CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview of the Study

The rapid development in computer technology and the emergence of the Internet has increased the popularity of Computer-mediated Communication (henceforth CMC) as a medium for human communication. Like other kinds of media, CMC is another electronic means to help communicators express and convey their ideas and purposes. One of the various types of CMC on the Internet is electronic mail (e-mail). E-mail is a tool for communication in this era of modern technology. It is a text-based communication in which messages are typed using a computer keyboard and then sent and read as text on a computer screen. In fact, e-mail correspondence is generally one-to-one, similar to the more traditional letter-writing genre.

In an electronic environment, e-mail communication provides no audio-visual cues; communicators are faced with limitations when expressing their wishes unlike in face to face interaction. Therefore, there is a need to substitute the absence of tone, voice, pronunciation and paralinguistic aspects of language with some other forms of words or symbols. Thus, communicative strategies (CSs) are employed by e-mailers to replace the prosodic and graphological aspects of communication so that their ideas can be effectively delivered. CSs are ways to solve the momentary communication difficulty of language users and the language used is adapted to suit the condition of the e-mail context and situation.

The language in e-mail is a new fascinating hybrid of language. The e-mail medium makes "different demands on writing style and has its own unique conventions" (Angell and Heslop, 1994:xi) because an e-mail message is often written as if the message were spoken with little attempt to edit the text, and written e-mail messages back and forth is often referred to as "holding a conversation online" (Shea, 1994). E-mail users employ numerous ways of 'speaking' and present their speech in written form which is unique in its own way therefore differentiating itself from others, for example, *btw* for 'by the way', *u* for 'you', and *Hiiiiiiiii* for 'Hi'. These novel text-based e-mail expressions can only be recognized by the people of the same speech community.

For this research, it is hoped that analyses will show the various communicative strategies employed by teenage male and female email users when interacting with their friends on the website - www.friendster.com. The results of this study will provide insights to all e-mail users (both experienced and novice/newbies) and reduce their apprehension with regard to the language conventions.

Investigation into e-mail language and communicative strategies for recreational purpose has remained virtually unstudied in Malaysia. The different communicative strategies adopted by the males and females in their e-mail interaction seem to have been largely ignored in communication research as well. Most of the research conducted was on corporate e-mails written by staff of different social statuses and positions in different corporations, and students' e-mails to their lecturers for educational purposes. Therefore, it is the interest of the researcher to explore and research into this new hybrid of language used in our modern technological world. It is the researcher's aim to unveil some of the communicative strategies adopted by and frequently used by teenage male and female e-

mail users in their recreational e-mail messages. In such informal yet non-threatening setting, they can freely express themselves by using the e-mail language conventions. In addition, a discussion on the reasons for using various types of communicative strategies will also be provided.

Research on gender communication revealed that men and women speak differently in face-to-face communication. For example, the style of women's speech was seen to be distinctive – avoiding strong or forceful statements and relying on expressions that convey hesitation and uncertainty (Lakoff, 1975). Likewise in CMC, men tend to favour adversarial interactional style such as 'flaming' or 'bombing' – which is worse than 'flaming' (Talbot, 1998). Herring (1994) has also identified the contrasting masculine and feminine interactional styles in CMC. Interactors in CMC who use adversarial language, involving 'put-downs, strong, often contentious assertions, lengthy and/or frequent postings, self-promotion, and sarcasm' are automatically assumed to be male. On the other hand, she observes that anyone posting a message expressing appreciation and consideration for the desires of others' is probably female (Herring, 1994). As much had been said about the differences in face-to-face interaction and CMC between men and women, do they employ different communicative strategies when communicating through e-mails? Thus, the study will explore and explain the types of communicative strategies used by both male and female e-mailers and a comparison on the frequency of each communicative strategies used will be made as well.

E-mail messages are collected from 12 teenage school students, who have at least an e-mail message box with www.friendster.com, by downloading their original e-mail messages. These messages are later compiled to form the raw data for the present study. As a

subscriber to www.friendster.com and member of this virtual community, the researcher becomes a participant observer focusing on the various communicative strategies used by male and female e-mailers in an informal social setting. Interviews with all the participants of this study are also carried out to find out the reasons for the use of the various language conventions (see 1.10 Definition of Terms below), and at the same time to validate the study.

