CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 The Premise of the Present Study

The internet has triggered people to engage in meaningful virtual activities in chatrooms, emails, blogs and the like as people can choose a convenient time to communicate with others. These people, when they interact on a regular basis, usually leave a textual trace making it possible for researchers to shed light on interactive behaviours in specific contexts or use (Herring, 2004). Woods and Ebersole (2003) contend that the proliferation of online interactions is due to the feeling of social connectedness among online participants.   Nevertheless, experiencing communal interaction can be somewhat challenging as online interactions remain, primarily, textual exchanges which are time and context independent (Tu & McIsaac, 2002; Woods & Ebersole, 2003)

In that sense online participants are thus, challenged to be socially interactive within the constraints of an online setting (Herring, 1999; Crystal, 2001; Nilsson, 2003; Segerstad, 2002). In addition, informal online interaction has often been perceived to foster virtual communities (Crystal, 2001; Herring, 2004; Herring, et al. 2005; Nilsson, 2003; Tu & McIsaac, 2002).

When online participants social network, such as to question, to ask and to inform, they scaffold and connect online participants in the formation of online community (Woods & Ebersole, 2003). This study, henceforth, aims to investigate social networking strategies of

blogs that augment the formation of blog discourse communities. Herring's (2004) analytical framework Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), will form the basis of this study's framework. Through the combination of data collection procedures such as interviews and questionnaires, the researcher hopes to outline the conceptual framework of blog interaction that emerges from this study.

Among the various electronic data, online forums such as blogs are used because they allow asynchronous interactions among participants who can log on whenever convenient to them. Presently, blogs are becoming popular as tools for people to participate in online discourses (Nardi et al., 2004). A blog is a discourse type which is used by bloggers as a communication tool. It comprises short, informal, and chronological entries (Bausch et al., 2002; Miller & Shepherd, 2004). This is in contrast with synchronous online interaction such as chatrooms that require users to actively take part and give immediate response. Asynchronous online forums have been reported to be observable, relatively easy to use, accessible, and safe (Anderson & Kanuka, 1997; Hsiung, 2000). In addition, participants of online forums experience a sense of social equality which allows reticent participants to discuss issues more comfortably and feel less threatened compared to face-to-face interaction (Herring, 1999).

As asynchronous online forums require users to register themselves with passwords, it allows confidentiality and reliability of data collection (Im & Chee, 2006). Besides, data from online forums is safer for research purposes because other types of data from the internet can be accessible to the public without the use of passwords (Kollock & Smith, 1999; Saba & McCormick, 2001). Additionally, as research in asynchronous online forums

is usually conducted over a period of time, researchers have the opportunity to overcome problems of technicalities, deadlines and time pressure in administering their studies. Additionally, asynchronous online forums reduce problems associated with synchronous online communication (Kollock & Smith, 1999; Saba & McCormick, 2001).

Prior to undertaking this research, a pilot study was conducted to determine whether a study on blog interactive practices can be done. The pilot study found that informal use of language in blog forums appears to serve the social functions of building rapport. The pilot study also helped to establish that blog interactive practices would require investigation, as the main study intends to identify blog interactive practices, especially among local Malaysians in East Malaysia.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Parks and Robert (1998) noted that the Internet was first invented to exercise control of information supply. The increase in online social networking has created the dimension that people can access to unlimited information online. Baym (2006) points out in the invention of any new media, scholars could only grasp the social implications of the invention after the media has been used by people over a period of time. For example, Baron (1998) suggested the email as a tool for building and maintaining social relationships in the late 1990s even though emails were used since the 1980s.

Likewise, blogs were invented as online journals by internet service providers but the social networking practices are developed by bloggers themselves. For example, as blogs are text

based online communication, bloggers adapt their communicative styles within the challenges and constraints of a blog in order to be communicatively coherent when text-only CMC can be interactionally incoherent (Crystal, 2001; Herring, 1999; Segerstad, 2002). Additionally, bloggers use language strategies to foster camaraderie and intercultural interaction. Evidently, these interactive behaviours are not defined by the blog service providers, but are created by the participants themselves based on their background knowledge and getting acquainted with the media.

Presently, not much research has been done on the nature of language used in the internet in the Malaysian context. One of the possible reasons for this lack could be the intimidation where users are expected to reveal their identities in online message exchange. For example, researchers may need to identify the ethnicity and gender of online participants whilst bloggers may prefer to keep their identities secret (Chester, 2004; Crystal, 2001). In addition, complication may arise in terms of tracing the gender and ethnicity of bloggers especially if there is no cooperation among bloggers. In that sense, this research could provide information on social networking practices of Malaysian bloggers.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Blogs have been acknowledged to promote reflective practices among pre-service teachers (Asmawi, 2008; Chuang, 2008; Tan, 2006, Pedro, 2004). Carlson (2003) noted that blogs are used by people to post their daily thoughts on websites, besides serving as tools to teach writing skills (Jones, 2006; Ngah, 2007); research has shown that blogs tend to support

online interactions due to the formation of virtual communities (Chau & Xu, 2008; Herring, et al., 2005; Nilsson, 2003; Prieto et al. 2007; Silva et al. 2006; Zhou & Davis, 2006).

