Communicative Guanxi: Making Online Discussion Forums Come Alive

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Abstract

The present study contributed to understanding the interactive language strategies that highlighted interactivity that leads to online *Guanxi* that facilitates interactivity in online discussion forums. Online discussion forums were selected for this study because this is where forum members come to seek and share information collaboratively. By using the analytical framework of Herring's Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), the study carried out a qualitative analysis of the naturally occurring data that was gathered from several online discussion forums discussing academic topics; the study investigated the language strategies that emerged from the data that seem to encourage interactivity in the online discussion forum. Interactivity was highlighted because it was observed that this variable was essential to keep the online discussion forum interaction on-going by encouraging the members to post. This study found that interactivity does not simply occur but must be intentionally built or worked upon in online discussion forums. Therefore, to increase interactivity in online discussion forums, forum members actively post to have discussions on-going. The study found that online Guanxi was necessary to increase interactivity in online discussion forums. Online *Guanxi* was formed when forum members felt the presence of others, and they trusted that the forum members would be able to share information that would be helpful. The whole process of seeking, sharing, and exchanging information was done by respecting one another's "face".

Keywords: social presence, trust, face-saving strategies, online *Guanxi*, online interactivity

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduce the Problem

Online discussion forums, also known as threaded discussion, have become a popular way of discussing issues and sharing information via digital device. Researchers have investigated online forums from a variety of angles, including interaction (Kent et al., 2016), a community of inquiry (Cho & Tobias, 2016), social behaviours (Krämer et al., 2021) and peer support (Drysdale et al., 2021; Krämer et al., 2021). The variety of lenses through which online discussion has been explored is enabled by capturing rich data that can provide insight into how to have engaging and interactive online forum discussion.

Online discussion forums are commonly used in academic, health and business settings to share information or knowledge with other group members. In the academic field, online discussion forums became popular with the introduction of hybrid and online courses. There are, however, some problems such as lack of learners' focus and inadequate reflection (Almendingen et al., 2021), students not responding to the ideas of others, and surface-level discussions (Shanthi et al., 2017). In some online discussion forums, when a thread starter throws out a question to the community, they may get a reply, or an answers way faster than others. However, at other times, some online discussion forums die a natural death after a few exchanges because participants fail to contribute to the discussion. Therefore, keeping the members engaged is a big question that needs further investigation. By using Grounded Theory to analyse the online discourse, this study will shed light on what are the features needed for effective and engaging computer-mediated communication in online discussion forums. This was done by analysing naturally occurring data from an online discussion forum using Herring's Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) framework. The premise of the present study is that higher interactivity in online discussion forums is because of online *Guanxi*. Thus, information sharing in online discussion forums should be a collaborative effort to form online *Guanxi*. Using grounded theory, the study will identify the interactive language strategies used by the virtual community members to stay on and post more messages to either seek, share, or exchange information.

This paper will discuss the features that contribute to interactive knowledge-sharing practices that evolve around the concept of Guanxi.. It is hoped that information gained from the study could be used by people from the different fraternities such as academic, health and business. Therefore, the findings of this study would add to the existing field of knowledge on how best to conduct interaction in online discussion forums.

1.2 Theoretical Foundation

1.2.1 Politeness Theory

Politeness in an online forum discussion is based on the Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). According to Brown and Levinson, many universals of politeness in language reflect strategies that attempt to minimise or redress damage to face when face-threatening actions (FTAs) are committed (Pardede et al., 2019; Hutahaean et al., 2021). Brown and Levinson as cited in Pardede et al. (2021) divide the notion of the face into

