



## **Compliments and Compliment Responses on Twitter among Male and Female Celebrities**

**Siti Yuhaida Anniqah Mohd Yusof and Tan Bee Hoon\***

*Department of English Languages, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication,  
Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia*

### **ABSTRACT**

This study illustrates how compliments and compliment response strategies differ across gender among celebrities in Malaysia. The objective of the study is to identify the functions and topics of compliments, and also the patterns and strategies of compliment responses across gender among celebrities on twitter. Forty celebrities consisting of 20 males and 20 females were selected and the data were collected from their twitter accounts. A total of 220 compliments and compliment responses were extracted from the celebrities' tweets as to form the corpus for investigation. The results indicate several differences on how compliments and compliment responses are used by men and women. Women prefer to compliment on appearance, while men prefer to compliment on possession. The results also reveal differences in strategies used by the celebrities to respond to compliments. Female addressees adhere to the first principle that governed the act of politeness, that is, to accept the compliment in order to give face to the complimenter. However, male addressees tend to use comment acceptance when receiving compliments. The study provides evidence for significant differences in the use of compliments and compliment responses across gender. In addition, cross-cultural differences are also discussed briefly.

*Keywords:* Celebrities, compliment, compliment responses, twitter

### **ARTICLE INFO**

*Article history:*

Received: 6 August 2013

Accepted: 27 December 2013

*E-mail addresses:*

yuhaidaniq@yahoo.com (Siti Yuhaida Anniqah Mohd Yusof),

tanbh@upm.edu.my (Tan Bee Hoon)

\* Corresponding author

### **INTRODUCTION**

Studies of cross-cultural pragmatics have reported that the way speech acts are realized is different across languages. According to Yousefvand (2010), many people who take part in a conversation within different languages and different cultures often experience breakdowns in

communication with speakers from different first language (L1) backgrounds. This is also realized by sociolinguists that such intercultural miscommunication is partly contributed to the different value systems that govern each speaker's L1 cultural group (Chick, 1996). In other words, the studies confirm that culture plays an important role in determining how interlocutors react to compliments given to them. Apart from culture, gender also determines how people use compliments and react to compliments.

As the world is undergoing globalization and due to rapid advancement in technology, twitter is a popular platform used by a good number of celebrities all around the world to establish good rapport with fans. By being active on twitter, their fans can interact with them, and they can also update on any latest activity they involved in to their fans. This use of twitter is also found to be quite common among Malaysian celebrities. Many celebrities in Malaysia now have a twitter account where fans can interact with them. As we can observe, celebrities usually receive much compliment regarding their skills, appearance and performance from their fans. Therefore, it is important for the celebrities to be tactful in accepting the compliments in order to maintain cordial rapport with fans. At the same time in accepting the compliment though, the celebrities must not appear to be arrogant because they have to reflect themselves as a good role model to the public.

Up to now, most studies on compliments and responses pertaining to cross-cultural and cross gender are done by collecting

and eliciting responses from subjects via questionnaires or interviews. In comparison, not many studies elicit compliments and related responses from other sources of data such as films. A study that sourced data from films was conducted by Bruti (2006) who commented that the most inspiring study on the structure and distribution of compliments and compliment responses in films was conducted by Rose and Kasper (2001). Rose and Kasper (2001) establish the validity of film language in the teaching of pragmatics in language classes. Compliments and responses in films can serve as data for research because such dialogues in films also appear in real life conversation. This indicates that researchers do not always have to rely on real life conversation to collect data. Data of interaction in a conversation can also be obtained from other means such as chat rooms and social networks because the data can be considered authentic. The difference between conversation in real world and conversation in chat rooms and other social networks such as blogs or twitter is that the former is spoken, but the latter is written. Even though the conversation in chat rooms and social networks is in written form known as written speech, it still has the language of spoken conversation.

## REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

### *Compliments*

Compliments are positive expressions, commendation or admiration that can boost one's morale. The act of giving compliments is seen as good remarks that directly or indirectly give credit to

somebody for something that is appreciated by the speaker of the addressee and even the whole speech society (Ye, 1995). Research in New Zealand, United States and Britain suggests that women both give and receive more compliments than men. A study by Holmes (1988) established that 51 per cent of the compliments were given by a woman to another woman, while only 9 per cent were given by a man to another man; 23.1 per cent were given by a man to a woman and 16.5 per cent by a woman to a man. This pattern has also been found in comparable American data (Wolfson, 1983) and in Britain (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001). One of the most primary functions of compliments is to consolidate and increase solidarity between interlocutors. The primary purpose of compliments is to create and reinforce solidarity between the speaker and the addressee (Manes & Wolfson, 1981). According to Holmes (1988), compliments are commonly regarded as positively affective speech acts that are meant to the addressee, which can be used as a powerful device for mutual solidarity and support. Besides, compliments not only convey honest admiration of positive qualities, but they are also used to substitute greetings, thanks, or apologies and minimize face-threatening acts (Morales, 2012).

The most common topics of compliments are: possessions, appearance, skills and achievements (Holmes, 1988; Wolfson 1983). According to Holmes (1988), people usually compliment on appearance. This type of compliment is usually known to be most suitable among people who know

each other well although sometimes it can be used by some people who have what one considers as remote relationship. According to Wolfson (1983), usually a speaker will compliment on a person's appearance, and they usually make compliments on their apparel. In addition, according to Wolfson (1983) in her study of American English compliment behaviour, there are two types of this sort of compliment. The first type is general and the second type refers to specific acts. The general one includes all compliments, which refer to something that is done by the addressees' effort or skill, and also those that refer to the addressees' talent, taste and personal qualities. The specific one refers to compliments which are act-specific. For example, "you are being so kind about this" or "that is very interesting."

