

Relational Dialectics in Facebook among Students of a Public University in Malaysia

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Facebook as the most popular social network site is playing an important role in daily social interactions, formation and maintenance of our relationships in the digital world. Relationships in Facebook like relationships in real life suffer from some tensions. However there are some strategies to get rid of the tensions in relationships. Drawing upon relational dialectics theory, the present qualitative study makes an attempt to deeply investigate Facebook users' relational dialectics and strategies utilized to manage the tensions resulted from relational dialectics. Three interviews were conducted to collect the data to respond the research questions. It was found that Facebook users faced openness-closeness dialectic more than the other two relational dialectics. Selection and separation also were the most widely used strategies to manage tensions in Facebook relationships. Moreover all three participants reported that Facebook is a good venue to develop, improve and maintain their interpersonal communication.

[Key words: *Relational dialectics, Facebook, Interpersonal communication*]

The advent of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) has revolutionized the online communities and has dominated the internet space for a long time. Today, we live in an increasingly networked world which has provided people various ways to link themselves together. The new social networks have influenced communication concepts. They are playing a prominent role in everyday social interactions, formation and maintenance of our relationship in the digital world.

Facebook as one of the most popular social networking sites has provided a venue for communicating online with those who are already in one's offline social circles. "It allows individuals to present themselves, articulate their social networks, and establish connections with others" (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Facebook has altered the nature of relations as well as the direction of the relational flow. Friends whom we can make from all around the world through Facebook is just one of the many advantages of this online social networking (Ellison, et al., 2007). Currently, Facebook is the second most trafficked website on the internet (Pennington, 2008). Malaysia is one of the top Asian countries with the 13,589,520 Facebook users (Internet World States, 2012). In terms of age groups, Malaysian young adults are the main users of Facebook (Mustaffa, et al., 2011).

Unique characteristics of Facebook present researchers the novel insight into Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). Building upon different models and theories (e.g., Social Information Processing, Hyper-personal Perspective, Social Capital Approach, Social Penetration Theory and Social Identity-Deindividuation Effects theory), numerous qualitative and quantitative studies have been conducted to examine interpersonal relationships in different communication technologies and the use of such technologies to construct and maintain the relationships (Ellison, et al., 2007; Lea, Spears, & de Groot, 2001; Pennington, 2008; Utz, 2000). The followed aims in those studies were to look into how relationships start and end via communication technologies but the present study attempts to gain better insight into the nature of relational communication in Facebook by employing a relational dialectics approach (Baxter & Montgomery, 2006). What has not been known in studies conducted by now is how relationship is maintained through Facebook. The increasing numbers of Facebook users and the rapid adoption of Facebook by young adults in Malaysia can bring a question to mind such as how relational dialectics in Facebook.com are among Malaysian young users of Facebook.

Literature

Relational Dialectics

Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery developed Relational Dialectics Theory to explain that interpersonal ties among individuals are not linear but they suffer from the tension, struggle, and general messiness (Baxter & Montgomery, 2006). We all experience this sort of relational dialectics in our everyday social life but we do not realize it. Baxter and Montgomery believe that "social life is a dynamic knot of contradictions, a ceaseless interplay between contrary or opposing tendencies" (Baxter & Montgomery, 2006, p. 3).

Relational dialectics theory explains how relationships are maintained, employing closely interdependent social, environmental and historical forces (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). It focuses on the opposing tensions that take place between two interrelated poles which yet are totally free from each other. In order to sustain the relationships, contradictory forces shape on a continuum and act together to constantly negotiate the relationship (Baxter, 1990).

Therefore, it is partly impossible to study these forces independently from each other. These tensions are seen in all facets of daily social life, however, the significance of these tensions and ability to handle them differ depending on the type of relationship. According to Baxter and Montgomery (2006), dialectical tensions are not expected to be resolved in relationship but they are to be handled.

Two types of external and internal dialectical tensions are usually negotiated in all relationships. The external dialectics refer to contradictions generated between an individual and the community where he/she belongs or does not belong to (Baxter & Montgomery, 2006). On the contrary, internal dialectics include those tensions between friends who take actions to handle and sustain that relationship (Baxter, 1994). Three important internal dialectics in friend relationship are openness-closedness, connection-autonomy, and certainty-uncertainty (Baxter, 1994).

