



Making sense of relational communication among Malaysian secondary school students: Framing of self and other

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ABSTRACT

The central focus of this paper is on students' meaning-making of relations with others in daily encounters. Making sense of how school students frame themselves and others requires understanding their well-being given that these students are considered academically competent and some of their peers are facing the risk of dropping out. Thus, drawing from the relational communication perspective, we argue that the way these students view themselves in daily relationships with others might affect or impact their attitudes towards schooling. This paper seeks to understand how school students who are considered achievers construct images of themselves and others in daily interactions. How they articulate their relations and interpret such encounters are impactful not only to them but also others around them. Six (6) focus group discussion sessions with twenty-eight (28) students were conducted. Interview protocols were developed based on literature review. The data were analysed using Atlas.ti software. The findings reveal that their narratives demonstrate positive self-image, self-control and appreciation of others. The paper offers new insights on relational communication theory in the Malaysian setting and the role of interpersonal communication in building positive self-esteem.

Keywords: *Framing of self and others, meaning making, relational communication theory*

INTRODUCTION

Making sense of challenges faced by secondary school students who are considered achievers among their peers requires more understanding given that communication is essential in any relationship. People are often impacted by how others communicate or relate to them and vice versa as is the case of teacher-student relationships (Coristine et al., 2022). Given that communication is conjointly created (Wilmot, 1995), we need to foster effective social interactions for impactful student learning (Hurst et al., 2013). Baxter and Montgomery (1996) asserted that “[c]ommunication is the vehicle of social definition: participants develop a sense of self, partners develop a sense of their relationship, and societies develop a sense of identity through the process of communication” (p. 42).

Upon reflection, this draws attention to the idea of relational view posited by Bateson (1972) and Bakhtin (1981). The self–other continuum indicates how self and others are affected by each other which reflects that *one cannot not communicate*, to echo Watzlawick et al. (1967). According to Watzlawick and Beavin (1967), “in the presence of another, all behaviour is communicative” (p. 5). This means, it is “impossible not to communicate” (Watzlawick & Beavin, 1967, p. 6). It reflects our engagement to the social life given that communication is central in any relationship. The verbal and non-verbal communication can create positive or negative consequences in interaction as is the case of social media where the interactional space is borderless, creating a global village (Chapdelaine & Manzerolle, 2021; McLuhan, 1962). Individuals have to make sense of their relationships because whatever they do, they will create impact and be impacted by each other and the surrounding. As Wilmot (1995) remarked, “a relationship exists when the participants construct a mental view of it” (p. 21). Rogers and Escudero (2004) defined communication as “the life giving, social sustaining essence of relationships, the interactive process by which relationships come into being, take shape, are built up or torn down in the ongoing ebb and flow of their evolutionary course” (p. 3).

In this paper, we explored school students’ relationships with others through their own understanding. We analysed such interactions from the relational communication perspective embraced by the individuals in relating to others in daily encounters, particularly at home and school. We share Wilmot’s (1995) perspective that “[c]ommunication is most productively seen as a conjoint reality, created by two people in relation to each other” (p. 53; emphasis original). Relational communication is a human construction (Wood, 2000). Thus, we posit that who the person is and what the person says matters a great deal in the daily situations of these social actors which are often taken for granted, especially in the case of school achievers who are surrounded by peers who have the tendency to drop out. Their dialogues or reflections of relationships ought to be taken more seriously with the intention to help with the learning hence, become better communicators in the real-life situation.

We posed the following research question:

How did school students who are considered achievers construct the image of themselves and others in daily encounters?

MAKING SENSE OF RELATIONAL COMMUNICATION

To know more about how people communicate in daily life requires understanding the nature of communication itself. Communication is a two-way process which consists of speaker and listener. The medium is the language that is shared with others (the interlocutors). The language we use to communicate reflects the self, the language use, self-image among others, which is displayed to those who we communicate with. Gudykunst and Shapiro (1996) posited that “understanding communication in everyday encounters is necessary to explain how and why relationships form, develop over time and are maintained” (p. 20).