#### *Compliment Responses*

Like compliments, compliment responses have a role in preserving and establishing the solidarity of relationships and the harmony of it (Heidari *et al.*, 2009). According to Pomerantz (1978), two rules govern the principle of compliment responses. The first rule is that the recipient must agree with the compliment given by the complimenter, and the second is that the recipient must avoid self-praise. These rules are somewhat in line with Leech's (1983) explanatory analysis of politeness that the Agreement Maxim is the first constraint followed by the Modesty Maxim. The Modesty Maxim puts the recipient in an uncomfortable position to accept the compliment and pressure him or her to decline the compliment and at the

end disagree with the complimenter. These two maxims obviously contradict with each other.

Holmes and Brown (1987) then furthered the study on compliment responses and put forward three broad categories of how a receiver responds to compliments, which are accept, reject and deflect. Accept denotes that the remark is acknowledged and accepted as a compliment. If reject, the complimentee tries to change the complimentary force, and evades or redirects the given compliments (Morales, 2012). In New Zealand, complimentees frequently choose to address the compliment by using the Accept strategies (Holmes, 1986). Holmes (1988) continues the study

of compliment responses and proposes three acts in the form of macro level, and each macro level is then sub-categorized into forms of micro level. Another large-scale study on compliment responses by speakers of American English was done by Herbert (1986), who revised the Pomerantz's taxonomy of three main categories to twelve (see Table 1).

*Compliment and Compliment Responses Related to Culture and Gender*

Many variables can influence how a society perceives compliments and react to them. Two important variables are culture and gender. According to Holmes (1986), complimenting behaviour varies cross-

TABLE 1  
Herbert's (1986) Taxonomy of Compliment Responses

<b>A. Agreement</b>	
I. Acceptances	
1. Appreciation Token	<i>Thank you</i>
2. Comment Acceptance	<i>Thanks, it's my favorite too</i>
3. Praise Upgrade	<i>Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?</i>
II. Comment History	<i>I bought it from a trip to Arizona</i>
III. Transfers	
1. Reassignment	<i>My brother gave it to me</i>
2. Return	<i>So is yours</i>
<b>B. Non-agreement</b>	
I. Scale Down	<i>It's really quite old</i>
II. Question	<i>Do you really think so?</i>
III. Non-acceptances	
1. Disagreement	<i>I hate it</i>
2. Qualification	<i>It's all right, but Len's is nicer</i>
IV. No Acknowledgement	<i>[silence]</i>
<b>C. Other interpretations</b>	
I. Request	<i>You wanna borrow this one too?</i>

(Source: Yousefvand, 2010, p. 95)

culturally. Evidence that supports this claim is that second language learners will face problems in understanding and using compliments accordingly (Wolfson, 1981; Holmes & Brown, 1987). Misunderstandings usually revolve around what one culture regards as sincerity compared to another (Thomas, 1983). Appropriate ways to respond to compliments also differ cross-culturally. As pointed out by Al Falasi (2007), differences arise when it comes to compliment responses. Different cultures respond to compliments differently. For example, Arabic and South African English are found to accept compliments more openly rather than reject them. On the contrary, non-native speakers of English such as from Asian countries tend to reject to compliments because they seem to have difficulties in responding to compliments in an appropriate manner (Al Falasi, 2007).

Apart from differences between cultures, it is also important to take into account the effect of inter-gender communication in different cultures. As stated by Cedar (2006), men and women rely on different sub-cultural norms in interpreting information encoded in language. In addition, men and women perceived compliments differently (Holmes, 1988) where females tend to perceive compliments as a positive speech act, serving to increase or consolidate the solidarity between speaker and addressee. In contrast, males perceive compliments as a face-threatening act to the extent that the compliments may imply that the complimenter envies the addressee in some way or would like something

belonging to the addressee. Apart from that, different genders utilized compliment and compliment responses differently too (Herbert, 1990). Females usually disagree with compliments, and males have a higher tendency to question or fail to acknowledge a compliment.

Many research studies with contrasting results have been conducted to compare compliment responses in different languages, and some of these studies show that female Iranian teenage EFL learners tend to avoid and reject compliments more than male Iranian teenage EFL learners (Heidari *et al.*, 2009; Mohajernia & Solimani, 2013). Another interesting result from the study is that the former used an indirect communication of modest acceptance by their no response meaning yes. This demonstrates consideration and politeness towards others. On the other hand, male Iranian teenage EFL learners feel comfortable in using direct communication of acknowledgement. Lorenzo-Dus (2001) examined compliment responses of British and Spanish male and female undergraduates. The study shows that Spanish males tend to upgrade compliments ironically more than their female counterparts do. On the other hand, the Arabics and the South African English are more likely to accept compliments rather than reject them compared to the American English (Nelson, Al-Batal & Echols, 1996).

One interesting study by Sharifian (2005) found that speakers of Persian tend to scale down compliments because there is a schema that appears to be rooted in certain cultural-spiritual tradition in their society.

It also encourages the speakers to reassign the compliments to god, parents, friends or other people. The schema that largely influences how they counter compliments is called the *shekasteh-nafsi*. This schema has made the Persian to react to compliments in certain ways to show their modesty which plays an important role in Persian politeness (Sharifian, 2005).