The researcher uses simple frequency counts for the analysis of data in order to identify the frequency of types of communication strategies used by male and female e-mailers, and discusses the reasons for employing the various strategies when writing their e-mail messages for recreational purposes. This involved using a mixed methodology design that combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches in a single study. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

1.2 Development and Emergence of the Internet

The APRANET was developed exclusively for the US military and soon it captured the attention of the computer science community who contributed a new practice of research-based information sharing. Then, in 1969 the Defense Department's Advanced Projects Research Agency (DAPRA) developed a computer network which allowed the spreading of information to places outside of a vulnerable, central location. This system progressed rapidly and in the same year, four hosts were connected to the APRANET. In 1970, the first host-to-host protocol was invented which allowed for the development of applications. The first comprehensive e-mail programme was developed in 1975. However, the Internet only began to take its present form – a global and borderless entity, in 1985, when the National

Science Foundation network created an infrastructure to serve the entire academic community.

The Internet began to change dramatically from the early 1980s. Between 1981 and 1989, the number of computers linked to the Internet rose from 300 to 90,000. The growth was due to consumer adoption of personal computers and the development of standardized commands and software by university and private research bodies.

In 1989 the Internet was transformed by the development of the new protocol that was based on hypertext. This means it allowed for the embedding of links in text to other text and brought previously separate systems together. With further innovation, the development led to the existence of the World Wide Web (www) in 1991. Due to its phenomenal growth, the Internet is described as "the most liberating media force in the world today. It has an unplanned network structure with no corporation, government or global organization claiming ownership of it. In fact, the Internet has evolved into the largest and most uncensored information provider today" (Searls & Weinberger, http://www.worlddofends.com, 2003).

The World Wide Web is the full collection of all the computers linked to the Internet which holds documents that are mutually accessible through the use of a standard protocol (HyperText Transfer Protocol or 'http'). It is usually abbreviated to Web or W3 or as the acronym 'www'. It is defined as 'the universe of network-accessible information, an embodiment of human knowledge' by its creator, Tim Berners-Lee (Crystal, 2003).

1.3 Background of Friendster

Friendster is an online community that connects people through networks of friends for communicating, sharing and making new friends. It is one of the leading global online social networks. Friendster helps people stay in touch with friends, family, school, groups, activities and interests and discover new people and things that are important to them. Friendster provides a clean, user-friendly and interactive environment where users can easily connect with anyone worldwide. It is the No. 3 branded social network in the world and No.1 in Asia. The Asian users are primarily 16 to 30 years old. Out of over 35 million registered users, fifty-five percent are female and forty-five percent are male. Meanwhile Malaysia has over 4.2 million registered members out of the total of 14.9 million Internet population (*comScore Media Metric-internetworldstats.com*, October 2007).

The Friendster service is operated by Friendster, Inc.. The headquarter is in San Francisco, California. Friendster is backed by Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers, Benchmark Capital, DAG Ventures and individual investors.

Before using the Friendster website, users must agree to be bound by the Terms of Service and indicate acceptance of its terms by following the instructions on the "Sign Up" page and check the box labeled "I agree to Friendster's terms of service." To be eligible to use the website, an individual must be eighteen or above to register as a Member or create a Fan Profile. Membership is free except for some cases where individuals choose to use a paid version. Termination of membership can be done any time for any reason. The service and the website are for the personal use of individual members only and not for commercial endeavors except for those who have registered a Fan Profile.

1.3.1 Mechanism of Friendster

The personal information of a member contained in his or her profile will be shown to those people whom the member chooses. A member may choose any of the following three levels of sharing to allow his/her Friendster profile to be viewed. These levels are:

i) "Friends," which consists only of that Member's friends,

ii) "Friends of Friends" which consists of that Member's friends, as well as the extended group of people who are friends of that Member's friends, and

iii) "Anyone" which is all visitors to the Friendster website, whether or not they are Friendster members.

A member's e-mail address and full name will only be sent when the member invites a friend via e-mail to become a Friendster member or when the member sends a request to another member to add the other member to his or her friend list. Besides that, a member may change the group of people who may view his/her profile at any time.

The service also provides security to the users. A member's e-mail address will never be shared with or displayed to any other person except when inviting or adding friends. Members and their friends, and other members within their personal networks (depending on the level of sharing chosen) communicate on Friendster with each other through the Friendster service, without disclosing e-mail addresses. Interestingly, correcting, updating or removing of current personal information can be done just by clicking the "edit profile" link to the Friendster profile page.