positive and negative faces, each with its strategies to minimise the threat to one's face and others (refer to Figure 1). The terms 'negative' and 'positive' face do not mean "good" and "bad" behaviours as one might assume, but rather is the two opposite sides of the same scale to address the level of politeness.
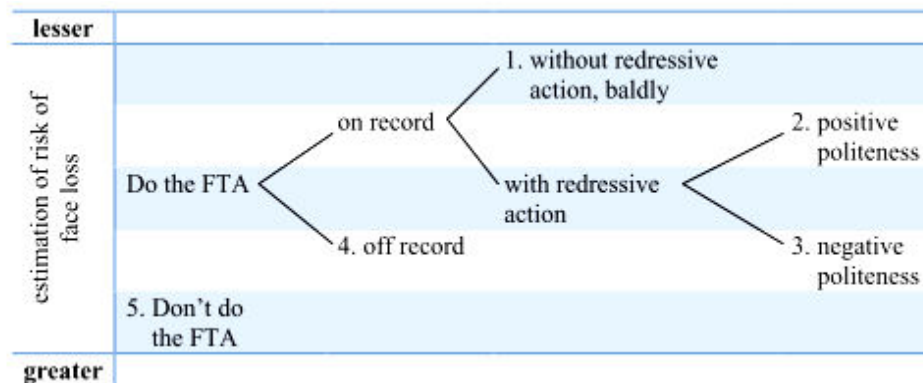

Figure 1. Brown and Levinson's five strategies for the mitigation of FTAs

Source: Arendholz (2011): Flattering and Flaming: Interpersonal Relations in Online Message Board.

The online discussion forum communication takes place in a social context characterised by the interaction of participants and a certain degree of spontaneity (Kristoffersen, 2014), where the issue of whether to be friendly or otherwise to fellow participants in the online discussion forum community becomes a vital issue. This theory explains the fundamentals of language production on why people do not always speak most straightforwardly and directly but rather lace their words. The reason, as suggested by Brown and Levinson (1987), is that we are all motivated by two desires: (1) the need to be approved of or wanting to stay connected to others (positive face), and (2) the need to remain autonomous or independent (negative face). Also, as pointed out, when online discussion participants are friendly while interacting online, it can enhance cooperation among them to accomplish a common task such as sharing and exchanging information. Though politeness is an essential variable for any online social interaction, how is the appropriate behaviour manifested in online discussion forums for better social interaction will emerge from the data. This is because each online social interaction has its way of portraying the different degrees to which we approximate politeness to a good experience of seeking, sharing, and exchanging information in online discussion forums.

1.2.2 Social Presence Theory

Another theory that lends itself to this study is the social presence theory. Social presence is the degree to which participants in computer-mediated communication feel effectively connected (Swan & Shih, 2003). Social presence allows virtual community members to negotiate meaning and structure communication (Tang & Foon Hew, 2020). Without a social

presence, members of a virtual community cannot successfully construct and share knowledge; social presence encourages social connectedness among members of a virtual community (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2018; Shanthi et al., 2018).

Therefore, the presence of other forum members is felt by web-forum members when they *acknowledge* each other's presence by greeting, thanking, or using closing or leave-taking, salutations, expressing humour or using emoticons to express one's feelings or emotion, inviting or asking for feedback or opinions from fellow forum members, agreeing, apologising, or even criticising one another's views were all indicators of social presences in online discussions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Online Discussion Forums

Online discussion forums are mainly used to share and exchange information so that whoever comes to seek information on a topic or issue will leave the online discussion having gained or learnt some new information. A good online discussion forum is one where the exchange of information or ideas happens as a group effort; forum members are allowed to share ideas learn from peers and build knowledge collectively while reading and reflecting on each other's thoughts (Kent et al., 2016). Observation revealed that not all online discussion forums could actively attract people to participate in online discussion. Quite often, online discussions do not meet expectations for engagement (Kent et al., 2016; Jandrić & Hayes, 2020), contributions frequently do not respond to or build on one another (Chang & Brickman, 2018); threaded discussions are often shallow and disjointed (Wang et al., 2014).

Another study found that in the broadest sense, when information is shared and exchanged in CMC, ideas are reshaped by the actions of the sender and receiver of information as fellow participants of the online discussion forums discussion on the topic of discussion and in the process, new information is jointly created (Shanthi et al., 2018). Online discussion forums are a platform for collaborative construction of meaning within online communities, to compose their thoughts while allowing more time for all participants to reflect on and respond to the contributions of others (Shanthi et al., 2019). When forum members build on the comments of others, a higher flow of communication and inference is shown (Shanthi et al., 2018). A higher flow of information will allow the members to debate more on information that, in the end, can be accepted as correct or discarded as incorrect. Thus, an online discussion forum that creates a climate that supports and encourages probing questions and expressing skepticism leads to explanatory ideas and discussion topics (Garrison 2011, p. 32).