Speakers of East Asian Languages (Chinese, Japanese, Malay and Thai) tend to avoid accepting compliments and they would rather reject the compliments compared to the English (Chen, 1993; Daikuhara, 1986; Gajaseni, 1995; Ye, 1995). Chiang and Pochtrager (1993) investigated the way Chinese speakers of English and American speakers of English responded to compliment according to their gender. The study found out that in most situations, the former used negative elaboration as well as denial, but the latter used positive elaborations. In another study, Chen (1993) examined the strategies used by American English speakers and Chinese English speakers in responding to compliments. The study found that the American English speakers' use the strategy of acceptance that is governed by the Leech's Agreement Maxim. On the other hand, the Chinese English speakers' use rejection as a strategy that is governed by Leech's Modesty Maxim. The American society normally reacts to compliments by gracefully accepting it, whereas the Chinese society prefers to be humble by rejecting the compliment. Such a difference can be attributed to social values of the two cultures.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study was conducted to investigate the functions and topics of compliments among male and female complimenters, the compliment response patterns of celebrities in Malaysia, and the compliment response strategies used by Malaysian celebrities according to gender as seen in celebrity tweets. The research questions investigated are:

1. What are the functions and topics of compliments across gender found on Twitter accounts of Malaysian celebrities?
2. What are the compliment response patterns of Malaysian celebrities on Twitter?
3. What are the compliment response strategies used by Malaysian celebrities according to their gender as seen on Twitter?

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research Design*

This study situates in the realm of corpus linguistics and discourse analysis. A collection of compliments and compliment responses of Malaysian celebrities via their twitter accounts are collected and analysed based on identified categories. By following local celebrities' tweets, the study is able to gain the local culture perspective. The data are presented in simple percentages according to functions and topics of compliments, as well as compliment response patterns and strategies. The results are compared and contrasted

according to gender. The data are analyzed analytically and descriptively.

### *Sources of Data*

For the purpose of this study, 40 twitter accounts from 20 male and 20 female celebrities were chosen to extract the compliments and compliment responses. In this ICT era, most celebrities use Twitter like a diary where they post their latest routines and opinions. They also use Twitter to interact and socialize with people. Some of the interactions include receiving compliments from fans and responding to the compliments. Therefore, it is logical to use Twitter as a source of data because it can serve as a reflection of normal conversation experienced by interlocutors albeit as written speech. After all, language used in text-messages is closer to the spoken word than that used on paper because people text in a way similar to talking (Tagg, 2009).

In the present study, the compliments extracted from the Twitter accounts are the compliments addressed directly to the celebrities. Compliments that are not addressed to them directly are excluded.

### **DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE**

This section explains the procedure of data collection. The procedure includes choosing the Twitter account, extracting the compliments and compliment responses, translating the data and coding process.

#### *Choosing the Twitter Accounts*

Twitter accounts belonging to 40 celebrities (20 males and 20 females) were purposefully

chosen for this study. The selection of the celebrities was based on the following criteria: a) they must be local celebrities with their first language being Bahasa Melayu, and all of them are Malay; and b) they must be actively tweeting at least 3 times a day. All of the data were collected from the Twitter for 2 months (September - October 2012).

#### *Extracting the Compliments and Compliment Responses*

This study only chose compliments and compliment responses which were regarded as politeness strategies. This means that compliments with ironic meaning or sarcastic, and compliments for an absent receiver were all excluded.

#### *Translating the Data*

Most of the words used in these tweets are bilingual in English and Malay. Therefore, any compliment that contains Malay words was translated to English. However, not many Malay words were used because most of the time they used English. This makes the translating process a lot easier. The translation can be considered a minor process because the focus of this study is to identify the patterns of the interactions and not so much on translation.

#### *Coding*

There is also a methodological consideration which is relevant to be mentioned here, that is, inter-rater reliability. In order to minimize errors and increase reliability of the results, in the coding of different compliment

topics, functions and compliment responses, at least two raters coded the data. In the case of disagreement, a third colleague was consulted to reach a consensus on the coding.

## DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

The data were analyzed by using descriptive statistics where percentages, comparison and contrast are used.

### *Research Question 1: Functions and Topics of Compliments*

The first research question investigates two aspects which are the functions of compliments and the topics of compliments.

#### *a) Functions of compliments*

The study chose 6 functions of compliments which include: to express admiration, to establish solidarity, to replace some speech acts such as greetings, gratitude and thanks, to soften tight situation, to start a conversation, and to reinforce a desired behaviour. These classifications are based on previous studies from Herbert (1990), Wolfson (1983) and Manes (1983). Table 2 illustrates the functions of compliments and examples that serve each function.

#### *b) Topics of compliments*

The compliments analyzed in the present study consisted of 220 examples. The compliments were coded by referring to the categories from previous studies which are: possessions, appearance, skills and achievements (Holmes, 1988; Wolfson

1983). Table 3 illustrates the four topics of compliments.

### *Research Question 2: Compliment response patterns of Malaysian celebrities*

The study uses Herbert's (1990) taxonomy of compliment response strategies as a framework to classify the compliment responses from the tweets collected to answer research questions 2 and 3. According to Herbert's taxonomy, compliment response strategies are divided into three main categories. The three main categories are: agreement, non-agreement and other interpretations. The main categories also have their respective sub-categories (see Herbert, 1990). The compliment responses are categorized according to the sub-categories (see Table 4).