1.4 Statement of the Research Issue

With the advent of CMC, in which people communicate via computer, a new form of discourse has been generated. Originally, discourse is a dichotonomy of writing and speaking. However, CMC is a hybrid register that resembles both speech and writing and yet is neither (Veselinova & Dry, 1995). Meanwhile, Thurlow (2006) takes a step further to describe CMC as "somehow unique or distinctive from standard English, as a fully-fledged or 'new' language" and has a whole new culture of its own.

Each new user who embarks on electronic communication needs to know the conversational structures and culture of electronic communication in order to communicate effectively while an experienced user needs to keep up with the evolving language conventions. The communication in this electronic milieu is different as it has the characteristics of casual conversation, traditional writing and other forms of electronic communication cues (such as emoticons and smileys). This is a new communicative genre altogether.

Various communicative strategies have been employed by e-mailers of both gender so that they are able to communicate effectively. A common strategy which has been used to express state of emotion (since the Internet came into existence) is the use of emoticons or emotional icons. This strategy was first suggested in 1975 by Kevin MacKenzie when he emailed the MsgGroup (the first APRANET mailing list) suggesting that symbols be used to indicate the intended emotion of text messages – for example, :-) for indicating a smile (Hartley, 2002). These emoticons and other typographic features have increased in numbers over the years. Other communication strategies were also created to overcome the

shortcomings of online communication through e-mails and the use of these strategies may vary according to the gender of the e-mailers, experience as well as other social factors.

The new technological revolution has also contributed to an extensive use of e-mail communication, evolving the use of English language as the medium of communication. Although the explosive growth of e-mail communication does not correspond with the development of the English language (Chong, 2003), there exists a need for e-mail users to understand the nature of e-mail language which is a unique hybrid of written and spoken language. Besides, various communicative strategies need to be employed to overcome the paucity of paralinguistic expressions and wordy expressions.

In addition, Hymes (1972) says "'speech community' is a necessary, primary concept which postulates the basis of description as a social, rather than a linguistic, entity". He defines a speech community as "a community which shares knowledge of rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech". E-mailers of CMC are also a specific speech community as described by Hymes, which has its own situation for participants to express its ways of "speaking" (in C. Bratt Paulston and G. Richard Tucker, 2003:36). Therefore, e-mailers who subscribe to www.friendster.com are a speech community which gathers people to stay in touch with friends and discover new people and create new things that are important to them. In order to achieve their common goals, they need to understand and use the language conventions so that effective communication can take place.

1.5 Purpose of the Study

This study attempts to investigate, identify and explain the communicative strategies that are used by e-mailers to achieve successful communication and the reasons for adopting the strategies. Besides that, it also examines the different types of communicative strategies used by male and female e-mailers, in order to see whether gender has influence on the use of communicative strategies.

1.6 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

1. to identify the communicative strategies used by teenagers when writing e-mail messages for recreational purposes in the Friendster website,
2. to identify possible reasons for the use of these CSs, and
3. to determine the influence of gender on the communicative strategies used.

1.7 Research Questions

Based on the objectives, this study will attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the communicative strategies used by teenage e-mailers when writing their e-mail messages in the Friendster website?
2. Why do they adopt these strategies?
3. How does gender influence the use of these communicative strategies?

1.8 Significance of the Study

Every interlocutor aims to communicate ideas and thoughts effectively in face-to-face interaction. As e-mail has become a popular mode of communication today, every e-mail user who embarks on electronic communication also needs to know the communicative strategies and language conventions of electronic communication in order to communicate effectively. This study hopes to provide insights to the e-mail community (both experienced users and novice/newbies) on the use of certain communicative strategies and language conventions in order to reduce apprehension while communicating through e-mail. Moreover, it provides basic knowledge on e-mail communication to newbies so that they will be able to understand and apply the language conventions appropriately. Crystal (2004a, http://www.crystalreference.com) says that "language revolution in cyberspace time is a typical phenomenon" which disregards interferences from Man. Obviously, this calls for a study on the change, formation and trend of e-mail language conventions.

In addition, the researcher hopes that educators and course designers may be interested to include e-mail writing as part of their course syllabus. The writing skills in e-mail are important as they are increasingly being employed in communication for social purposes, business dealing, educational purposes, etc. with the development in communication technology. As people are faced with the unique hybrid of language which is influencing all aspects of human daily life, for instance, in advertisements by the roadside, newspapers or in television, there is great significance for linguists to study the language conventions, and for educators to highlight its appropriate applications to students in the classroom.

Communication practitioners can use these interpretive findings to inform people about appropriate courses of action such as informing or advising colleagues, friends and other contacts that there may be differences in CSs used by male and female e-mail users even when they wish to convey the same message. It is also hoped that miscommunication will be reduced as people of both genders need to communicate through e-mail for recreation or work purposes in this modern technological world.