1) Openness – Closedness

This dialectic is closely correlated with certainty-uncertainty. Uncertainty decreases when openness in communication takes place. In openness-closedness dialectics, information including public and private is exchanged and vulnerability joins with open exchange of information and discretion (Baxter & Montgomery, 2006). According to Baxter and Montgomery (2006), two partners are concerned about what to say and what not to say to one another. Healthy relationship needs partners to display both openness and caution in revealing information to one another (Baxter & Montgomery, 2006).

2) Connection- Autonomy

It is noted that this dialectic plays a central role in relationships (Rawlins & De Gruyter, 1992), because the existence and continuity of the relationship is influenced by the connection between two individuals.

3) Certainty- Uncertainty

This dialectic suggests that uncertainty reduction helps relational development to increase predictability about the relationship. Although a dialectical approach to relationships says that well relationships are maintained not only by uncertainty reduction but also by uncertainty in the relationship (Rawlins & De Gruyter, 1992).

Strategies to deal with tensions

There are three actions or strategies used to manage the relational tensions and to guide the interactions between partners: 1) selection which refers to when partners select to accentuate one extreme of a tension over another. Partners utilize strategy selection as a tool of handling the tension. This approach to the perpetual tensions producing the relationship can be influential under particular conditions, but constant use can create avoidance (Sabourin, 2003), 2) separation which takes place when partners acknowledge the tension as a natural section of their relationship and handle the struggle negotiated between two poles of the contradiction by going back and forth between them

(Sabourin, 2003), 3) integration which is defined as an endeavour to concurrently react to both opposing forces by showing behaviours which are not favour of neither poles and employing vague relationship so that there is no longer opposition between contradictory forces (Baxter & Montgomery, 2006).

Research Questions

What sorts of relational dialectics do Facebook users experience?
 What strategies do Facebook users employ to manage these dialectics?

Methodology

Qualitative approach was the best and appropriate choice to respond the research questions as it most probably makes the most honest and accurate data collected (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). The current research, therefore, applies qualitative method to deeply understand Facebook users' experiences and grasp their thoughts. The criteria for the present inquiry were as follows: (1) University Putra Malaysia undergraduate students who are studying communication; (2) those students who are active member of Facebook; (3) for at least one year. Three face to face interviews were carried out, and each interview lasted between 15 and 70 minutes. Out of 3 interviewees, 2 of them were female and one was male. The interviews included around 25 open-ended questions. Participants were not asked the identical questions because of the different situations which occurred for each interviewee. The interviews were audio-taped. The recorded data were immediately transcribed after finishing each interview. In order to analyze the collected data, they were firstly sorted, secondly coded and recoded to identify the themes appearing and to make theoretical linkage among coded data. Finally, coded data were reviewed to look for alternative explanations to approve or disapprove the evidence (Crabtree & Miller, 1999).

Findings and Discussion

A total of 28 codes were taken out from transcribed interviews. Identified words, phrases or sentences that had any linkage with the relational dialectics theory themes were categorized to obtain the patterns. There are 2 general categories which one of them are derived from the employed theory. In this study, the themes of relational dialectics theory gave researcher the form to organize data in a specific format.

Two general categories

- Interpersonal communication in Facebook
- Kinds of relational dialectics and strategies to deal with dialectical tensions

Kinds of relational dialectics	Strategies
Autonomy – Connection	Selection
Certainty – Uncertainty	Separation
Openness – Closedness	Integration

Interpersonal Communication in Facebook

“It is a reality of life because maybe we remember old memories. It makes new friends even we can find old friends. I have friends, old friends I did not meet them long time ago, but through Facebook I found them. It is like reviewing our memories.” (User1)

“... I like it just for improving my relations and keeping my relations fresh.” (User2)

“... I am a shy person, not comfortable in face to face relationship, but Facebook helps me say my words better.” (User2)

“I like to live in virtual world rather than in real world. It is not good but I feel more comfortable. My communication in real world is limit but I like to have more communication. In real world I cannot experience to have many friends but in virtual world it happens.” (User 2)

“Facebook is a medium to get our memories. During 1 year and half that I have had Facebook, I could have constant relationship with my friends. It is a kind of relationship maintenance.” (User3)

“...it is just social networking program. That is all. We meet many people. If we wanted to call them we had to pay for them. But Facebook is a mechanism to decrease your cost. So I think it is a good method. If we are using these things, actually we are using them freely.” (User3)

Everyone can acknowledge that we live in the saturated social networking world. There is no doubt that our life, education, work, entertainment and even our relationships have unconsciously been influenced by these social networking sites which have altered communication concepts in different ways and provided new canons for contemporary human beings. Participants use Facebook to develop and maintain their ties with others. Through Facebook they can share whatever they would like such as common interests in hobbies, religion, or politics. In most cases, individuals utilize this social network sites to satisfy their communication needs because of their unique functions and ease of use.