### *Research Question 3: Compliment response strategies according to gender*

Research question 3 focuses on a micro aspect which is the gender of the celebrities. The study employs Herbert's (1990) taxonomy of compliment response strategies to classify the compliment responses from the data collected. After the coding, the data is then analyzed statistically, using percentage values. Comparing and contrasting are also used to show the differences on the compliment response strategies of the two genders.

TABLE 2  
Functions of compliments (Adapted from Wu, 2008, p. 10)

1. To express admiration or approval of someone's work/appearance/taste (Herbert, 1990). Example: I like your dress. Explanation: This compliment praises someone's appearance and shows the speaker admiration.
2. To establish/confirm/maintain solidarity (Wolfson, 1983). Example: I like your dress. Explanation: When a stranger comes into a group and makes the compliment, it can be regarded as a method to establish rapport in the group.
3. To replace gratitude/greetings/congratulations/apologies (Wolfson, 1989). Example: How nice you are today! Explanation: When two friends meet with each other, this utterance has the same function of the greeting as "How are you?"
4. To soften a face-threatening act such as apologies, requests and criticisms (Wolfson, 1983). Example: Your dress is too much but I like your shoes. Explanation: If the speaker makes some offence to the hearer, he could use a compliment to change the topic and soften the tensed atmosphere.
5. To open and sustain conversation (conversation strategy) (Wolfson, 1983). Example: Hi, your English is very good, when did you begin to learn it? Explanation: If the interlocutors are strangers, they can begin their conversation from the compliment to open the dialogues.
6. To reinforce desired behaviour (Manes, 1983) Example: How nice your earrings are! Where did you buy them? Explanation: These two sentences show not only the speaker's admiration, but also the speaker's strong hope to buy the same earrings.

TABLE 3  
Topics of compliments (Adapted from Wu, 2008, p. 26)

1. Appearance –dress, looks, make-up, etc. Example: Sazzy Falak always looks nice in everything that she wears.
2. Possession –cars, albums, films, etc. Example: I love to hear Linda's voice.
3. Performance/ability/skills –job or competencies such as skills of acting, etc. Example: You are the best deejay!
4. Personality –internals traits, emotions etc. Example: Maya Karin, you are incomparable.

TABLE 4

Compliment responses based on Herbert (1990) (Adapted from Yousefvand, 2010, p. 99)

---

1. APPRECIATION TOKEN. A verbal acceptance of a compliment, acceptance not being semantically fitted to the specifics of that compliment Example: Thank you.
2. COMMENT ACCEPTANCE. The addressee accepts the complimentary force by means of a response semantically fitted to the compliment. Example: It's one of my favorite too.
3. PRAISE UPGRADE. The addressee accepts the compliment and asserts that the compliment force is insufficient. Example: I always look young.
4. COMMENT HISTORY. The addressee, although agreeing, with the complimentary force, does not accept the praise personally, rather, s/he impersonalizes the complimentary force by giving impersonal details. Example: That song is from my solo album. Created by Audi Mok.
5. REASSIGNMENT. The addressee agrees with the compliment, but the complimentary force is transferred to some third person or to the object complimented itself. Example: Alhamdulillah – Praise to God.
6. RETURN. The praise is shifted to the addresser/complimenter. Example: You are pretty too.
7. SCALE DOWN. The force of the compliment is minimized or scaled down by the addressee. Example: I'm just average.
8. QUESTION. The addressee might want an expansion or repetition of the original compliment or question the sincerity of the compliment. Example: Really?
9. DISAGREEMENT. The addressee directly disagrees with addresser's assertion. Example: No. I looked tired.
10. QUALIFICATION. The addressee may choose not to accept the full complimentary force offered by qualifying that praise, usually by employing but, yet, etc. Example: But I like my first album more.
11. NO ACKNOWLEDGEMENT. The addressee gives no indication of having heard the compliment, that is, he or she employs the conversational turn to do something other than responding to the compliment offered e.g shift the topic. Example: [silence]
12. REQUEST INTERPRETATION. The addressee interprets the compliment as a request rather a simple compliment. Example: Do you want it?

---

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Research Question 1: Functions and topics of compliments*

The first research question seeks to investigate the functions and topics of compliments. It is obvious that compliments serve a number of different functions on different situations. According to Wu (2008), compliments can comprise the functions and topics of compliments. In the next section, each function is explained in detail.

### *Results*

Table 5 summarizes the frequency of compliments from male and female complimenters according to the function. From the data, most of the compliments are for expressing admiration that accounts for 72.7% of the data. Most of the compliments admire on the way the addressee's look, dress up, and even the voice. The second use of compliments is to established solidarity (20.5%). As the complimenters are fans to the

addressees, they tend to give compliments in order to build relationship with the addressees because they regard them as their idols. For the complimenters who are familiar to the addressees, compliments are given because they want to establish solidarity with the addressees. The third function of compliments is to replace compliments with other speech acts such as greetings, thanks and gratitude that accounts for 3.6% of the data.

From the result, it is also noted that for women, the highest portion of compliments given is related to the function of expressing admiration (71.7%), and secondly solidarity (22.0%). This means that women usually show their admiration and solidarity when giving compliments to the addressees. With regard to men, they also use compliments to express admiration most frequently (75.4%), and secondly to establish solidarity (16.4%). Interestingly, males tend to use compliments to express admiration more than women, but the difference is not significant at 3.7%.