Rogers and Farace (1975) described that relational communication variables do not reside within specific interactors, but rather exist between them and relational analysis focuses on communication features that are only present at the dyadic system level. Relational communication is not just about what words are being uttered between two individuals, but it is more concerned with how the words are being exchanged. Burgoon and colleagues (Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Burgoon & Saine, 1978) defined relational communication as the verbal and nonverbal expressions that show how two or more people consider one another, their relationship, or themselves within the framework of the connection. Relational communication can be explained based on the perspectives of the Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973). As relationships progress to become more intimate or closer, the communication dynamic between the individuals change.

Breadth and depth are two fundamental aspects of the social penetration process. Breadth refers to the amount and quality of personality traits that one partner in a relationship makes accessible to the other partner. Depth relates to the significance of personality traits about which one has knowledge. Altman and Taylor (1973) employed an onion analogy to describe the process of social penetration. Comparable to the outside peel of an onion, the outer layers of personality structure consist of all the demographic and biographical information that may be learned about another individual. The larger the width of a connection, the more surface regions are exposed to a relationship partner. Each of these sections has layers beneath it, with the innermost layer representing a person's fundamental wants, emotions and values. The stronger a partner's ability to probe these core components of personality, the greater the relationship's depth.

Burgoon and Hale (1984) explained that relational communication has four implications based on the Social Penetration Theory perspective. First, the relational communication process suggests that certain communications may be intended to indicate the degree of familiarity and depth or shallowness obtained in a connection. Interactors may choose to indicate their intended level of mutual familiarity or force upon the interaction their own notion of the degree of superficiality or commitment. These signals would indicate the level of closeness that has been reached or is desired at the time.

Second, implicit in this perspective, which accounts for changes over time, is the possibility for relational messages to indicate not only the current status in a relational trajectory, but also the likely future trajectory of the relationship—towards greater intimacy, less intimacy, or an indefinite plateau. Such components of relational interaction may be time-dependent or direct time-indicators and they are likely to be intertwined with signals of breadth and depth (Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Burgoon et al., 2021).

Third, while most of the social penetration process involves the explicit transmission of information and is therefore more reportorial in character, verbal and nonverbal communications play an important relational role in the process. The act of verbal self-disclosure, for instance, transmits a relational statement of commitment in order to deepen the connection. In contrast, refusing to reveal intimate information is a relationship statement indicating a desire to remain at a non-intimate level. Altman and Taylor (1973) discovered nonverbal signs that indicate the development of intimate connections. The cues they identified correspond to the aspects of relational communication that we also identified: affection, inclusion, participation and likeness. Thus, the supporting evidence for social penetration simultaneously contributes to many other themes in relationship interactions (Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Givens & White, 2022).

Fourth, the fact that several communication processes are recognised as contributing to the relationship objective of increased intimacy strengthens the presentation of such dimensions as components of a broader intimacy theme (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Givens & White, 2022), hence indicating that the degree of closeness between two people will determine how relational communication works. In this paper, we focus on the relational communication process among high-achieving students and their peers, exploring how they construct their own self-image and perceptions of others in daily interactions based on their narratives. With regard to the relational communication process, the teacher-student relationship plays a pivotal role in developing good rapport in the educational settings (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020). Students' interactions within the classroom environment are highly influential, as they are primarily concerned with their peers' perspectives and opinions. Peer effects hold significant importance in school environments (Agostinelli et al., 2022; Matsumura et al., 2008) as evident in our larger frame of study.

Communication, self and other relations

Communication is a multifaceted process that involves not only the interaction between individuals but also their responses to each other, influenced by their self-perceptions and conduct. This dynamic process occurs during communication, whereby individuals communicate with themselves while communicating with others (Karnieli-Miller, 2020). In the school environment, interactions between high-achieving students and their low-performing peers may be understudied, despite their differing life goals (Beauchamp et al., 2021). High-achieving students are typically more disciplined and driven to achieve academic success, while low-performing students may exhibit different behaviours.

