COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES BETWEEN SPOUSES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal communication is vital in every relationship. People used to rely on face-to-face communication to interact with each other. However, with the advancement of technology, communication activities have shifted to the dependency on communication technology. Communication technologies have diverse communication platforms which facilitate interactions. Literature has suggested that the usage of communication technologies have varies of effect towards the relationship including the quantity of interaction. People tend to communicate more with the convenience of communication technologies. However, when people rely more on communication technologies more than face-to-face interaction, it will eventually lead to jeopardizing the quality of communication and interaction as well. In this current situation of pandemic Covid 19, movement control orders (MCO) have been implemented by the government. Due to the MCO, people spend more time at home and the communication activities within the family might change as well. Thus, this research will conduct a qualitative method (in-depth interviews) to investigate the communication activities and the effects of those activities between spouses during the pandemic of Covid 19.

Keywords: Family Communication, Communication Activities, Covid-19, Movement Control Orders (MCO), spouses

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication is a particularly important part of humans' lives. Interpersonal communication refers to communication that takes place between two people (Hanson, 2008) influenced by communication messages from each other through face-to-face interaction (DeVito, 2010) and other various medium such as technologies (Zhou, 2016; DeVito, 2005). Interpersonal communication helps people to conveyed messages and reaches mutual understanding and agreement and allow them to coordinate goals. Through interpersonal communication, people able to establish relationships with others, such as friendships and romantic relationships in creating strong, deep, and close association. This association may be based on solidarity, love, business, or other types of social commitment that can be categorized into six stages namely are contact, involvement, intimacy, deterioration, repair, and dissolution (Devito, 1993).

However, with today's technology advancement, the orthodox interpersonal communication has evolved. Most of the world has shifted their face-to-face interpersonal communication to electronic communication (DeVito, 2008) which is the Internet. Communication technologies have helped to developed relationships, relationship assistance and enhancement (Hertein & Anchet, 2014). Furthermore, communication technology frequently being used due to its convenience, easy and cost-effective. Despite the expediency of communication technology in moderating interpersonal communication, however, there are also the adverse effects of using it, whereby one of the prominent adverse effects is the lack of non-verbal cues that might jeopardize the quality of online communication occurred. The crucial component of effective communication, such as immediate feedback is lacking in virtual communication (Henderson, 2010) thus affecting the quality of communication. Internet not only change the dynamic of interpersonal communication, but it is quality as well because it is altering the way people communicate with each other.

Aforementioned, communication technologies have transformed communication into social dialogue, dominates and reshapes society and culture. Due to the advancement of this technology, the world is more connected, and the implications towards interpersonal relationships are inevitable. Thus, the need to recognize the role played by these virtual platforms and technology in interpersonal interaction is crucial. The constant progress of technology advancement had led some believe that people around the world are becoming more connected while others deem it may isolate and divide them. Anyhow, technologies, have alter human interaction and relationships, society, and environment. A great deal of work has been carried out to study the influence of communication technologies on interpersonal communication on various types of relationships, such as adolescent friendship (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Gapsiso & Wilson, 2015; Ndunge, 2017), teacher-student relationships (Mazer, Murphy & Simonds, 2007; Alsalem, 2018; Keasberry, 2018) and family members (Mesch, 2006; Mauthner & Kazimierczak, 2018; Ngonidzashe, 2016; Pace et al., 2015). However, there any areas that need more exploration to examine how the communication technologies have altered communication and relationships.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the importance of interpersonal communication to the success of marriage, spouses seemed to underestimate this factor in their relationship as they disregard their understanding of what quality communication is. According to Funk & Rogge (2007), the quality of communication in a marriage can be considered as a salient predictor of marital outcomes amongst newlywed couples. Many couples in marriage end up in divorce due to lack of understanding in concept and importance of quality communication in a marriage. Abundant of previous research have empirical layout data suggesting poor communication and medium of communication are one of the factors that led to marital dissatisfaction and eventually lead to marriage dissolution (Enache, 2013; Cox, 2010; Bodenmann et al., 1998). Research done by Enache (2013) has concluded that marital satisfaction is correlated with intercommunication between partners in marriage, whereby dysfunctional couples show little or no communication. The findings

are similar to research by Mohlatlole et al. (2017) which found that poor communication is one of the major problems in the marriage that led to divorce. Thus, indicating the importance of interpersonal communication between spouses.