TABLE 5  
Frequency of compliments by functions from male and female complimenters

Function	Females		Males		Total	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Express admiration	114	71.7%	46	75.4%	160	72.7%
Established solidarity	35	22.0%	10	16.4%	45	20.5%
Replace greetings, gratitude	5	3.1%	3	4.9%	8	3.6%
Soften a tight situation	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Open conversation	2	1.3%	1	1.6%	3	1.4%
Reinforce desired behaviour	3	1.9%	1	1.6%	4	1.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>99.9%</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>100%</b>

The second area investigated is the topics of compliments. Table 6 shows that the majority of the compliments refer to appearance (32.7%), and women tend to compliment on appearance more than men (37.1% vs 21.3%). Looks and clothes are the common topics of compliments. The second most frequent topic of compliments is on possession (25.5%). Evidently, men tend to compliment on possession (32.8%) more than women (23.1%). Compliments regarding possession include the addressees' album, movies and pictures. The third frequent topic on compliments refers to ability (21.4%) and the compliments are usually related to the addressee's skills and performance. Manes (1983) describes such compliments as "the quality of something produced through the addressee's skill or effort: a well-done job, a skilfully played game, a good meal" (p. 101). The last topic of compliment is personality (20.9%) in which women prefer to compliment on this topic (22.4%) compared to men (16.4%).

### Discussion

In this study, 220 compliments were analyzed. From the total compliments, 159 were addressed to women and 61

were addressed to men. This result is in line with Wolfson's (1983) findings that women receive more compliments than men. In the data collected for this study, female celebrities received 5 compliments while male celebrities received just one compliment on average. Holmes (1986) states that perhaps people give compliment more to women because women appreciate and value the compliment. Furthermore, Wolfson (1983) adds that "women because of their role in the social order, are seen as appropriate recipients of all manner of social judgments in the form of compliments, the way women is spoken to is, no matter what her status, a subtle and powerful way of perpetuating her subordinate role in society" (p. 243).

There are many functions of compliments. Herbert and Straight (1989) argue that Americans give compliments as a medium for the (re) negotiation of solidarity. Americans tend to use compliments as solidarity signals. Holmes (1988), on the other hand, argued that men and women perceive compliments in different ways. For women, compliments are perceived as positive speech acts, serving to increase or reinforce solidarity between speakers and

TABLE 6  
Frequency of compliment topics from male and female complimenters

Function	Females		Males		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Appearance	59	37.1%	13	21.3%	72	32.7%
Possession	36	23.1%	20	32.8%	56	25.5%
Performance/ability/skills	29	18.5%	18	29.5%	47	21.4%
Personality	35	22.4%	10	16.4%	45	20.5%
Total	159	99.9%	61	100%	220	100%

addressees. Researchers have acknowledged this function of compliments as the primary use of compliments (Herbert, 1986; Manes & Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson & Manes, 1980). Men, on the other hand, perceive compliments as a face-threatening act to the extent that they assume that the complimenter may envy the addressee in some way, or would like something from the addressee (Holmes, 1988). Hence, the data of the present study also show that men rarely compliment other men due to this mutual understanding.

In addition, women also use compliments to establish solidarity (Holmes, 1996). The present study agrees with Holmes because the collected data also reveals that some of the female complimenters use compliments to establish solidarity more often than men. Example (1) illustrates how compliment is used to establish solidarity.

- (1) Complimenter: Maya Karin, you look amazing. Simplicity is the key I suppose.  
 Addressee: Thank you. Yes, I don't really like wearing make-up; it makes my face feels itchy.

Interestingly though, this present study also shows that the primary function of the compliments is to express admiration. Example (2) shows that the compliment is to express admiration to the addressee's appearance.

- (2) Complimenter: Fasha Sandha is beautiful and stunning.  
 Addressee: Thank you dear.

Admiration is the primary function of compliments in this study probably because the addressees are celebrities, and the compliments came from their fans. According to Brown and Levinson (1978), compliments usually convey messages that the recipient is admirable or interesting to the complimenter. Hence, we can say that fans admire the celebrities, and perhaps want to be with them or want whatever the admired celebrity possesses. This perhaps has contributed to the fact that most of the compliments found in the present study serve the function of expressing admiration. One more interesting finding is that men use give compliments to express admiration more than women. This is normal because in social class order, men are more dominant compared to women, so the higher status person will give the compliment to the lower one (Sidanius *et al.*, 2000).

In the present study, four topics of compliment are considered which include appearance, possession, ability and personality (Holmes, 1986; Herbert, 1986). The result shows that women preferred to compliment each other on appearance. Many of the compliments in the data are related to how beautiful the addressee looks or how beautifully she dresses as shown in Example (3).

- (3) Complimenter: You are so pretty.  
Beautiful with style.  
Addressee: All praises belong to  
God.

Expressions such as Example (3) are also shown in the study by Holmes (1988) who concludes that women compliment each other more on appearances than on any other topic. Looking from the perspective of status, the most frequent compliments on appearance are from women to women, followed by from men to women. This indicates that compliments are given from a higher status class to an equal or lower status class.

In the study by Holmes (1986), the second most popular topic of compliments is ability. However, the present study contradicts with Holmes because possession, not ability, is the second most popular topic. Most of the compliments on possession came from female complimenters to male addressees. Next, Holmes (1988) states that compliments on skills predominate from higher to lower status men and from men to women of different statuses. The present study also shows that men receive compliments on their skills more than women, and most of the compliments come from women. The fourth topic on compliments is on personality but the difference is just minimal across gender.