Grewenig et al. (2021) suggested that during the pandemic, high-achieving students spent more time studying compared to their peers, who spent more time on entertainment activities such as watching TV shows and playing games. Agostinelli et al. (2022) found students who came from low-income and underprivileged backgrounds had a more pronounced requirement for school as a means of social equalisation when compared to their more affluent peers. Stated differently, it is possible for academically successful students to prosper in non-traditional educational settings, such as those that do not involve face-to-face instruction and interaction, despite the obstacles presented by circumstances such as a pandemic. The suggestion that high-achieving students may exhibit stronger intrapersonal relationships, resulting in reduced dependence on school agents such as teachers or peers, as they take ownership of their actions, is worthy of

consideration. Individuals may perceive low-performing students as a manifestation of inadequate discipline, despite the presence of life challenges such as a low-income background or pandemic-related circumstances.

According to Matsumura et al. (2008), the influence of peers is more pronounced among students in the educational setting. High-achievers can give less weight to what their peers do and say. Low-performing students may endeavour to persuade their classmates that academic pursuits are unproductive and that extracurricular activities are more pleasurable. Low-performing students may attempt to persuade high-performing students to emulate their behaviour as youths are commonly associated with deviant behaviour when developing friendships (Rose et al., 2022). Notwithstanding the significant impact of peer influence on teenagers, students who excel academically tend to persist in directing their attention towards their own goals. Specifically, the objective of the individual might be to remain enrolled in a school and attain exceptional academic performance. The peers' feedback is being reflected upon which affect how they may see themselves and perform academically (Felson, 1985; Simonsmeier et. al, 2020). Simonsmeier et al. (2020) posited that peer feedback "has the capacity to improve students' learning and academic self-beliefs. It is therefore a particularly promising teaching strategy to enhance intrapersonal competencies in higher education" (p. 720).

Such students may refuse to be a failure as they may see themselves as more superior than their peers in academic performance (Schunk, 2009). In other words, they may develop a more positive image about themselves when they are tied to their positive academic achievements compared to their peers. Teachers may also appreciate high-achieving students as compared to low-achieving students (Starck et al., 2020).

The positive outlook of high-performing students might be attributed to their inherent drive to succeed in academic pursuits (Felson, 1985; Grewenig et al., 2021; Schunk, 2009). Ryan and Deci (2000) found that students who performed exceptionally well were typically motivated intrinsically, which implies that they were propelled by their own inquisitiveness and interest, rather than external incentives or stressors. The presence of intrinsic motivation enables students with high academic achievement to maintain their concentration on academic objectives and withstand the impact of peers who may hold divergent priorities.

Students who excel academically may possess a robust sense of self-identity that is closely associated with their academic accomplishments. Oyserman and Destin (2010) demonstrated a positive correlation between academic achievement and academic identity, which refers to an individual's level of identification with academic values and objectives. Hence, students who exhibit exceptional academic performance and possess a robust academic self-concept are potentially less susceptible to the adverse influences of their peers.

Thus, this suggests that peer effects hold considerable sway over the academic performance of school students, although it is plausible that students who excel academically may exhibit a lower degree of susceptibility to such effects. The individuals' inherent drive to excel in their academic pursuits and their robust academic self-concept may facilitate the ability to withstand adverse peer influence and remain committed to attaining their academic objectives.

Sense of belonging and teacher-student relationship

Undoubtedly, teachers exert a significant influence on the self-perception of students, thereby potentially fostering academic achievement within the context of schooling. Gebresilase and Zhao (2023) claimed that teachers have the potential to make a positive impact on students' self-esteem, which in turn, have significant influence on the latter's academic achievements. Consequently, it is imperative that students are provided with favourable interactions with their teachers and perceive a sense of belonging and self-worth within the school setting.