Even though communication is vital in marriage, most couples acknowledge a limited understanding of the quality communication is the main reason for their unhappy relationship (Krishnan & Margeret, n.d). Even though it is essential to understand the concept of quality communication in marriage, previous research has overlooked the antecedents that contribute to the quality. Sandberg et al. (2015) suggest conducting future research to examine the predictors of communication behaviours to determine the strengths of those associations. Realising the gaps in previous studies, this current research further investigates not only the understanding of poor-quality communication but also the antecedents that lead to it.

COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES

Foundation of Interpersonal communication

Interpersonal communication happens between two people, which is also termed as dyads. Though interpersonal communication can occur face-to-face, it could also occur through the help of technology as a medium of interaction as the key to the communication is the presence during the interaction. According to Berko et al. (2010), models can help the understanding of the flow and foundation of interpersonal communication. The two models that are frequently used to explain interpersonal communication are the linear model of communication and the transactional model.

Medium of Communication

McLuhan (1967) claim "medium is the message". This notion leads vast of research (Velten & Ariff, 2013;) investigating different medium usage in interaction. Admittedly, in intimate relationships, technology has played its roles in facilitating and maintaining relationships. Coyne et al. (2011) found that married couples use communication technologies such as instant messaging, social networking, texting, blogs and webcams more frequent than dating couples, technology has helped coupled to satisfy their emotional and functional needs (Parket et al., 2013).

The asynchronous form of communication technologies has supplemented the face-to-face interaction, thus enhancing the relationship development (Pierce, 2009). However, the asynchronous communication shows difficulty in engaging with the other partner compared to synchronous (Hertlein & Chan, 2020) due to it delayed feedback. In addition, technology is not replacing face to face interaction but facilitating it. Ngonidzashe (2016) discovered that electronic communication helps in building relationships in a family setup. This study states that face to face is still the main channel of family interaction. However, whenever the members cannot have face to face interaction due to some obstacle such as physical proximity constraint, they will utilize technology to communicate and maintain family relationships. Communication technology also being used due to its convenience, easy and cost-effective. However, there is also the negative side of using communication technology, whereby the lack of non-verbal cues can jeopardize the quality of online communication occurred. The crucial component of effective communication, such as immediate feedback is lacking in virtual communication (Henderson, 2010). A study was done by Yamakanith & Gurusamy (2014) conclude that social media has changed their interpersonal relationships with families and friends. Social media has facilitated greater contact and family interaction. Therefore, social media could have helped the partners to establish or sustain a romantic relationship by promoting interpersonal communication between them. On the other hand, the usage of technology can also be a threat to a relationship as it can lead to message misinterpretation between partners in a marriage (Henline & Harris, 2006). According to their study, online communication technology interrupts the intimacy process and lead to exclusion and neglect feeling in a partner.

METHODOLOGY

The data of this research lean more on the qualitative rather than quantitative. Qualitative research provides an evaluation of the research question in a more efficient way that cannot be answered through a quantitative approach (Mackey & Gass, 2015). The research design refers to guidelines and blueprints in conducting research. Qualitative is the best approach to this research because the issue face by a group of the population needs to be explored. It is also because qualitative can help researchers to understand people motives and believes behind their actions. A qualitative researcher trying to understand the meaning of people attach to things in their lives (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2015). "Qualitative methods are best understood as data enhancer. When data are enhanced, it is possible to see key aspects of cases more clearly" (Ragin, 1994). Qualitative research is inductive, whereby it involved the process of interpreting and establish meaning derived from the data. Qualitative research is a systematic approach to knowledge creation. In the present study, the data collected by in-depth interviews. The purpose of the in-depth interview methods for data collection was to explore the research questions and topics. In this study, the researcher applies the semi-structured interview, which allows the researcher to ask supplementary questions when needed. The interviewee and interviewer have not met before; thus, the first few minutes of the conversation can impact the outcome of the interview. Since the informant is stranger, the research used one or two ice-breaking questions to build rapport and encourage the informant to talk about their own story then will smoothly shift to the questions which developed from research questions. Sample sizes of this research is 20 married individuals. Nvivo is used as the tools to analyse the data. The data were analysed in thematic analysis.