Relational Dialectics and Strategies

Autonomy – Connection

This dialectic deals with the fact that in relationship there are likely two poles, connectedness and separateness, which partners need to make balance between these two poles. They need their space but at the same time they have the urge to spend time together and to be with each other. If there is an imbalance in the relationship between connectedness and separateness, the relationship will ultimately suffer. This dialectic is concerned with how Facebook users manage the autonomy and connection. In some sense, the degree of closure can show some connection that users realize in their relationship. But not all interdependence can be described by the degree of disclosure. The themes describing both the autonomy and connection Facebook users expressed in their responses included close and warm relationship, interest in involvement with others or interest to make friend.

User 1 has made friend only with single individuals. She called her Facebook space as “single market.” She was single and she thought the world of married people is different from hers. She pointed out that singles have many things in common. They understand each other better and have close relationships. In fact, she preferred to connect with single and to spend her time to be with them. She has devoted her space in Facebook to 400 and something single friends. In other words, she tended to keep separateness from married individuals in her relationships through Facebook. So she managed the tension between autonomy – connection by separation of married group and selection of single people.

In terms of autonomy and connection, user 2 would like to have close communication with their friends in Facebook. Her response to this question “what do you think of when you hear this word Facebook?” is:

“My friends and our close and warm relationships in the past and now. I like to involve with them. What are they doing now? About their life, their education, even I like to know they are still single or married.”

Here, user 2 has had a warm relationship and an involvement with their friends. In this case, the tension between connection and separateness was resolved by taking selection. She selected connection pole to get rid of the tension.

About making friend with foreigners she exclaimed:

“I would like to be friend with them but I do not know how I can do it. You know because we are different, and we have different cultures, ethnics, religions. So I prefer just to view them. I like to leave comment but I am worried about misconception.”

It is perceived that there is a tension between connection and separateness for user 2 about making friends with foreigners. Her relationship with those who are non-Malaysian suffers because of the contradiction. She likes to get in touch with them. On the other hand, she wants to be independent. She, therefore, suffices only to view them.

Certainty - Uncertainty

In all relationships we need to be an element of spontaneity. If everything in relationship is strictly predictable the partners will lose interest. Although at the same time there also has to be some predictability because otherwise the amount of uncertainty in the relationship increases to a dangerous level.

This dialectic discusses the tension between certainty and uncertainty. In order to remove the tension, people should try to know their partner better. They, hence, apply many methods to increase the certainty and decrease uncertainty. They may apply information-seeking and reciprocity to increase certainty and they may increase their verbal communication, non-verbal warmth communication, self-disclosure, similarity and liking to decrease the uncertainty.

In terms of certainty and uncertainty, user 3 stated that he had never seen some of his friends before. He had mutual relationships with them by posting and receiving a comment. He believed that if people want to make relationship through Facebook, they have to write many times to give and get information. He first checks people's specifications and then he chooses them.

He expressed:

"From first I cannot trust them. I should try them so I will ask them more information about themselves and then I decide to accept them or not."(User3)

Here he referred to information-seeking and reciprocity to reduce his uncertainty. If he could get sufficient information about them and would have enough mutual friendship through Facebook, then he selects them. It means that he uses selection strategy.

He added:

"Having some similarities with me is important if we have same things, the same motivation. I have friends from "friend club". We follow the same hobbies, movies, novels. I chat with them to exchange our idea about whatever. Sometimes I look at their name. I am a choosy person. I am not comfortable with everyone. I like to have much communication to know them. Even sometimes it depends on my intuition. If my feeling says ok they are good. I have tendency to choose. Some people say ok you will be my friend. But I really should check who that is? I will check it by mutual friends."

User 3 sought similarity between him and others to expand certainty. He emphasizes on being choosy. It implies that he always selects people based on his criteria. In his opinion, if they are qualified, they will be chosen. In conclusion, he takes selection approach to handle the tension in his relationships with his friends in Facebook.