The concept of belonging pertains to an individual's subjective experience of being embraced, esteemed and integrated into a specific social collective or setting (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021). Within the educational setting, the concept of a sense of belonging pertains to the degree the student experiences a sense of attachment and inclusion with their fellow students, teachers and the broader school populace. The presence of a sense of belonging among students reveals a positive correlation with their motivation to learn, engagement in classroom activities and establishment of favourable interpersonal connections with both their peers and instructors (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Gillen-O'Neel, 2021). In cases where students perceive a lack of connection or inclusion within their school community, they may encounter a variety of adverse consequences, including substandard academic achievement, diminished self-regard, and social seclusion (Osman et al., 2021). Thus, cultivating a feeling of inclusion among students in educational institutions should assist in advancing their holistic welfare and scholastic accomplishments.

Studies revealed that positive teacher-student relationships are a crucial factor in achieving academic success (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Li et al., 2022; Osman et al., 2021). Hamre and Pianta (2005) asserted that students who maintained favourable associations with their teachers tend to display higher levels of engagement in school, demonstrate improved classroom conduct and attain superior academic results. Meanwhile, Lazarides and Buchholz (2019) revealed that teachers who cultivated favourable connections and excellent teaching delivery with students exhibited enhanced proficiency in establishing a learning-friendly classroom atmosphere, which ultimately led to greater academic success.

Osman et al. (2021) posited that teachers who provided emotional support can exert a noteworthy influence on the self-concept of their students. Hence, students who perceived their teachers as being concerned about their well-being and invested in their academic success tend to develop a positive self-concept, which in turn, positively impacted their academic performance although they may come from an underprivileged background (Grewenig et al., 2021; Osman et al., 2021). Evidently, teachers hold crucial positions in moulding the self-perception of students, subsequently influencing their academic achievements. Establishing favourable teacher-student relationships and cultivating empathy can create a feeling of inclusion and approval that is indispensable for achieving academic accomplishments. Thus, educators should foster affirmative connections with students and establish a conducive learning milieu that leads to academic success.

Understanding school achievers

School achievers can be defined as children or adolescents who possess strong interpersonal relationships and a positive self-concept which are strongly linked to their academic achievements (Hirsch & Costello, 1970). These high-achieving students typically have clear goals, aspirations and are highly motivated to succeed in all aspects

of their lives. They may possess better learning strategies than their low-achiever peers (Yip, 2021). As they are more motivated to learn, they may develop their own learning strategies (e.g., note-taking, revising, ways of memorising information) (Minnaert & Janssen, 1992; Yip, 2021). The school achievers, as in our study, were those who displayed rather strong commitment and dedication towards schooling, teachers, peers and families in accomplishing the educational goals.

METHODOLOGY

The nature of the study and context

We employed a qualitative approach in exploring the perspectives of secondary school students. The study was part of a larger study which focused on secondary schoolers' motivation to school having been surrounded by peers who are at risk of dropping out. Approximately, six different schools in the northern state of Malaysia participated with the assistance of the school administrator in each school. Some of the schools were located in town areas whilst a few in the rural areas. These schools were identified based on the achievements made by their students and the need for more understanding on how these students managed to pursue their day-to-day schooling despite the challenges encountered including peers dropping out and the COVID-19 crisis.

Approximately six focus group discussions were conducted for each school (Table 1) with each group ranging from between three to five members. The focus group discussion was considered suitable because the purpose was to collect information on a specific topic (i.e., the participants' views of themselves and others in daily school encounters) in the group interaction (Morgan, 2001). The questions were formulated in relation to their educational goal; why they liked attending school, or the subject, teacher or friend. The focused group interaction enabled participants who knew each other to reflect on each other's views and sort of validate the responses in that social interaction. It exposed the moderator and the participants to direct evidence in terms of similarities or differences of responses (Morgan, 1997). In that way, the sessions were livelier which was believed to have enabled participants to express themselves better in front of the moderator (researcher) in a familiar environment (i.e., the natural school setting). Participants were carefully selected by the teachers in charge of the six schools based on certain criteria.