Thus, with the two-way nature of interaction found in an online discussion forum, it has become a helpful tool for sharing information on any issue., online discussion forums can become a helpful tool for sharing and exchanging information if members collaboratively participate in the online discussion forums.

The study conducted by Mihail, Rubin and Goldsmith (2014) found that particular information-seeking posts and when some participants play devil's advocacy and challenge the views of others lead to increased interactivity among participants in online forum

discussion. Similar findings that threads posted that require questioning and challenging other ideas leads to increased interactivity in the online discussion forum (Shanthi et al., 2019).

2.2 Guanxi in Online Discussion Forums

Guanxi generally refers to social connection based on shared interests within a group of people and favours in Chinese face-to-face business. To a large extent, online discussion forums have successfully brought together people with similar interests and goals, talking online by sharing information on a topic of interest to group members, thus making the concept of online discussion very popular. In recent years research about *Guanxi* networks in computer-mediated communication has gained momentum (e.g., Ou & Davison, 2015; Wong et al., 2014; Krämer et al., 2021). In the Chinese culture, business practice is seen as a chain of collaboration that leads to achieving business success. Therefore, "*Guanxi* cannot survive without harmony between two parties in a relationship" (Wong et al., 2014). Despite the prominence of *Guanxi* in building and maintaining a relationship in business, little is known about the concept of *Guanxi* beyond the business management literature. Hence a significant part of the literature review on this concept is from the Chinese business sector.

In the Chinese society, social networks are equivalent to the cultural construct of "Guanxi", which is a close personal tie among two or more individuals who are bounded by notions of reciprocity and mutual support (Krämer et al., 2021; Ou & Davison, 2015; Ou et al., 2014). In the past few years, the concept of Guanxi has attracted the attention of IS scholars, and several studies have been conducted to examine its antecedents in various research contexts. Specifically, Ou and Davison (2015) indicated that communication quality and mutual trust could significantly promote the development of Guanxi networks among employees by using the technology of instant messaging. Meanwhile, Niedermeier et al. (2016) found that social media is beneficial for creating and solidifying the Guanxi network between sales professionals and customers. Guanxi network plays a significant role in facilitating individuals' participation behaviours in online discussion (Lin et al., 2019). Davidson et al. (2015) found that *the Guanxi* network formed using the different Web 2.0 tools can enhance work performance among employees, while Ou et al. (2014) found that computer-mediated communication technologies can mimic traditional interactive face-to-face communications, thus enabling a form of *Guanxi* in online among buyers and sellers at online marketplaces that boost sales.

According to research done on Chinese business management, the *Guanxi* relationship can be an insider or outsider relationship. The insider relationship refers to an exclusive circle of members, while the outsider relationship refers to people connected by temporary "instrumental" ties, which are enacted regularly to pursue material goals (Krämer et al., 2021). In online discussions, it is not the strong ties that can be the most beneficial; in fact, weak ties that are built with people who might be strangers or one whom the online community members might not know beyond the virtual world are deemed as far more valuable in online interaction that focuses on information sharing (Morgan, 2014). So, members of the online communities can have access to more people and a bigger pool of information compared to the small circle of contacts from the strong ties or insider relationships (Refer to Figure 2).
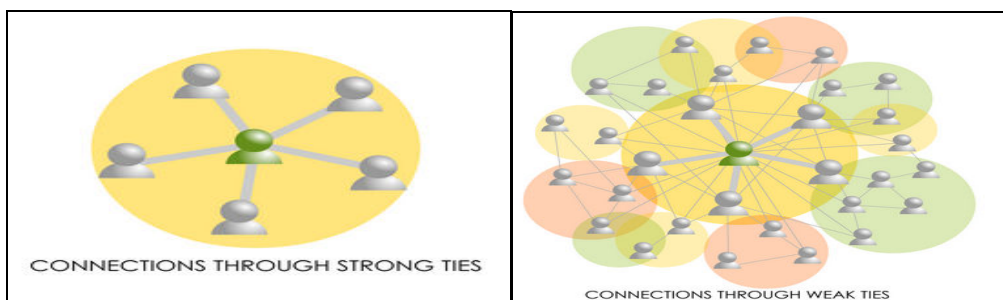
Figure 2. Comparison of strong and weak ties in online network communication