#### *Research Question 2: Compliment response patterns of Malaysian celebrities*

A study from Herbert (1986) on response types among the Americans and the South African English indicate that when

addressees reply to compliments, a certain type of pattern can be acknowledged. The second research question of the present study attempted to investigate the pattern of compliment response of celebrities in Malaysia.

#### *Results*

As shown in Table 7, among the three main categories, agreement responses are the most frequent (90.89%) in the compliment exchanges. Among them, acceptance and non-acceptance response types account for 69.55% and 21.34% of all the responses, respectively. The remaining responses comprise non-agreement responses (9.07%). Evidently, each type of compliment response does not carry equal weight. The category that carries the most weight is the agreement type. Therefore, it can be interpreted that most of the compliment response strategies is agreement. This result is similar to Herbert's (1990) findings for American English speakers' compliment responses. According to Herbert (1990), American speakers' responses to compliments use agreement strategies that can be accounted for (66%) comprise 29.4% appreciation token, 6.6% comment acceptance, 0.4% praise upgrade, 19.3% comment history, 3% reassignment, and 7.3% return.

#### *Discussion*

The dominant compliment response pattern that can be seen in the present study is that two thirds of the data indicate that the recipients respond to compliments by using the agreement strategy. Therefore, it

TABLE 7  
Frequency of compliment response strategies of addressees

Response strategies	Number	Percentage
A. Agreement		
I. Acceptances		
1. appreciation token	133	60.46
2. comment acceptance	20	9.09
3. praise upgrade	0	0
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>69.55</b>
II. Non-acceptance		
1. comment history	6	2.72
2. reassignment	24	10.90
3. return	17	7.72
Subtotal	<b>47</b>	<b>21.34</b>
Subtotal	<b>200</b>	<b>90.89</b>
B. Non-agreement		
1. scale down	4	1.81
2. question	7	3.18
3. disagreement	4	1.81
4. qualification	0	0
5. no acknowledgement	5	2.27
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>9.07</b>
C. Other interpretation		
1. request	0	0
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>99.96</b>

is clear that the recipient observes the first principle of compliment which is to agree to the compliment. Perhaps the reason to this is because most of the complimenters are their fans, so giving face to their fans seems to be the right way. With this the hearer is actually observing the Agreement Maxim by Leech (1983). This pattern shows similarity with Herbert's (1990) study on American English speakers' compliment responses, whereby 66% of the data show that the speakers use agreement strategy.

Under the agreement strategies, the most responses used in the present study are appreciation token, or what is known as the 'textbook' responses. This is perhaps it is the safest way to respond to a compliment and to avoid self-praise. Hence, the hearer has observed the second principle of compliment by Pomerantz which is avoiding self-praise. The second one is reassignment. Due to the recipients' strong ties with their religion, they have faith in their God (Allah). The strong tie is deeply embedded in their speech

acts. This is why some of the compliment responses are in the form of a small prayer that the speaker be blessed by Allah and what he or she gets or has is with the help of Allah. Example (4) shows how religion influences are imbedded in the addressee's response to compliments.

- (4) Complimenter: You have the most  
gorgeous yet  
masculine smile  
ever.  
Addressee: Alhamdullillah  
(Praises to God).

One of the most outstanding features in the collected corpus is that none of the recipients use the praise upgrade strategy to respond to a compliment. This indicates that they did not use the strategy in order to show modesty. This is probably due to the fact that they are Asians and their social values are to appear humble. A study by Chen (1993) also presents that Asian speakers are motivated by Leech's Modesty Maxim (1983).

*Research Question 3: Compliment response strategies according to gender*

While the second research question looks into the pattern of compliment responses of celebrities in Malaysia, the third research question explores the pattern further by looking at the strategies of compliment response according to the gender of the celebrities.

*Results*

Table 8 indicates that among the two genders, women tend to use the appreciation token

strategy to respond to compliments. This 'textbook' response is the most frequently used by women that accounts for 62.70% as compared to men who use it for 57.45%. Men do accept compliments but indirectly as can be seen from the results. Men use comment acceptance and reassignment that account for 13.83%, which is more as compared to the women. Interestingly though, under the strategy of agreement and the sub-category of acceptance, men seem most likely to agree to the compliments more than women because the percentage is 71.28 as compared to women's 68.26%. However, in the opposite sub-category, women use non-acceptance more than men when responding to compliments. The table shows that females use the agreement strategy (92.07%) more than men (89.36%). The rest of the data fall under the non-agreement strategy: 7.94% for women and 10.64% for men. It is clear that men use the strategy more than women under the sub-category of questions that accounts for 5.32% of the compliment responses. Overall, men use this strategy more than women, and it indicates that women practice the act of politeness more than men.

*Discussion*

In the data, female celebrities show a preference for using the appreciation token far more often than male celebrities (62.7% vs. 57.45%). Male celebrities accept the compliment by using appreciation token less than females do, and they use comment acceptance more than females to weaken the complimentary force. This is probably due

TABLE 8  
Frequency of compliment response strategies by gender of addressees

Response strategies	Female		Male	
	Number	%	Number	%
A. Agreement				
I. Acceptances				
1. appreciation token	79	62.70	54	57.45
2. comment acceptance	7	5.56	13	13.83
3. praise upgrade	0	0	0	0
Subtotal	86	68.26	67	71.28
II. Nonacceptance				
1. comment history	5	3.97	1	1.06
2. reassignment	11	8.73	13	13.83
3. return	14	11.11	3	3.19
Subtotal	30	23.81	17	18.08
Subtotal	<b>116</b>	<b>92.07</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>89.36</b>
B. Nonagreement				
1. scale down	3	2.38	1	1.06
2. question	2	1.58	5	5.32
3. disagreement	3	2.38	1	1.06
4. qualification	0	0	0	0
5. no acknowledgement	2	1.58	3	3.19
Subtotal	<b>10</b>	<b>7.94</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10.64</b>
C. Other interpretation				
1. request	0	0	0	0
Subtotal	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>100</b>

to the fact that men perceive compliments as a face-threatening act (Holmes, 1988). Hence, they react in a way that can save face of the complimenter by accepting the compliment but with reservation. To be more precise, in avoiding self-praise, men tend to employ the comment acceptance strategy but women simply favour accepting the compliment.