Participants

Using purposive sampling, 28 participants were selected. They were considered competent and able students given that they achieved good results in their exam, displayed good behaviour and attitude towards schooling and were regular attendees as attested by their teachers. Being high achievers, they would be able to share their perspectives on how they view themselves and others around them in daily school communication. They were also viewed as disciplined, determined, passionate about their studies and the focused type. Being in a similar year of secondary schooling (Form Three), they were considered mature and able to respond to the moderator's question and probing in the familiar surroundings. The participants were observed to be rather chirpy, obedient and well-mannered. Some were more eager to respond and had much more to say compared to others. Overall, they communicated well with the teachers, peers and were motivated by those around them.

Participants' profile

The participants' demographic profile is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' demographic profile and focus groups

Focus Group/Total	Participant	Secondary Level of Study	Gender
FG1	P1	Form 3	Female
	P2	Form 3	Female
	P3	Form 3	Male
	P4	Form 3	Male
	P5	Form 3	Female
Total	5		
FG2	P1	Form 3	Female
	P2	Form 3	Female
	P3	Form 3	Female
	P4	Form 3	Female
	P5	Form 3	Male
Total	5		
FG3	P1	Form 3	Female
	P2	Form 3	Female
	P3	Form 3	Female
Total	3		
FG4	P1	Form 3	Female
	P2	Form 3	Female
	P3	Form 3	Female
	P4	Form 3	Female
	P5	Form 3	Female
Total	5		
FG5	P1	Form 3	Female
	P2	Form 3	Female
	P3	Form 3	Female
	P4	Form 3	Female
	P5	Form 3	Female
Total	5		
FG6	P1	Form 3	Female
	P2	Form 3	Female
	P3	Form 3	Female
	P4	Form 3	Male
	P5	Form 3	Male
Total	5		
Overall participants	28		

Procedure and instrumentation

The six focus group discussion sessions were conducted in the school environment, a place familiar to all the participants of each respective school. The language used was Malay for ease and comfort given that they were all Malays. In the group, the participants were asked to describe themselves in relation to schooling and other related factors such as peers and teachers. For each focus group, one researcher acted as the moderator. Each session was approximately one hour to one hour twenty minutes. These sessions were conducted on different days according to the schedule agreed upon by the school administrators.

Data analysis

The interview data were transcribed and analysed based on Braun and Clark's (2006, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c) analytic method, that is, thematic analysis. The analysis assisted in understanding the focus group discussion responses given that such analytic method comprised six clear steps that the researchers needed to interrogate: (i) being familiar with the data, (re)reading transcripts; (ii) coding, generating relevant codes; (iii) searching for possible themes; (iv) reflecting on the emerging themes to ensure that they convincingly inform about the data; (v) defining and naming the themes which involves identifying and naming the specific themes and (vi) writing a persuasive and coherent narrative about the data based on the themes.

Such flexibility of the thematic analysis model enabled the researchers to carefully scrutinise the data and make sense of the responses related to the research focus. In so doing, the researchers highlighted relevant keywords that reflect the relational elements of self and other in communication as they narrated their standpoints. Meanwhile, the Atlas.ti software assisted in sorting out the data. As such, three emerging themes were evident in the discussion data: (i) displaying positive self-image; (ii) demonstrating good self-control; and (iii) expressing appreciation of others.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings revealed narratives of the selves and others from the way the participants framed the instances and situations based on their relationships with others.

Displaying a positive self-image

A positive self-image reflects the confidence of a person in the way he or she frames or views things or people as is the case of the participants in this study. Prince (1989) defined self-image as "an awareness of a particular set of ideas, attitudes, or feelings an individual possesses about selfhood at any given point in time. Self-esteem, a related concept, is the extent to which an individual admires, likes, or values the self" (p. 3). Overall, the participants (FG1–FG6) were mostly optimistic about how their parents guided them in doing things and thinking about their future. For instance, FG1P2 narrated about the need to focus on education and not work. Similarly, FG1P1 and FG1P3 echoed this. Even though that might seem like trivial talk, however, it makes the individuals engaged with the relations and, in turn, signify "the essence of the relationship" (Gudykunst & Shapiro, 1996, p. 20).