Openness – Closedness

The contradiction of openness- closedness is about information sharing. This kind of tension appeared in the data. Because in Facebook.com people actually live in the virtual world so they do not have to provide any information about their real-world identity. Revealing some information including gender, real name, age, status, hobbies, success, affiliation, achievements even showing photos can be seen as important signs of intimacy, closeness and trust.

In this case, users 1 and 2 have pun on their real name, age, status, some affiliations, hobbies and many of their photos with their friends and family members in Facebook. The photos actually presented their physical appearances. This means that user 1 and 2 would like to be open rather than close in terms of revealing these kinds of information.

However user 2 mentioned that only some of her friends are allowed to view some of her pictures. She added:

"Only my close friends can access them [photos] because I would like to have private situation."

Her action revealed that she has chosen selection strategy in dealing with the tension between expression and non-expression.

However she agreed with those who put their personal information in their Facebook but exclaimed:

“...but it is safe for us to keep something privately because they are very personal. We are Muslim so we are not allowed to share everything. I do not allow everyone to see some of my pictures and to get my information. Some common information has no problem. It is ok to use our name, age, success and something like these.”

She supported her privacy by selecting Closeness pole.

User 3 believed that the characteristics such as age, real name, affiliation are considered as very personal information. He stated:

“... basically I don’t let everybody know about my relationships, my age. Even previous time I did not put my real name. I had written my nickname. But in Facebook I do not know why I put my real name. I already enclosed my real name...”

In another part he added:

“I never put my photos in Facebook. I would like to keep them as secret. All photos have been posted by somebody else.... I do not like people to have details about me...”

About user 3, he first selected closedness no to divulge his real name. But the tension emerged for him in term of revealing his real name. He negotiated with himself to take open or close approach. In order to manage this tension, he did selection and finally revealed his real name in Facebook.

About feeling expression, 3 users did not find Facebook a good venue to express their feeling and emotions towards others. All, therefore, took closeness pole to run the tension in their relationships.

“I never leave any comments that show my real feelings and thoughts about my friend, family members, only for gossiping. If I feel closer and more intimate with my friends, I leave comment. About them frankly, it is ok but about others I never do it. (User1)

User 2 reflected that she does not like to share her emotions with others through Facebook. She uttered that if she likes someone, prefers to have it as a secret in Facebook, although she checks his/ her profile several times a day.

She added:

“May be I leave the comment for them but I do not tell them I like them but I am interested to get involved with them. I am afraid to be seen as a busybody person if I ask them more.”

User 3 expressed that if he wants to write something about people’s feeling, he is very choosy to write sentences and to select words. Sometimes he types a word two or three times. He said:

“... Sometimes I write long sentences and change my mind to post it so I delete the whole comment. Even though my intention is good but they think in different way and reflect differently. May be they return me back in a bad way?”

Sometimes I write a sentence and then ask myself is this word tricky? I change it or delete it. So it is the avoidance.”(User3)

User 3 in another part pointed out if he is angry with his friend, he never shows it in Facebook by using bad words. He will try to take true way. He said that in Facebook we do not have the intonation; we cannot talk to people by sound and cannot write words by fluctuation.

All these words indicate that participants would like to choose selection strategy to express their feeling in Facebook. If they are sensitive to pick up the words to leave the comment or if they like someone but they prefer not to tell them, all these cases suggest that their relationships in Facebook have tensions between openness – closedness and in most cases they choose selection strategy. For example, if user 3 writes a long sentence to leave a comment and then deletes it, it means he has chosen this approach.

Conclusion

The present study employed the relational dialectics theory by which we could look into relationships of Facebook users. This theory provided us underlying understanding of how the oppositional forces construct our online relationships and how individuals attempt to manage the existing tension in their relationships. Our relationships through social networking sites like our relationships in real life suffer from some tensions. Those who experience this virtual world are provided some strategies to get rid of the contradictions in their relationships. In this study, it was realized that Facebook users confronted all sorts of relational dialectics in their Facebook relationships, especially openness-closedness dialectic and they took selection and separation strategies. All participants reported that Facebook is a good tool to develop, improve and maintain the interpersonal communication.

The study did not reach to the saturation stage which is one of the most important principles in qualitative research. It was not, therefore, discussed all aspects of topic as well as relational dialectics theory. It needs more in-depth inquiry to gain more insight into the relational dialectics in Facebook among users. On top of that, it will be effective if future study would conduct comparative study between people’s relational dialectics in real world and in virtual world especially Facebook.

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