first ivf & baby?

The last type of open questions asked by the women in the forum was then the “why” questions. There were not many of the “why” questions asked in the forum (N=3, Table 4), and they were usually about the reasons for certain aspects of the infertility treatment. For instance, the advice-seeker in Message 7 asked the advice-giver the reasons she had not gone for Frozen Embryo Transfer (FET) cycle protocols as part of her IVF treatment (“Why dint u go for FET?”), while the advice-seeker in Message 8 wanted to know the reasons for the discrepancies in the amount of money spent by her and the advice-giver for the treatment (“Why our cost are difference???”).

Message 7
Many thanks for the info, in that case I may have to take medication as well to induce the period, let me see my doc first. I am so disappointed that 11/2 month wasted waiting for AF! Did u start a fresh 2nd cycle before? Why dint u go for FET?

Message 8
Not yet. I will go hospital tomorrow to start the medication and injection. Why our cost are difference?? Do you mind to tell me how old are you? You can PM me at jenny@gmail.com

Nonetheless, although analysis of the questions in the data revealed that closed questions elicited short answers, in some instances, the required response was more elaborated. For example, the responses to the closed yes/no questions in Message 9 (“Do you know how to get rid of it?” and “Or how to prevent to get those bruises?”) might not be necessarily be a mere “yes” or “no” answer. On the contrary, the advice-giver might be expected to continue explaining the ways to solve the problem as well, i.e. ways to “get rid of it” and ways “to prevent to get those bruises” if her answer to both the questions was “yes”. Similarly, the expected response to the closed alternative question in Message 10 (“I’m not sure whether to continue another round of IUI or go straight to IVF?”) was not a mere statement of the option, but also the advice-giver’s justification for her choice of option.

Message 9
Do you have bruises after your injections apart from rashes? Do you know how to get to rid of it? Or how to prevent to get those bruises?
All the best to you IVF

Message 10
I've been thinking so much since this morning... the failed treatment...is it because I don't really rest ...I knew that IUI has low success rate... I'm not really sure whether to continue another round of IUI or go straight to IVF? I'm in dilemma now... please advise...
Likewise, some of the open questions only required brief responses, depending on the context in which the questions were asked. For instance, the open question using "what" as in "Juz wan to know about what are the do and dont during post ET? " anticipated a lengthy answer detailing what the advice-seeker could and could not do after her ET procedure. However, when "what" was used in the question, "What was your BETA reading?" in Message 4.33, the question only required a brief response in the form of a figure.

Hence, the complexity in the relationship between the question-type and the response-length shows that simply categorizing questions according to their syntactic structure cannot fully capture the ways how questions are used to seek advice. Another way of coding and analysing the questions is by looking at the functions of the questions.

Message 11

Congratulations..... I am very happy for you. What was your BETA reading?...

Analysis of the Question move revealed that the move can be divided into four types according to its functions: (1) questions asking for information, (2) questions asking for opinion, (3) questions asking how the message-recipient handles a specific problem, and (4) questions asking for confirmation of advice-seeker’s understanding or knowledge. Among the four types of questions, questions asking for information were the most common (N=217, Table 6).

Table 6: Types of Questions Based on Functions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Move</th>
<th>No. of Occurrences</th>
<th>Examples Identified in Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questions Asking for Information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Related to advice-seeker’s problem</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>Does anyone know where I can have natural IVF &amp; what is the cost?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Unrelated to advice-seeker’s problem</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>When are you going to deliver?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions Asking for Opinion</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Im 35 tis yr, do u think I’m too old?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions Asking How the Message-Recipient Handles a Specific Problem</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>How did u deal with it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions Asking for Confirmation of Advice-Seeker’s Understanding or Knowledge</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Think that should be natural cycle, right?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>355</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The questions asking for information could then be further categorized into questions that were related to the advice-seeker’s problem, and those which were unrelated to the advice-seeker’s problem. The question in Message 12 was asked in connection with the advice-seeker’s situation in that she had had
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two failed attempts in getting pregnant via IVF under the same doctor. Subsequently, she was asking if there were any forum members who knew of another clinic or hospital where she could go for another IVF and the cost of the treatment (“Does anyone know where I can have natural IVF & what is the cost?”).