Prince (1989) asserted that "[p]roviding the conditions which enable students to improve their self-image must become a major objective of education because high self-esteem is a necessary prerequisite to a readiness for learning and for a genuine desire to achieve academically" (p. 4). As observed, the school atmosphere and the relations established between teacher-student and researchers as in this study, enabled the students to express themselves fairly well which (in)directly displayed their capability to project themselves as they themselves desired. The positive self-image was echoed by the majority of the participants. In other words, they were not shy to project themselves and their views towards the things being asked. For instance, FG1P2 shared about being cautious when choosing and making friends. They would try to advise others if they thought some

students were not suitable to be befriended. This was due to the fact that P2 did not want to be involved in doing things which were not supposed to be done. When reflecting on ambition, FG1P3 aimed to be either a marine biologist, doctor, dentist or architect but felt that it would depend on the results.

P3 was comfortable in sharing that with the researcher and relating it in a very confident manner. Similarly, others (FG2P1, FG2P3, FG2P5), for instance, aimed for good professions such as teaching, medical field, photography and dentistry. For sure, they aimed to be good and do well as narrated by FG6P5, —obtaining 8As in the Form Five examination would be good as that was the grandfather's desire. FG5P4 echoed that doing well would mean that she would be able to obtain a better job and enable her mother to go on the hajj pilgrimage with her income. The aim was to make her mother happy. This indicates that how they would want to be seen in the future was impacted by their relations with those close to them and the comfortable context they were in.

Demonstrating good self-control

The findings revealed that not only did the participants demonstrate good self-image but also good self-control. The term, self-control, is defined as “the self-initiated regulation of thoughts, feelings, and actions when enduringly valued goals conflict with momentarily more gratifying goals” (Duckworth et al., 2019, p. 374; Li et al., 2022). Duckworth et al. (2019) argued that self-control consisted of two features: (i) It is “self-initiated” (p. 376); and (ii) it is “only relevant to choices in which one option is recognizably more valuable in the long run than the other but in which, nevertheless, the less valuable option is momentarily more attractive” (p. 376). This implies that the participants were able to choose the option that they valued the most, for instance, completing school, doing the national exam and obtaining the certificate, which will lead to a good career as stated earlier (being a doctor etc.). They were able to speak in a manner that portrayed confidence, determination and positive self-concept which reflects their charismatic nature as being high school achievers. To illustrate, FG5P1 stressed the importance of completing school, which was echoed by FG5P2, FG5P3, FG5P4 and FG5P5.

As narrated by participants:

- P1G5: *I want to come to school. I am not into social media. At this age, I am not into tiktokers, social media. I am not interested.*
- P2G5: *I also want to complete my study first and then I will think about what I will do next.*
- P3G5: *I also want to attend school, complete my studies.*
- P4G5: *I want to come to school as the SPM certificate is important to me.*
- P5G5: *I will choose to attend and finish schooling for my future. If I stop now, it is a high risk for our future...as nowadays, it is a competitive job. If I do not finish my school, then it will be difficult for me to be successful in the future.*

These participants were able to convey their future plans clearly and in detail, and not just about schooling, but also about school assignments and personal problems. For the latter, they emphasised the importance of seeking help from smart uncles and

aunties, smart friends, elder sister and brother, parents and teachers. Interestingly, the latter would be the last resort for them to ask for assistance which further indicates the ability to work independently and with determination. Positively, this suggests that they would try to ask those close to them first before reaching out to teachers. As narrated by FG6P3, *“we did not normally share our problems with the teachers. However, I would help them by being ‘Pembimbing Rakan Sebaya’ (PRS) or peer mentor or facilitator...I helped in managing other students’ problems with the teachers’ guidance”*. This also implies that the participants had high aspirations, dreaming for successful future career paths. They were not only ambitious but also dreamt about having a bright future.