1.9 Limitation to the Study

The limitations of this study are as follows:

1.   The communicative strategies (CSs) identified is not an exhaustive list. The data collected for the study reveals its richness in CSs. There are many other types of CSs found but it is not the intention of the researcher to exclude them in the taxonomy. Some examples of CSs are code-switching, literal translation, etc. As all the e-mailers are multi-lingual, there are many reasons for the participants to code-switch; among them is the inability to think of the English equivalents spontaneously while composing their e-mail messages. Literal translation was used not to compensate for their linguistic deficiencies but to create an informal atmosphere. These reasons were revealed by a few participants during Interview 2 in the present study. Besides, the nature of the e-mail message which is more like speech also allows the participants to resort to the easiest and fastest lexical items to complete their e-mail composition. Thus, the present study is unable to cover all the CSs found in the data.

2. Another limitation is the study focuses on e-mails from one website only, that is, www.friendster.com. while there are many other recreational e-mail websites such as Facebook and Hi5, which are commonly used by teenagers of both gender. The reason for choosing this website is mainly due to its popularity among the researcher's circle of teenage friends.

3. Besides that, the 123 e-mail messages which formed the corpus were downloaded from only 12 participants between the ages of 17 and 19 which exclude other younger teenagers. Other variables affecting the use of CSs such as gender of e-mail recipients, linguistic and racial background of the participants as well as the level of friendship between the participants and recipients were not taken into consideration in the present study.

Future studies might address all these limitations and carry out a more comprehensive study on CSs used in e-mail messages for recreation and work purposes.

1.10 Definition of Terms

The following definitions are listed down for reference because these definitions will be used throughout the research.

1. Language convention refers to the emoticons, smileys and typographic features such as punctuations, simplified spellings, and capitalisations which are used by e-mail users when composing their e-mail messages.

2. Netiquette refers to the term used to describe the established conventions for online communication and also to refer to the standards of being social and relating in the online environment; or online etiquette (Mann & Stewart, 2000)

3. Acronyms, Initialisms and Abbreviations

As speed is considered a virtue in email communication, acronyms/initialisms/abbreviations are used as language features in email messages for fast communication. A lot of time can be saved because e-mailers do not need to spell out word by word when composing a message. "Acronyms and similar abbreviated terms have served as handy communication shortcuts for centuries", especially with the rapid growth of email communication as a fast-paced communication technology in the 21st century Crowley, 1976: vii).

Definition from *Acronym, Initialisms and Abbreviations Dictionary* (Volume 1) (Crowley: viii) draws a distinction among these three terms although in many ways they often overlap. "**An acronym** is composed of the initial letters or parts of a compound term. It is usually read or spoken as a single word, rather than letter by letter. Example : LASER (Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation)."

"**An initialism** is also composed of the initial letters or parts of a compound term, but generally verbalized letter by letter, rather than a single word. Example: PO (Post Office)."

"**An abbreviation** is a shortened form of a word or words which does not follow the formation of either of the above. Example: Ph.D (Doctor of Philosophy)."

In this research, acronyms, initialisms and abbreviations are considered a set of specific lexis used for communication through e-mail for recreational purpose. Apart from the standard acronyms, initialisms and abbreviations, the e-mail users also used non-universal

acronyms and other similar abbreviated terms (example: CNY (Chinese New Year) in their messages to meet the needs of the discourse community. Swales (1990:26) states that usually a discourse community has acquired some specific lexis and he sums it up as follows:

> "the specialization may involve using lexical items known to the wider speech communities in special and technical ways as in information technology discourse communities, or using highly technical terminology as in medical communities. Most commonly, however, the inbuilt dynamic towards an increasingly shared and specialized terminology is realized through the development of community-specific abbreviations and acronyms. The use of these (ESP, EAP, WAC, NCTE, TOEFL, etc) is, of course, driven by the requirements for efficient communication exchange between experts."

1.11 Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the present study that is the use of communication strategies (CSs) in e-mail messages for recreational purposes. This is followed by a brief historical background of the development and emergence of the Internet which contributes to the popularity of e-mail communication for recreational and work purposes. Next, it provides the background of the chosen website – www.friendster.com where authentic e-mail messages sent by the participants are collected, and the mechanism of this website. In addition, statement of research issue, purpose, significance and limitations of this study and finally definition of terms used are outlined.

The following chapter presents the review of literature related to the study.