In contrast, when questions which were unrelated to the advice-seeker’s problem were asked, these were normally related to the advice-giver’s situation and they functioned typically as a way to establish some kind of connection or relationship between herself and the advice-giver. For instance, in Message 13, the first question (“When will you be testing?”) had nothing to do with the advice-seeker’s situation or problem. Instead, the question was asked in relation to the advice-giver’s situation in that she was currently undergoing the two-week-wait period (tww) after the IVF procedure. Subsequently, the message-author was asking when the advice-giver would be doing the pregnancy test to ascertain whether the IVF was successful, i.e. the conception was successful.

Message 12
Hi… I have done my 2 failed IVF in XYZ Clinic under the same doctor. Dont know should i go back to same Dr again since i still have RM 3k deposit with XYZ Clinic. Does anyone know where I can have natural IVF & what is the cost?...

Message 13
Hi Sopi,
Good to hear that you are enjoying your tww. When will you be testing?
As for me, yesterday went for TVS, my right ovary responded well have 6 follicle in good size & only 3 in left, the rest are still small ones. My endo lining is ok at 8mm ready…
Anyone who has done acupuncture or doing it now for IVF? Need some tips…

As questions unrelated to the advice-seeker’s problem did not function to help the advice-seeker in any way except to bond with the message-recipient, these questions were not regarded as advice-seeking. Nevertheless, there were not many of these questions (2 questions out of the total number of 355 questions) (Table 7), and thus, the total number of the Question move that performed advice-seeking (N=353) still far exceeded the other advice-seeking moves, i.e. the Problem Statement move (N=178) and the Request Advice move (N=80) (Table 1).

While questions asking for information required objective answers, the type of answers expected from questions asking for opinions was subjective, i.e. subject to the advice-giver’s interpretation or perception. For example, in Message 14 below, the advice-seeker was asking for the advice-giver’s opinion on whether she was too old, considering her capacity to produce only 10 eggs (“do u think I’m too old?”). The expected response was thus, subjective, depending on whether the advice-giver thought 35 was “too old” to produce many eggs.

Message 14
Hi Ivy baby … Im 35 tis yr, do u think I’m too old? After all I only produced 10 eggs, but I notice some people produce more than 20!!
Doc ask me go for long protocol 2 mths later he said tat it's chances higher, but since its higher chances n same amount to pay as de short protocol, I dun know y in de 1st place he suggested short protocol, a little disappointed wif my doc!! I'm totally lost n dun know wat to do!!!
Another type of questions occurring in the data was questions asking how the message-recipient handled a specific problem. These questions usually required the advice-giver to describe her experience in tackling the problem, and therefore, the responses were frequently lengthy. For instance, the second question in Message 15 below (“How did u deal with it?”) was a question that asked how the advice-giver dealt with the Ovarian Hyperstimulation Syndrome (OHSS) as the advice-seeker was having the OHSS symptom of experiencing abdominal bloating. The response to the advice-seeker was subsequently, a lengthy description of what she did to alleviate the swelling by sleeping with her “head lifted up”, “eating a little each time”, and having the water drained from her “tummy” (Message 16).

Message 15

(1) Anyone have Ohss? (2) How did u deal with it? The bloating tummy make me very uncomfortable. I just discharge after admitted 2 nights. No improvements but doc say at least no increasing

Message 16 (Reply to Message 15)

Hi Sily22,
Congratulation!! U r pregnant. May be more v your high beta...I also cant sleep on side when I had Ohss and I felt better sleeping v my head lifted up. Also i felt better eating a little each time or else my tummy got swelled up. I had to be admitted for 1 week and need to drain the water from my tummy. Think of d baby n soon your Ohss wil b over. I m happy for u.

The last type of questions identified in the six-month messages posted by the Malaysian forum members was questions asking for confirmation of the advice-seeker’s understanding or knowledge. These were questions that did not specifically require novel answers from the advice-giver, but were an expression used to seek confirmation of the advice-seeker’s belief or opinion. For example, the second question in Message 17 did not aim to get new answers from the advice-giver, but just a confirmation that the advice-seeker’s worry about substandard service or quality provided by the “Merdeka Package” was inconsequential (“But since you got pregnant with the package, I think should be no problem, right?”).

Message 17

Hi Squeaky,
Were they using the same medication for Merdeka Package? They are having the Merdeka Package again and I was thinking to take the package. But afraid that their service or medicine given will be of lower quality one... But since you got pregnant with the package, I think should be no problem, right?