Source: http://www.forbes.com/sites/jacobmorgan/2014/03/11/every-employee-weak-ties-work/

In short, in online discussion forums, the concept of *Guanxi* is about the formation of a mutually beneficial social relation to achieving a specific purpose. In this study, a specific purpose is defined as the act of information sharing practices that encompasses seeking, sharing, and exchanging information for the common goal of finding an answer or solution to the forum members' problems and queries. The answers can be found when forum members share their experience, knowledge, and skill with others in the group for the mutual benefit of the online discussion forum community. Therefore, taken away from the Chinese business culture and looked at from the social communication perspective, *Guanxi* refers to "mutually reciprocal interpersonal connections or relationships", which is one of the most important factors to consider when investigating social networking phenomena carried out in harmony among people (Wong et al., 2014).

Therefore, in online discussion forums, to have a meaningful information sharing experience in a virtual world that lacks the many face-to-face cues, both parties, the writer and reader, need to collaborate and build and maintain a *Guanxi* relationship.

3. Method

The study is guided by a qualitative approach and grounded theory with Herring's Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA). The CMDA is a complete framework that guides from data-generating to its analysis and, finally, its interpretation. By adhering to the recommendations made in the CMDA approach, this study hopes to inductively develop a pattern of interaction based on the language functions and strategies used to seek, share, and exchange information.

Figure 3 explains the research design of this study. Naturally occurring text-based asynchronous interactions from online discussion forums were this study's primary data source. By natural data, the researcher refers to authentic message exchanges that online forum members used to interact in a language that contains verbal features though they were (written) typed on a keyboard and read on the computer screen. The interaction in online discussion forums to exchange information was conceptualised as a collaborative information sharing process; Guanxi.
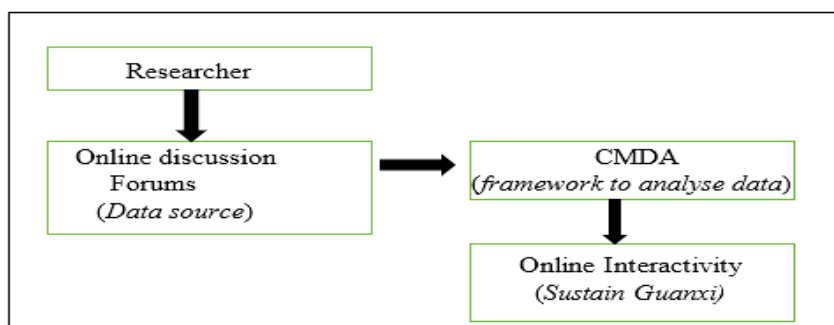
Figure 3. Research design

To study the social behaviour that forms Guanxi, the researcher examines the language choices using grounded theory; when interacting online, members of the forum make certain language choices. The grounded theory allows data to speak for itself by allowing themes to emerge from the data that show how language choices of the forum participants form strategies and develop a pattern of interaction that sustains Guanxi in online forums.

When continuous interactivity occurs, online discussion forum members may connect, and a virtual community becomes formed. Figure 4 explains how data is analysed to gauge Guanxi in online discussion forums. Language strategies were coded from the data guided by Brown and Levison's Politeness Theory and Social Presence Theory, and the emerging themes were recorded to study how Guanxi is built and maintained.