Interesting issues that emerge from the results is that men use reassignment more than women (13.83% vs. 8.73%). Most of the compliments they received were

responded with “what they possess came from God.” The present study shows that men tend to use this strategy more when the compliment comes from women, but women use it less when the compliment comes from men. This indicates that it may have something to do with the religion. Does this show that men are more pious than women? Perhaps, more studies can be conducted to shed light on why men prefer to use this strategy compared to women. Example (5) illustrates this situation.

- (5) Female Complimenter: Pengacara terbaik! Awal memang superb.  
(The best emcee! Awal is superb  
Male Addressee: Thanks Alhamdulillah. Bakat Allah kasi.  
(Thanks Alhamdulillah. Talent given by Allah)

Expression (5) shows the male addressee reassigns the compliment to another party. In this case, it was reassigned to God. This type of compliment responses is most common when the compliment is offered by a woman.

The other most frequently used strategy is question. This is a sub-category of the non-agreement strategy. According to Holmes (1986), women tend to use this strategy because women are more concerned about face than men when they reject a compliment. However, the present study shows that men prefer using this strategy more than women do (5.32% vs. 1.58%). This strategy is mostly used by men, especially when the complimenter is a woman. This is maybe due to man's higher status in the Malaysian society, and so they have the power to confirm the compliment again or ask for further clarification on the compliment received. Example (6) illustrates this situation:

- (6) Female Complimenter: Yoursong entitled *Termolek* is very nice.  
Male Addressee: Where did you hear it from?

## CONCLUSION

Several key findings can be summarized from the present study. Firstly, women received more compliments than men. This is the same as in the study by Wolfson (1983). Holmes (1996) reported how compliments may be used, on the one side as a positive speech acts and polite strategies, yet on the other as a face-threatening act. In addition, women use compliments to each other obviously more than they do to men or men do to each other. This is the same as the study by Holmes (1988) and the pattern has also been found in comparable American data by Wolfson (1983) and in Britain (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001).

Contrary to previous studies, the present study found that men use compliments to express admiration more than women. This result is different from several previous studies that found men use compliments as encouragement and evaluation feedback (Wolfson, 1983; Manes, 1983; Holmes, 1988; Holmes, 1996). In comparison, women tend to give compliments to each other on appearance, but men, by contrast, prefer to give compliments to each other on possessions or skills. However, the present study shows that most of the compliments to men on possession are by women.

Next, the results obtained on the use of agreement as a form of compliment response strategy among celebrities are found to be similar with the study by Herbert (1990). However, the findings of the present study contradicts with studies on speakers of East Asian Languages such as Chinese, Japanese, Malay and Thai by Chen (1993), Daikuhara

(1986), Gajaseni (1995), Shih (1986), and Ye (1995, as cited in Yousefvand, 2010). The related research claim that the speakers tend to avoid accepting compliments and rather rejecting them compared to English speakers.

Finally, when comparing the compliment response strategies from the perspective of gender, the present study reveals that women tend to use the 'textbook'. Hence, it contradicts with Herbert's study (1990) which claims that women usually disagree with compliments. In the present study, men tend to use comment acceptance and reassignment to accept the compliments in order to minimize the force of the compliment. They agree with the compliments but not directly. This proves the claims made by Holmes (1988) that men perceive compliment as a face-threatening act. Apart from that, men also prefer using the questioning and reassignment strategies to counter compliments. This result agrees with Herbert (1986) that men have higher tendency to question or fail to acknowledge a compliment. However, it contradicts with Holmes' study (1986) because her study indicates that women tend to use the question strategy as women are more concerned about face than man when they reject a compliment. There also seems to be a difference in the results of compliment responses in verbal communication and compliment responses in written speech. In this present study, the result shows that the celebrities respond to the compliment by using the agreement strategy. However, an analysis of 60 compliment responses produced by Malaysians in New Zealand,

undertaken by a Malaysian student (Azman, 1986; as cited in Holmes, 1986) suggests that Malaysians are much more likely to reject compliments than to accept them.

With regard to limitations of the study, the small corpus is the main limitation. The corpus chosen for this study comprises only 220 compliments and compliment responses. This small corpus, to some extent, cannot reflect the behaviour of a larger population. The small corpus also affects the generalizability of the results.

Despite the limitations, this study has provided yet an additional example to how different people react to compliments according to their own culture. The information regarding compliment functions and compliment response patterns given in the study should provide some useful data for teachers of second language to raise students' awareness of cultural similarities and differences between L1 and L2.

## REFERENCES

- Al Falasi, H. G. (2007). Just say 'thank you': A study of compliment responses. *The Linguistics Journal*, 2(1), 28-42.
- Azman, A. (1986). Malaysian students' compliment responses. Unpublished Term Paper. Victoria University of Wellington.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1978). Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena. In E.N. Goody (Ed.), *Questions and politeness: Strategies in social interaction* (pp. 56-289). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bruti, S. (2006). Cross-cultural Pragmatics: The translation of implicit compliments in subtitles. *The Journal of Specialized Translation*, 6, 185-197.