Conclusion

The study sets out to investigate how women seek advice online on matters related to in-vitro fertilization (IVF), with specific reference to their strategies, as well as the types of questions these women asked in terms of forms and functions. Using web content analysis method, 251 IVF-related advice-seeking messages were analysed for their discursive moves, the relational work in the messages, and the linguistic realizations of the discursive moves.

The findings indicate that there are perhaps more in common, rather than differences, among participants in terms of their online advice-seeking strategies, irrespective of their cultural backgrounds, the research
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sites, and the topics of discussion. It was revealed that the women in the investigated forum predominantly employed three types of advice-seeking strategies: (1) question-asking (the Question discursive move), (2) problem-narration (the Problem Statement discursive move), and (3) explicit advice-request (the Request Advice discursive move). Of the three advice-seeking strategies, question-asking was used most frequently, followed by problem-narration and explicit advice-request respectively. This finding is consistent with the findings by Locher (2006) and Kouper (2010) when they investigated online advice-seeking strategies.

When the questions were further examined for their forms or linguistic structures, the findings on the advice-seekers’ tendency to employ certain question structures were also observed in Locher’s (2006) study. Like the advice-seekers in Locher’s (2006) research, it was found that the women in the investigated online forum were also more fond of asking closed questions rather than open questions, and that the yes/no questions were preferred to alternative questions.

However, with regards to open questions, the “how” questions were asked most often, followed by the “what”, “when”, “which”, “where” and “why” questions respectively. These questions usually pertained to the IVF treatment, particularly on various aspects of the IVF protocol such as the procedures involved in the protocol, as well as the duration of certain procedures. Some of these questions were also related to the advice-giver (e.g. her condition when undergoing IVF, the quantity of her eggs or embryos produced for the treatment, her manner of coping with some difficulty during the treatment, her age, and her choice of doctor or hospital). As such, the questions asked by the women were not only enquiries about the treatment, but were also a way to bond or connect with the advice-giver, i.e. the Bonding relational work. This was achieved through the women’s questions in the form of invitations for the advice-giver to share her personal experiences or information about herself.

When the questions were examined based on the functions they performed, findings revealed that the women perceived the forum as primarily an avenue where they could find out more about the IVF treatment. Majority of the questions (60.1%) asked by the women performed the function of information-seeking. Three other functions performed by the questions asked in the forum were opinion-seeking (17.5%), asking how the message-recipient handles a specific problem (11%) and asking for confirmation of the advice-seeker’s understanding or knowledge (10.4%). Hence, for the women in the forum, their main concern in the questions asked was about equipping themselves with adequate knowledge about the treatment in order to increase their chances of conceiving. They could have considered this a priority as in the Malaysian society, a barren married woman is often looked down upon and criticised (Akhtar, 2011).

Nevertheless, the research is not without its weaknesses. Due to the anonymity afforded by computer-mediated communication, it was not possible to ascertain the identities of the participants. This is a general weakness of an online research, and thus, the participants could only be at best regarded as Malaysian women on the basis that they were the targeted participants as specified in the forum title. In addition, there is also only one research site, and thus, the findings may not apply to other local online forums. As such, future studies in this area of research could benefit by either incorporating more local online forums for a better understanding of how Malaysian women with infertility problems seek online peer advice, or having a comparative study by looking at how women of a different culture with infertility problems seek online peer advice.
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Malaysia.


Biodata:

Jariah Mohd. Jan is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya. Her research interests are interdisciplinary, centering on feminist linguistics and emphasizing the importance of language in understanding social processes. Her main research interests are pragmatics, gender and power issues in language, discourse and society, social networks and workplace discourse and literature in ESL. Address of correspondence: Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, 50603, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email: jariah@um.edu.my

Pung Wun Chiew is a lecturer at UNIMAS, currently pursuing her PhD at the University of Malaya. Her research looks at the strategies Malaysian women use to seek and give online advice on IVF, as well as the factors that might influence their choice of strategies. During the course of her studies, she has presented several aspects of her work at both local and international conferences. Her research interests are pragmatics, computer-mediated communication, and gender issues. Address of correspondence: Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, 50603, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia Email: pwchiew13@gmail.com