As seen in Figure 4, the initial analytical process starts after reading the data. Within a feedback loop, the categories were revised and checked. Later NVivo software tool will be used to organise the data and systematise the analysis process; all the codes are counted for the frequencies of each of the language functions to answer the research questions. Next, these language functions will be scrutinised to form categories that describe the interactive pattern in sharing and exchanging information among online discussion forum members that build a virtual community.
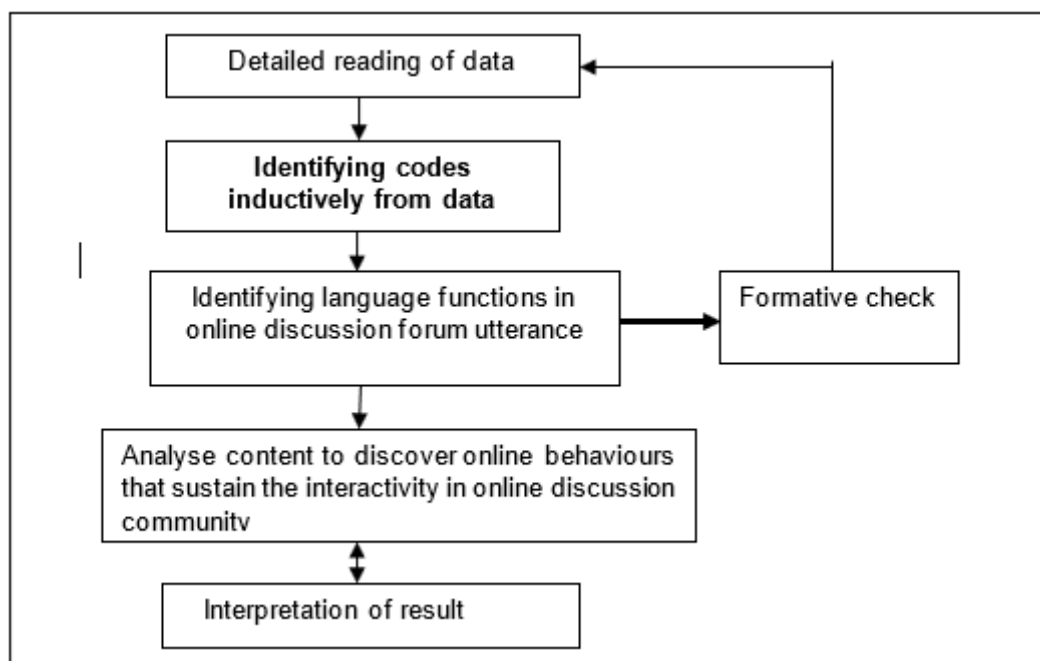
Figure 4. The analytical procedure of online discussion forum

4. Results and Discussion

The finding reported in this paper is based on a more extensive study investigating interactivity features in online discussion forums that helped keep the online discussions interactive for its community members. This section will report on the following research question:

1) What are the features of online Guanxi that sustain interactivity in online discussion forums?

Guanxi means "network of relationships" in online discussion forums interaction that leads to online *Guanxi* between forum members is developed using different interactive language strategies that help transform strangers into "acquaintances" in online discussion forums. *Guanxi* in the online discussion forum is sustained using the following interactive strategies and tactics, as reflected in Table 1.

The three main themes derived from the online discussion forum data that aided interactivity (online Guanxi) in forums were trust, the felt presence of other forum members (social presence), and face persevering.

4.1 Quantifying Language Strategies Used for Building Online Guanxi

The study found that the online discussion forum community members in this study used three main *Guanxi* building strategies, as seen in Table 1.

Table1. Language Strategies Used to Form and Sustain *Guanxi* in Online discussion forums

Language Strategies	Number of occurrences	Percentage (%)
Face preserving strategy	673	23.3
Social presence strategy	880	30.5
Trust gaining strategy	1333	46.2
Total	2886	100

Table 1 shows that forum members portrayed much trust in the online discussion forum virtual community (46.2%). Trust seems to focus on building and sustaining *Guanxi* in the online discussion forum. The study portrays that when trust is established or gained with the other forum members, cooperative behaviour will facilitate the online relationship or Guanxi building in the online discussion forum community. This is followed by the Social Presence strategy (30.5%). Forum members seem to feel the presence of others in the online discussion forum, so they reciprocate accordingly by using different language tactics to reach out to others in the process of seeking, sharing and exchanging information online discussion forums. Finally, the study also found that forum members used many different face preserving tactics under the face preserving strategy (23.3%) so that the forum interaction could happen in an environment that encourages information practices. When forum members realise their face was not a threat in this particular web community, they seem to interact more often in online discussion forums interaction.