However, previous studies have not been able to report on the rudimentary aspects of how bloggers social network in qualitative terms when these are important components of any online interaction. Additionally, research involving blogs should make available information on the choice of social networking strategies used by different genders and ethnic groups as this could trigger other research areas.

In that regard, the significance of the present study lies in its aim to identify the language strategies used by online participants when they network in blog forums. It is further deduced that the results of this study could be used to draw implications and thus contribute to the existing pool of knowledge about language strategies used in blog forums. It is hoped that the findings of this study can benefit educators and researchers who are conducting studies on online communication via the Internet.

1.4 The Research Objectives

This study seeks to elicit language which is derived from the discussion of issues in blog forums. This study hopes to investigate interactive practices of mixed gender and ethnic groups and instances of how users apply various language strategies when they network socially in blogs. The researcher hopes to propose a conceptual framework of blog interaction that emerges out from the data collected for the study.

In undertaking the task of analysing the language strategies in blogs, the theoretical assumptions of Social Presence theory and Speech Act Theory are used. Social presence theory proposes that for meaningful online interactions to occur, in this case through blogs, bloggers need to feel the presence of the other (Short et al. 1976; Lombard & Ditton, 1997; Rourke et al. 2001; Ijsselsteijn & Riva, 2003). It is assumed that bloggers take part in blog forums with the idea that someone online will be reading their comments. As a result, the concept of social presence can influence people to visit and leave their comment in blog forums, and this, can perpetuate the development of a blog discourse community.

In this respect, interactivity in blog forums is thus, the result of bloggers using language to perform specific speech acts due to the social presence of others. Speech act theory can provide a basic understanding of how bloggers communicate interactively in blog forums. With that in mind, the objectives of the present study are:

1. to study the conventions of a blog discourse community among local tertiary students

2. to investigate the discursive features of blogging among tertiary students

3. to identify the social networking strategies and tactics bloggers use to network socially

4. to compare choice of strategies and tactics among different genders

1.5 Research Questions

Four research questions are drawn as a result of a pilot study and an initial observation of the blog forums, which focused on the language strategies used by the participants. As such the research questions are formulated with the primary focus of investigating the social networking strategies in blog forums that consisted of participants from different genders

and ethnic groups. This study therefore seeks to provide answers to the following questions:

Question 1: What role does social presence play in the selection of blogging strategies? (see Chapter Five and Six)

This question is related to social presence theory whose proponents Short et al. (1976), suggest that the feeling of the presence of others is important especially when the communication medium restricts face-to-face interaction. The analysis will therefore show how the presence of other bloggers influences the social networking practices in blog forums. Therefore, the researcher would need to collect data in the form of interviews and questionnaires.   It would be beyond the scope of this study to measure the extent of social presence felt by the participants in blog forums.

Question 2: What are the interactive strategies and tactics used by the participants when they blog? (see Chapter Five)

This study seeks to show how bloggers generally interacted in blog forums that have not been evident in any past research done in blog studies. Therefore, by analyzing blog interactive practices, the study hopes to make known the general features of social networking in blog forums.

As a discourse type, a blog forum has its own conventions and practices, such as codes, styles and strategies (Mullholland, 1991). In this study, bloggers are seen as a discourse

community that generates its own discourse types, both for spoken and written communicative purposes (Swales, 1990; Kramsch, 1998). Therefore as a discourse community, bloggers in this study are expected to develop their own conventions of interactions.

Since blog forums fall on a continuum of spoken and written language (Nilsson, 2003; Crystal, 2001; also Herring 2004) speech act analysis will be the basis for identifying the forms and functions of blog social networking strategies. Additionally, in view that blog forums are texts which are structured and organized in form and content (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 2004), speech acts analysis will aid the coding of the language phenomenon to emerge out of the blog postings (Herring, 2004). This will be discussed further in Chapters Three and Four

Question 3: What are the social networking strategies and tactics used to promote camaraderie among the different ethnic groups in this study? (see Chapter Six)

Brown and Yule (1983) suggest that speakers just as much as writers control the production of language under various circumstances in society. As members of a discourse community, there is a tendency for bloggers to monitor their language to suit the blogging context. In this, regard, the analysis of the data would entail ascertaining the language forms and functions that encourage intercultural interaction as bloggers are expected to violate Grice's (1975) principles of cooperation and observe politeness strategies and promote a feeling of friendship among the participants in blog forums. Additionally, as the participants in this study are made up of different ethnic groups, this study hopes to give

evidence if the participants choose appropriate language strategies when they interacted in blog forums.

Furthermore, Lakoff's (1975) rule of distance and camaraderie can be used to understand the lexical choices of blog participants in blog forums. As online interaction falls on the continuum of spoken and written language, some lexical choices could serve specific social functions such as portraying equality among members in blog forums. Therefore, in the analysis of this data, when participants use informal language features *(e.g. Hello….Narniafreak…..eaykssssss…please…, think lah!!!!!!)*, it will be possible to use Lakoff's rules of rapport, to describe language features that appear to enhance camaraderie among blog participants.