The sample size for this study was 20 informants, as suggested by Sandelwoski (1995). 50 informants for interviews are a large sample for a qualitative study and recommends a sample of 20-30 informants instead. This recommendation corresponds with O'Reilly & Parker (2012) and Roulston (2016). Guest et al. (2006), on the other hand, suggest a smaller sample size which is 12 informants. This is due that in qualitative research, more data does not mean or lead to more information (Mason, 2010).

Sandelwoski (1995) mention that a maximum of 30 informants is adequate to achieve saturation. There are several types of saturation in qualitative study namely data saturation (Francis et al., 2010) and thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2006). Data or thematic saturation refers to the data collection that are collected until no new information and knowledge is discovered (Green & Thorogood, 2018). This research used nonprobability sampling, which is purposive sampling. This sampling technique is commonly used in exploratory research (Neuwman, 2011). Data was continuously evaluated and gathered until a saturation point was reached. In this study, the sample size was not pre-determined.

RESULT

Based on the data analysis, the researcher categorized the medium use between spouses in marriage into three categorized which are face to face communication, technology mediated communication and written communication. Technology mediated communicated can be diverse into social media usage, WhatsApp, Phone call and video call. See Figure 1.
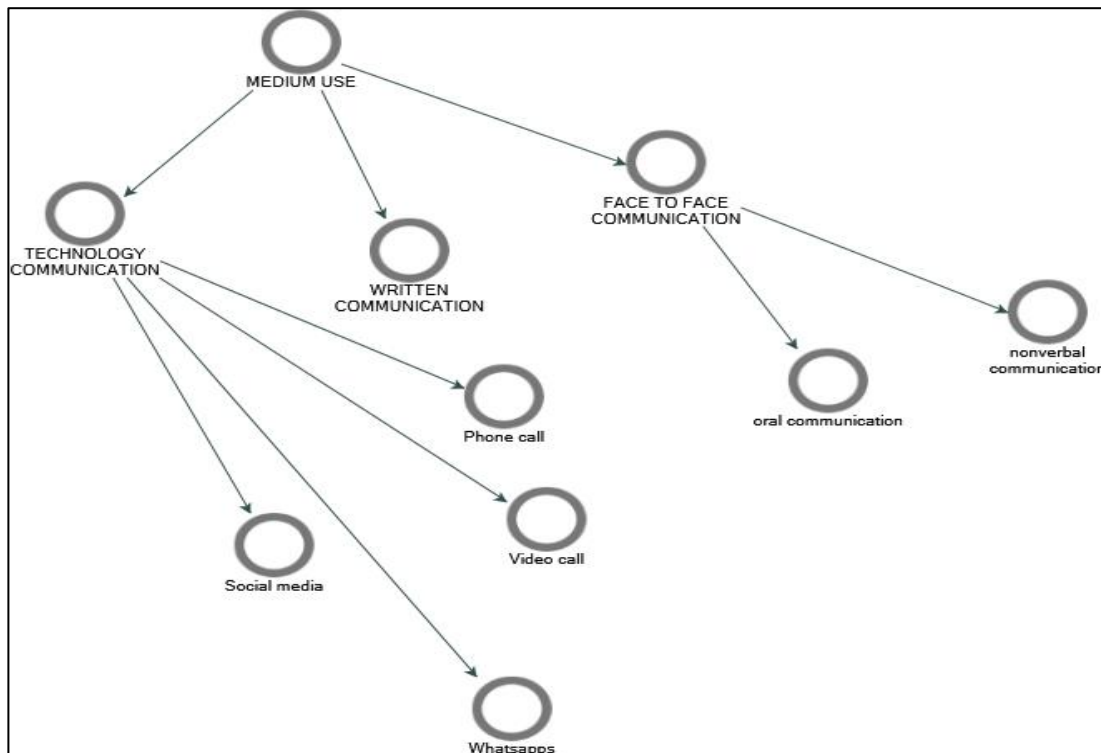