Evidently, the narrated scenario and reflections tend to correspond with Duckworth et al.,’s (2014) process model of self-control which consists of four stages; (i) situation; (ii) attention; (iii) appraisal; (iv) response. The recursive process of the person’s self-control is generated by impulses and regulated over time in those four stages as revealed by the participants’ narration of their hopes and schools, and subjects learned among others.

Appreciating others

In relating to how they view others, the participants shared their appreciation of the teachers. For instance, FG3P2 found her English teacher to be a ‘sporting’ person, that is, someone who is regarded as considerate and caring for them. FG3P1 also felt that the Counselling teacher was a rather considerate person. This was echoed by the other students in the group (P3) who considered the class teacher as someone they would share their problems with. Meanwhile, FG1P3 shared how his school teacher made him feel comfortable and fall in love with the subject taught. The participants mostly shared how caring teachers would make them feel good and they would be sad when such teachers had to leave the school. For instance, FG1P3 further narrated how a particular teacher would visit the students at home during the COVID-19 crisis when schooling was shifted online, concerned if they had problems following the lessons taught. FG4P2 conveyed her enthusiasm of going to school due to her good teacher whom she regarded as ‘sporting’. Her English teacher would organise many learning activities including listening to songs, filling in the blanks, doing word puzzles and role-playing based on the situations given.

Another participant, FG3P2 confessed that she would rather share her problems with her parents as they could give advice about the right approach or things to do. On the contrast, FG3P3 would prefer to share with her mother or friend, not her father as she would feel uncomfortable doing it. FG4P1 described her mathematics teacher warmly as someone she considered to be ‘sporting’ and not arrogant. She was someone they preferred to ask for help as she would always attend to their occasional ‘whining’. She felt that she could relate well to the teacher. On being motivated to go to school despite having peers who are at risk of dropping out or not interested in completing studies, these participants view schooling as important, not to be missed. FG5P1 felt that her friends were the ones who motivate her to attend school. She claimed that she would cry if she could not go to school. Her sentiment was echoed by the others in the focus group session (FG5), for instance, P2, P3, P4 and P5. They viewed their peers as those whom they could ask assistance such as help with school work and sharing their personal problems.

Making sense of the emerging themes

The relational communication theory explains how individuals connect through their patterns of interaction, specifically, how they achieve mutual understanding and alignment in conversations to facilitate relational processes. In essence, the theory posits that effective dyadic communication fosters reliable and trustworthy relationships. The study's three key findings: projecting a positive self-image, exercising self-control, and demonstrating appreciation for others, emerge as outcomes of consistent interpersonal communication, which collectively enable individuals to establish and sustain trust-based relationships. The themes draw attention to the significant understanding of how individuals frame their views of things and others in the world they live in. Such sensemaking of self and others including interpersonal communication should not be taken for granted (Harun et al., 2021) due to the highly complex symbolic process of human communication (Wood, 2000) and its impact.

The abstract symbols communicators make can be misconstrued or interpreted differently. Thus, it is essential that much attention is given to such “correspondence of meanings” (Wood, 2000, p. 55) that occur between individuals through multiple channels and articulators (Trujillo & Holler, 2023) as is the case of the participants and researchers when the former was probed face-to-face about school, others (e.g., teachers, peers, family) and ambitions, for instance. Such communication should be given proper attention, as well as other types of communication, in particular, communication within the social space (e.g., Twitter, Telegram, WhatsApp, Facebook) where reaching out to anyone virtually is borderless. Digital communication can also influence parent-teacher engagement, be it positively or negatively (Johari et al., 2022).