Additionally, the lexical choices which blog participants make could be influenced by the physical environment of a communication medium (Crystal, 2001; Segerstad, 2002; Verderber & Verderber, 2004). As blogs are text based communication, the physical environment of the blog does not allow blog participants to transmit information as face-to-face-interaction. Therefore blog participants are likely to create their own symbols and emoticons to approximate speech and non-verbal communication. For example, in the pilot study, it was observed that the participants could use the upper case of the letters of the alphabet *(e.g. YES I AGREE!!!)* that appears to emphasize an agreement and they 'invented' emoticons (^,^) to communicate more than what was possible in blogs.

Question 4: What are the choice of strategies and tactics used by genders when blogging? (*see Chapter Seven*)

As gender can influence the choice of language and how people relate to others (Diane & Phil 2008; Kramsch, 1998), it is also possible for one gender to use certain interactive strategies and tactics more than the other. Additionally, the transactional model of human communication maintains that the gender and the culture of the people in an interaction can influence the communicative behaviors and messages produced by them.

In terms of online interaction, Herring (1994, 2000, 2001) claim that online interactive styles are not exclusively used by either women or men (see Chapter Two, also Chapter Three). Additionally as the identity of online users is not fully known (Chester, 2004; Raymond, 2003; Crystal, 2001) it is possible for online participants to flame and to be more direct than they would in face-to-face interaction.

Based on these facts, the current study seeks to provide an answer on social networking strategies used by the male and female participations when they participate in blog forums. These features when quantified will enable the researcher to draw on the commonly used strategies by the male and female participants in this study.

1.6 Methodology

The data for the study is made up of qualitative and quantitative data collected as follows:

(i)   the responses posted in the blog forum via the internet at http://johnathan2001.blogspot.com from December 2005 to December 2006.

(ii)   the interviews conducted after 13 months of blogging experience.

(iii) the responses given to the open-ended and closed-ended questions in questionnaires.

Taking Herring's (2004) Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) as the underlying structure, the data is analyzed for social networking strategies and they are compared for similarities and differences among the gender and ethnic groups in this study. Based on the analysis, this study seeks to present a conceptual framework of blog interaction that emerged from the data (see Chapter Seven). A more detailed discussion follows in Chapter Four.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

This study hopes to highlight the social networking practices when participants of this study social network in blog forums. In this study, gender and ethnicity of the participants of the study have been identified and the discussions of blog issue in blog forums were triggered by the researcher. Therefore, this study is based on the analysis of language used by blog participants when they social network in the researcher's blog. The limitations of this study are:

1. it **does not** aim to profile the linguistic features used by the participants according to their age, or

2. regard any of the ethnic groups in this study as a dominant or host ethnic group; or

3. conduct a comparative study with discourse types in public domain blog forums.

In addition, since the researcher has knowledge of gender and ethnicity of the participants, when they remain anonymous to one another, it is possible the views given by the participants may differ in blog forums that ensured complete anonymity. However, all necessary steps will be taken to ensure the natural production of language in the researcher's blog as discussed in Chapter Four.

1.8 Definition of Terms

This section gives the working definitions adopted for this thesis. A detailed description of the terms is given in relevant chapters as they are indicated.

1.8.1 Blogs

Blogs are personal websites that are updated frequently with commentary and they can be political and/or personal diaries that can focus on one narrow subject or range across a universe of topics. In this study, blogs refer to the mode of asynchronous online communication in the internet (see Chapter Three and Four).

1.8.2 Intercultural Interaction

Intercultural refers to the communication between people from different ethnic, social, and gendered cultures within the boundaries of the same national culture (Kramsch, 1998). As identity is not stable in online interaction, in this study, intercultural communication also

refers to communication among people from different orientations such as political ideologies and background (see Chapter Two).

1.8.3 Social Networking vs. Social Networks

Social networking refers to the connections with colleagues, stakeholders, and communities and Social Networks are the web based services such as FaceBook, MySpace, and Twitter (Gilbert Centre, 2010). Thus social networking refers to the grouping of individuals together into to specific groups, often like a small community or a neighborhood and it is most popularly used in online interaction among users to develop friendship. In this study, social networking strategies are the forms and the functions of language that scaffolds and connects people (Woods & Ebersole, 2003). These mechanisms are used by online participants to achieving a particular purpose or goal online (see Chapter Two)

1.8.4 Strategies and Tactics

Strategy and tactics are used to describe concrete communicative action (Kim, 1993). Strategies are generally viewed as action sequences that are used to attain goals. Tactics are the tools or devices used to realize a strategy (Nierenberg, 1973). Kim (1993), states that tactics are specific behavioural actions that people manifest in their goal-directed interaction with others. In this study, tactics are the linguistic devices that help to deliver the desired goal (see Chapter Two).

1.9 Summary

The present study looks at the interactive practices of blog participants when they social network in blog forums. The participants in this study social network appropriately in the non-physical space of online forums and the context of intercultural environment in blog forums. By applying the analytical framework of CMDA and the combination of speech act theory and social presence theory as the basis of data analysis, this study hopes to make available the social networking practices in blog forums.