4.2 Theme 1: Trust

As seen in Table 1, this study found three strategies that sustained *Guanxi* in online discussion forums. In this study, Trust Building Strategy played more than Social Presence Strategy and Face Preserving Strategy in sustaining *Guanxi*. Online discussion forum members appear to trust the information shared because the information is scrutinised and checked for accuracy and reliability by forum members. Trust seems to strengthen when forum members perceive the information shared is important and relevant.

Guanxi involves trust in building relationships (Shaalan, Reast, Johnson, & Tourky, 2013). Studies have revealed that *mutual trust contributes to the development of Guanxi networks* (Ou & Davison, 2015; Ou et al., 2014) because trust is related to productivity. It is hard to develop trust in a virtual community when members cannot see each other because "CMC omit cues that are crucial elements for gaining trust such as integrity of virtual members who are sharing their views and giving suggestions" (Ou & Davison, 2015). According to Shaalan et al. (2013), the absence and presence of trust affect any social group's efficiency and survival.

Therefore, CMC trust needs to be established to build and maintain *Guanxi* in a virtual community. This is because when trust is lacking in the relationship, members will not share information openly, thus limiting the capability of the virtual community members to build *Guanxi* and maintain it. However, to gain trust, online discussion forums needed the assurance that members were reading and responding to their messages. Therefore, when

forum members see tangible signs of the presence of others in the online discussion forum, such as having forum members post queries and questions for clarification and receiving good or quality answers to the queries posted, they appear to place their trust in the online discussion forum.

4.3 Theme 2: Social Presence

The feel of the presence of others in the mediated environment is termed social presence. The "felt presence" of others in online discussion forums and virtual communities acts as a catalyst that encourages forum members to communicate with each other. Response in the form of messages from online discussion forum members showed that other forum members in the online discussion forum community followed the discussion and responded to the request to share and exchange information. In online discussion forum interaction, it is the feeling that other forum members are reading their messages and will respond to it is the ultimate feeling of social presence in online discussion forums.

Hence when the presence of other forum members is felt in the exchanges of messages in a threaded discussion, it leads the way for a formation of *Guanxi* that shows that forum members care and support the common needs of forum members; they seem to develop a "shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to being together" (Brook & Oliver, 2003, p. 42). A higher degree of felt presence was more likely to result in forum members feeling more connected with each. Hence, to build and sustain *Guanxi* in online discussion forums, forum members need to feel the presence of each other before they can bond.

When trust and social presence are found in the online discussion forum community, the final need for *Guanxi* to form among the online discussion forum community is to have forum members interact respectfully or politely. Therefore, what appeared to blend trust and social presence for sustaining *Guanxi* is Face Preserving Strategy when forum members, among others, avoided disagreement, regulated their language behaviours and were tactful at responding to messages. These three dimensions are reflected in the language strategies identified in the online discussion forums, as depicted in Figure 5.