Figure 1: Mapping of medium use in marriage

Technology Mediated Communication

Based on the data analysis, most spouses use technology mediated medium in order to communicate and facilitate their daily routines. This technology mediated medium includes social media, WhatsApp, video call and phone call.

Social Media

Five of the informants mentioned they utilized social media to communicate with their spouse. The mostly used social media is Facebook. They mentioned that they use social media to express feeling and emotion that can't be expressed by face-to-face communication. Social media is one of the platforms used by the informants when the face-to-face communication fails. For example, Informant 1 said:

> *"Sometimes I use social media to communicate with him. He understands. He knew it, so I was like, 'oh so you're aware of it huh? I thought you didn't'. But then he got upset about it. When I tried to speak directly to him, he didn't listen. So that's why I had been snarky because he got it."*

Informant 1

The same situation was mentioned Informant 11, by mentioning his spouse tries to communicate with him through her Facebook posts:

> *"When men hear gossip about us that's not true, we don't stress over it. But when she publicised our problems on Facebook and our friends could read it, I told her this was ruining my reputation. She tries to communicate with me through her post on Facebook. I'm a businessman. When she aired our dirty laundry, my name was ruined. After that, many of my friends reached out to me to ask for the truth."*

Informant 11

Informant 17 also mentioned that he tries to use Facebook posts to communicate with his spouse by reminiscing their past stories. Informant 17 said:

> *"First I used Messenger. But she blocked me, so on Facebook, I could only express my feelings. Sometimes I included religious matters in there. Then reminisced our past stories, so that she understood. But the more she read, the more she got angry. Because she used to, he used to be in trouble, I took her in. So, when I told stories about the problems from her side, she got angry."*

Informant 17

WhatsApp

Most of the informants mentioned the usage of WhatsApp as their main platform of communication when they are physically away from each other. Some informants mentioned that they prefer WhatsApp compared to other medium due to the convenience of the application. For example, Informant 6 mentioned:

> *"Actually, I prefer WhatsApp. It's easier. However, he doesn't because of his work. He works as contractor. He never calls. He never tries to interact with me. Even when i tries to connect with him, he doesn't seem to like it. After we had children, he acts differently."*

Informant 6

On the other hand, Informant 8 mentioned the usage of WhatsApp is due to the availability of the messages. The reader can read the messages at any time of their leisure:

> *"That's why I like messaging him on WhatsApp. He reads. He would read them. Maybe he has deleted a lot of these messages. He would reply, "Okay." I want to ask for permission. My parents also advised me that I shouldn't leave before asking permission from him. So, after MCO, I'll discuss it with him. I also think he doesn't feel anything for me anymore. The feelings mutual."*

Informant 8

Meanwhile, other informant mentioned that usage of WhatsApp is to avoid conflict and violence communication. For example, Informant 15 said:

> *"We did it face to face. But when we talked face to face, it led to violence. Then, on our second year, we started using WhatsApp to communicate with each other."*

Informant 15

Video Call

Four informants mentioned that they use video call to communicate with their spouse when they are at work. Informant 16 said:

> *"He was working offshore at that time; he was working offshore. If he went there, for two or three months. He would text or video call. Then, I thought when we were being far. But when his hallucination came, suddenly he would send hurtful messages. Suddenly he would say… it's like this. I don't know why we got married."*

Informant 16

Informant 11 agree with the usage of video call at work:

> *"Actually, in the beginning, middle, and before our final moments together, we communicated normally like a couple. She was a stay-at-home wife. So, I'd go to work in the morning, have meals like I normally do. Similar to when we were dating, I would call, WeChat, video call her.*