Meaning making is based on what individuals hear, see or understand. Thus, this requires careful scrutiny of any information received, heard or uttered especially among close partners given that communication is rule-guided (Wood, 2000). Even though relational communication concerns much communication with partners (e.g., close partners, spouse), we believe that student-peer, student-teacher and teacher-teacher encounters ought to be given prominent attention and the scrutiny should expand to include the delicacy of the interaction and the way we communicate. Friendly interactional communication tends to display a positive relationship which is most often enacted outside of the classroom context (Claessens et al., 2017).

The students in our study who displayed caring, positive attitudes viewed their teachers, parents, peers and surrounding individuals favourably through the way they narrated their future plans and preferences. Such observation indirectly makes us reflect on the “small choices” that individuals make or are forced to make in everyday life that will impact their future. By observing those interactional relationships, more in-depth analysis can be made in understanding how such communication works, successfully or otherwise in daily encounters in Malaysia. The know-how skill on managing interactions is still lacking (Harun et al., 2021). The participant data speak volumes about reactions towards life and others, in particular, student-teacher interpersonal interactions which influence academic achievements (Yu et al., 2023). For instance, in motivating students towards cultivating the culture of independence and creativity as in the case of entrepreneurial learning (Triwardhani et al., 2020).

Participants who exhibited caring and positive attitudes tended to view their teachers, parents, peers, and social environment favourably, as reflected in the way they

articulated their future plans and preferences during interviews. These observations align with the assumptions of the relational communication theory, which posits several key principles. First, certain communicative acts signal the degree of familiarity and the depth or superficiality of a connection. Second, embedded within this perspective—accounting for relational changes over time—is the notion that relational messages convey not only the current status of a relationship but also its anticipated trajectory. Third, while much of the social penetration process involves explicit information exchange and is therefore reportorial in nature, both verbal and nonverbal communication serve critical relational functions. Fourth, recognising that multiple communication processes contribute to the relational goal of increased intimacy underscores the importance of framing these dimensions within a broader intimacy construct. Within this thematic context, projecting a positive self-image, exercising self-control, and demonstrating appreciation for others emerge as outcomes of relational communication processes. These behaviours may also function as stimuli for fostering constructive communication strategies in managing teacher–student and peer interactions over the long term.

CONCLUSION

The paper has attempted to make sense of the relational communication from the lens of secondary school students who are considered achievers. Their narratives of selves and others demonstrate positive self-image, good self-control and appreciation of others which should be of interest to not only educators but also relatable others, especially parents, family members, peers and teachers. Meaningful relationships and constructive ways of relating are essential elements of ensuring that the interlocutors remain engaged, be it in the classroom or outside of school context (Yulida et al., 2020). Even though our study did not focus on the actual interactions between student–teacher, student–parent or student–peer, we believe that the student narratives provide insights into interpersonal communication, an area which is often taken for granted. This might be due to the fact that observing individuals’ conversations is considered taboo or as intruding into people’s privacies. Yet, it is believed that the relational communication and the framing of actual interactions can moderate the effect of communication, physically, or virtually by embracing interpersonal interactions positively, in person or on mobiles and through technology, to motivate people to relate to others with great cultural and religious sensitivity (Salman, 2021).

Future researchers can probe this area to identify ways of facilitating communication with close ones and across cultures with proper monitoring. This involves learning particular communication and behavioural skills including initiating, narrating, exchanging texts or messages, engaging and making excuses with careful consideration towards others. Interpersonal communication requires genuine efforts in reaching out to close partners and diverse others by skilfully employing such skills. As people share feelings about themselves and others, such revelation informs much about the framing of such real-life encounters. Researching how communicators articulate themselves and respond to others in interpersonal relationships should assist students and educators more about meaningful, proper classroom and social interactions given that positive student relationships with peers, teachers and parents tend to create positive influence on the former’s academic achievement regardless of the situations they are in. This should also

spotlight the need for all relevant parties to work in tandem for ensuring that effective and polite communication in classroom and social interactions is practised.

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