4.4 Face preserving Strategy

A way of strengthening *Guanxi* is by maintaining its members' *public face*. Hence, the social expectancies of ensuring that the forum members' public face was not compromised; members need to be polite, diplomatic, and respectful of others, summed up as politeness in CMC. Though, at times traces of impoliteness appear, the study shows that forum members were able to use the appropriate politeness strategies to redress their actions to counterbalance the disruptive effect of face-threatening acts (FTAs) in online discussion forums. Hence, two-way communication that showed respect for those involved in an online discussion forum interaction helped form and sustain *Guanxi in* the online discussion forum.
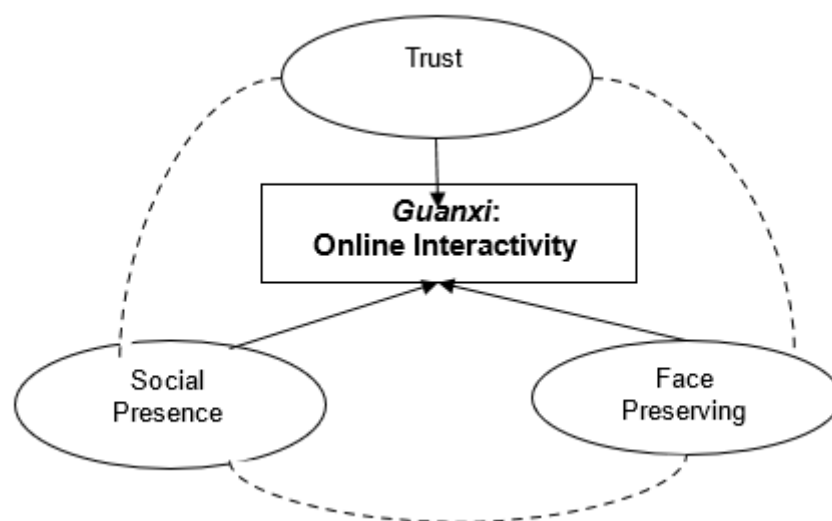
Figure 5. The three dimensions used for building online Guanxi

As seen in Figure 5, *Guanxi* remained at the centre of online discussion forum interaction because it was noticed that online *Guanxi* caused online discussion forum members to return to online discussion forums to seek answers or share their knowledge and experiences. To build online, *Guanxi* forum members need to feel the presence of others in the forum. When members respond to their queries and suggestions from the online discussion forum members, this encourages them to interact in online discussion forums because they know the members will read the post and give the necessary comments. With social presence, online discussion forum members trusted that other members would give reliable and useful feedback. They also treat others politely by using the necessary face-saving practices so as not to appear rude and gain the trust of the online discussion forum community.

5. Conclusion

The present study contributed to understanding the interactive language strategies that highlighted the online behaviour of online discussion forum members. An online discussion forum is a virtual place where information is shared through the conversation when forum members use different language functions to seek, share and exchange information. In this study, the online discussion forum discussions were typically those that evolved around specific topics of common interest to Malaysians so that the study's findings would reflect interactive language behaviours among Malaysians. Online discussion forums were selected for this study because they can seek, share, and exchange information collaboratively. To date, little is known about Malaysians' online communicative behaviour that encourages them to stay connected and share ideas in online discussion forums. Using the analytical framework of Herring's Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), the study carried out a qualitative analysis of the naturally occurring data gathered from several online discussion forums in Malaysia that actively discussed Malaysian issues. The study found that though there was much *disapproving* function in the interaction, an almost equal number of language

functions were categorised as *being polite*. This shows that even though the online discussion forum members *disapprove* of each other's views, they usually do it without damaging the "face". Next, the study investigated the language strategies that emerged from the data that encourage interactivity in the online discussion forum. Interactivity was highlighted because it was observed that this variable was essential to keep the online discussion forum interaction on-going by encouraging the members to post. This study found that interactivity does not simply occur but must be intentionally built or worked upon in online discussion forums. One of the important findings that emerged from this study is that to increase interactivity in online discussion forums, and it does not need to have the entire online discussion forum members actively posting to have an in-depth discussion, but rather a small group of members. These members were usually the thread starters and the leaders who emerged in the interaction process because they had the knowledge or experience in the topic of discussion. Finally, the study found that online *Guanxi* was a necessary element to increase interactivity in online discussion forums. Forum members felt the presence of others in the virtual community when their queries were answered, members greeted or took leave, called others by name etc., leading to forming of online *Guanxi*. Online *Guanxi* was formed when forum members felt the presence of others, and when there was trust that forum members were able to share information that would be helpful and the whole process of seeking, sharing, and exchanging information was done by respecting one another's "face".

Acknowledgements

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