Informant 11

Phone Call

Four informants mentioned that they use phone call to communicate with their spouse to check on their spouse. Informant 11 said:

> *"I treated her like we were still dating. I'd call, I'd call her in the afternoon, ask her whether she's had her lunch, because she wasn't working. She only stayed at home."*
>
> Informant 11

Meanwhile, other informant mentioned that their spouse blocked all communication platform with them. For example, Informant 4 shares:

> *"We're in MCO, all shops are closed. Then he replied, saying that he needs to check on his fresh supplies at his restaurant. I waited from March until May, and he still hasn't come back home. In June, I went out looking for him with my kid. I even went to trace his phone number at Celcom centre, but it didn't work. I went to Pasir Gudang, get into the jungle looking for the father of my child. Until my child ended up in a hospital with asthma for missing him too much and still, he can't be found.He blocked me and so I was alone single-handedly taking care of our son during MCO."*
>
> Informant 4

Face to Face Communication

Based on the data analysis, the researcher categorized face to face communication into two categories namely nonverbal communication and oral communication.

Nonverbal Communication

Four informants mentioned they use nonverbal communication such as physical touch with their spouse to articulate their love to their spouse. For example, Informant 9 said:

> *"I mean, at that time we were still married. I think I'm the type of person who doesn't like to keep my problems to myself. I would sit down and discuss things with her until it's settled. Then, I'd hug her, kiss her, love her. Couples do that."*
>
> Informant 9

Oral Communication

Most of the informants mentioned that they prefer face to face communication with their spouse. As mentioned by Informant 7:

> *"I always communicate face to face directly"*
>
> Informant 7

This is as the same as Informant 6:

> *"We always communicate face to face. But... only communicate when needed. Actually, we seldom communicate."*
>
> Informant 6

The usage of face-to-face communication is due to the immediate feedback that they will get while communicating directly face to face. They also mentioned about the convenience in talking as compared using another medium that requires them to type the message. For example, Informant 10 said:

> *"Well, I prefer face-to-face interactions a lot more. My hands do get tired of communicating through typing."*
>
> Informant 10

Informant 5 agrees with the notion of getting feedback from face-to-face communication. He also mentioned that the usage of other medium might lead to misunderstanding due to lack of feedback and nonverbal cues:

> *"For me, medium of communication doesn't really matter but the best medium is definitely face-to-face interaction. On WhatsApp, we can't really tell their exact expressions whether the person is upset or not. It could create misunderstanding."*
>
> Informant 5

Meanwhile, Informant 3 mentioning the usage of face-to-face communication while not in conflict:

> *"For me, verbal communication took place when we're not in a conflict. My former wife and I didn't know each other before we got married. So, we took some time to develop good communication with each other. Well, of course there were situations that caused conflicts resulting to our divorce and one of it was communication problem."*
>
> Informant 3

Some informants mentioned that because of MCO, the face-to-face communication between their spouse has cause conflict. Moreover, they mentioned due to physical distance with their spouse had led to lessen in physical face-to-face communication and cause more conflicts especially when they are miscommunication. For example, Informant 17 said:

> *"Since 2021, since the MCO. Maybe it triggered from the MCO? Tension and all. Well, to me, if I want to solve the problem, I can't. I can't go back, I can't call. So, I'm stuck. These things become obstacles… and it explodes. Now I want to move but I can't because of the MCO, so I am now in Terengganu. My first wife is at Dengkil. So, it's a miscommunication error right now. So, I can't do anything, it's over, jammed. That's the story."*
>
> Informant 17

Meanwhile, other informant mentioned that even though their spouse spent more time at home during MCO, the face-to-face communication between their spouse has not increased. This is due to both parties are occupied with other things such as house chores and handphone. For example, Informant 8 said:

> *"I was still living with him during MCO, we would've taken turns to be at home. Sometimes he'd be at home, sometimes he wouldn't. Even when he's at home, he would act according to his whims. Sometimes I would cook, but when I don't, it's because I'm tired and I don't receive any help. I'd compare him with my friends' husbands. They would help around the house and care for their children. My husband does take care of our kids but only for a while, about 10, if not 20 minutes. That's his longest record. When he gets bored, he gets on his phone. If he says he's not open for discussion, I'd avoid him. Since MCO, I'd spend my nights watching movies on my phone, putting the kids to sleep. Before I go to sleep, I'd put on music. He would still be awake at that time. Sometimes he would get a drink at 1.00 AM, 2.00 AM. That is the perfect time to discuss. Nowadays he sleeps outside, and I sleep in the room."*
>
> Informant 8

Informant agrees with the notion and mentions that even though he spent more time at home during MCO, the communication between his spouse still do not happen. His spouse still didn't spend more time communicating with him. Informant 10 said:

> *"But when I got married, I changed my ways, because of MCO as well. So, regardless of my wishes, I had to stay home, right? But if nobody was spending time with me, what was to become of me?"*
>
> Informant 10

Some informant mentioned that MCO has triggered more conflict in their communication. They highlighted that during the MCO, they started to realize there are communication breakdown in their marriage and there is no mutual understanding between them. For example, Informant 11 said:

> *"Then, during last year's MCO, my business faced a huge drop in sales. I was mostly at home after that. Because I was at home a little too much, her side of the family started to meddle, asking me why I wasn't working. At that time, I wasn't living with my family or with hers. I lived separately; I have my own house. But when other parties tried to interfere in my household affairs, I felt my manliness was being questioned.*
>
> *From my perspective, in March and April, we had some fights, but I explained that it was still MCO, and business wasn't going well. There were many things I had to juggle. I asked my friends doing business, how they were doing, and they were struggling like me. The difference was that I asked her whether she could understand me and my situation, that was all. From March of last year to September, I realised that she couldn't understand me."*
>
> Informant 10

Written Communication

Based on the data analysis, two informants mentioned about using written medium as way to communicate with their spouse. They mentioned that writing letters is a good way to express their feeling in length and ensure that their spouse will read the letter without ways to avoid it. It is also a way to make sure the conversation would not lead to arguments. For example, Informant 18 said:

> *"More to face-to-face. When it became a fight, it became like… towards the end it became like there were, issues that were not satisfied. I wrote. I would write letters, I told him to read."*
>
> Informant 18

Informant 3 also mentioned his spouse prefer to write notes compared to face to face communication:

"I like to have a verbal interaction, but she likes to do it through written notes, messages, WhatsApp text and voice note."

Informant 3

DISCUSSION

In general, there are three mediums used by the marriage couples to communicate with their spouse namely technology mediated communication, face to face communication and written medium. The technology mediated can be divided into several types which are social media, WhatsApp, videocall and phone call. The usage of these mediums is mainly because of the convenience and are use when the spouse is away from each other. Other than that, the choice of technology mediated communication being used due to the failure in face-to-face communication between the spouses. Technology communication seems to be the outlet to express their subtle messages especially through Facebook posts. Technology mediated communication also facilitates the daily interaction between the spouses.

The second medium use is face to face communication. This type of medium comprises of nonverbal and oral communication. For nonverbal, spouses will articulate their love and intimacy through nonverbal such as touch. For oral communication, most of the informant prefers oral communication due to the immediate feedback and low tendency of misinterpretations.

The last medium is written. Some informants prefer to write their feelings and let their spouse to read it. This to ensure the spouse will fully understand the full lengthy explanation and expression written on the notes. As for conclusion, spouses use a lot of medium to communicate their partners. Each medium possessed different purposes, pros and cons depending on the circumstances. Future research can explore in depth the pros and cons of each medium used.

Of all the medium, during MCO, informants more rely on face-to-face communication with their spouse due to their presence at home. However, informant also mentioned that even though they spend more time at home during MCO, the face-to-face communication between their spouse has not increased nor improved compared to other time. This Is due to both parties did not spend time communicating and interacting with each other and occupied with other matters such as house chores and their handphone. Future research can examine the motivation between spouse to communicate with each other.

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