- Cedar, P. (2006). Thai and American responses to compliments in English. *The Linguistics Journal*, 1(2), 6-28.
- Chen, R. (1993). Responding to compliments: A contrastive study of politeness strategies between American English and Chinese speakers. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 20, 49–75.
- Chiang, B., & Pochtrager, F. (1993). A pilot study of compliment responses of American-born English speakers and Chinese-born speakers. (ERIC No: ED356649).
- Chick, J. K. (1996). Intercultural communication. In L. M. Sandra, & H. H. Nancy (Eds). *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching* (pp. 329–348). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Daikuhara, M. (1986). A study of compliments from a cross-cultural perspective: Japanese vs American English. *Penn Working Papers in Educational Linguistics*, 2, 23–41.
- Gajaseni, C. (1995). A contrastive study of compliment responses in American English and Thai including the effect of gender and social status. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Linguistics, University of Illinois.
- Heidari, M. A., Rezazadeh, M., & Rasekh, A. E. (2009). A contrastive study of compliment responses among male and female Iranian teenage EFL learners. *The International Journal of Language Society and Culture*, 29, 18-31. Retrieved from <http://www.educ.utas.edu.au/users/tle/JOURNAL/>
- Herbert, K. (1986). Say “thank you” or something. *American Speech*, 61(1), 76-88.
- Herbert, R. K. (1990). Sex-based differences in compliment behavior. *Language in Society*, 19(2), 201–224. Retrieved from [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org).
- Herbert, R. K. & Straight, S. (1989). Compliment rejection versus compliment-avoidance: listener-based versus speaker-based pragmatic strategies. *Language and Communication*, 9(1), 35-47.
- Holmes, J. (1986). Compliments and compliment responses in New Zealand English. *Anthropological Linguistics*, 28(4), 485-508.
- Holmes, J. (1988). Paying compliments: A sex-preferential politeness strategy. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 12, 445–465.
- Holmes, J. (1996). *Women, men and politeness*. London: Longman.
- Holmes, J. & Brown, D. (1987). Teachers and students learning about compliments. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21(3), 523–546.
- Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principle of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Lorenzo-Dus, N. (2001). Compliment responses among British and Spanish university students: A contrastive study. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 33(1), 107-127.
- Manes, J. (1983). Compliments: A mirror of cultural values. In N. Wolfson, & E. Judd (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and language acquisition* (pp. 96-102). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Manes, J., & Wolfson, N. (1981). The compliment formula. In F. Coulmas (Ed.), *Conversational routine: Explorations in standardized communication situations and prepatterned speech* (pp. 116-132). The Hague, the Netherlands: Mouton Publishers.
- Mohajernia, R., & Solimani, H. (2013). Different strategies of compliment responses used by Iranian EFL students and Australian English Speakers. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 4(2), 340-347.
- Morales, R. C. (2012). Compliment responses across gender in Philippine context. *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 18(1), 47-60.
- Nelson, G. L., Al-Batal, M., & Echols, E. (1996). Arabic and English compliment responses: Potential for pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 17(4), 411-432.

- Pomerantz, A. (1978). Compliment responses: Notes on co-operation of multiple constraints. In J. Schenkein (Ed.), *Studies in the organisation of conversational interaction* (pp. 79-109). New York: Academic Press.
- Rose, K. R., & Kasper, G. (Eds.). (2001). *Pragmatics and Language Teaching*. Cambridge, NY: CUP.
- Sidanius, J., Levin, S., Liu, J., & Pratto, F. (2000). Social dominance orientation, anti-egalitarianism, and the political psychology of gender: An extension and cross-cultural replication. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 30, 41-67.
- Sharifian, F. (2005). The Persian cultural schema of "shakasteh-nafsi": A study of compliment responses in Persian and Anglo-Australian speakers. *Pragmatics and Cognition*, 13(2), 337-362.
- Shih, Y. E. (1986). *Conversational politeness and foreign language teaching*. Taipei: Crane Publishing Co.
- Tagg, C. (2009). A corpus linguistics study of SMS text messaging. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. U.K.: University of Birmingham.
- Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 4(2), 91-112.
- Wolfson, N. (1981). Compliments in cross-cultural perspective. *TESOL Quarterly*, 15(2), 117-124. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org>.
- Wolfson, N. (1983). An empirically based analysis of complimenting in American English. In N. Wolfson & E. Judd (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition* (pp. 82-95). New York: Newbury House.
- Wolfson, N. (1989). The social dynamics of native and nonnative variation in complimenting behavior. *The dynamic interlanguage: Empirical studies in second language variation*, 219-236.
- Wolfson, N., & Manes, J. (1980). The compliment as a social strategy. *Papers in Linguistics: International Journal of Human Communication*, 13(3), 391-410.
- Wu, L. (2008). Gender-based differences in compliments in the American comedy TV series Ugly Betty. Retrieved September 27, 2012, from <http://hkr.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:224605/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Ye, L. (1995). Complimenting in Mandarin Chinese. In G. Kasper (Ed.), *Pragmatics of Chinese as native and target language* (pp. 207-295). Manoa, Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Yousefvand, Z. (2010). Study of compliment speech act realization patterns across gender in Persian. *Arizona Working Paper in SLA & Teaching*, 17, 91-112.

