CHAPTER TWO

VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION

2.0 Introduction

Chapter Two reviews the concepts of discourse community and human communication and their relevance to communication in a virtual discourse community. This includes an overview of ethnicity and communication in the Malaysian context. The chapter ends with an overview of virtual intercultural communication and gender communication.

2.1 Discourse Community

According to Ellis (1999), discourse refers to all meaning making activities, whether intentional, conscious, unconscious, explicit, or implied and it involves the process of creating meaning and the interpretation of the world around us. Therefore, the concept of discourse community links two useful notions – discourse and community (Swales, 1990; Ovens, 2002).

In reviewing the term discourse community, Ovens (2002) defines a discourse community as an association of individuals that shares and creates experiences by connecting with the individuals who make up the community. Ovens (2002) claims that the discourses produced within a community can reflect the make up of the community, thus different discourse communities (family/home, school, workplace etc.) can be characterized by the variety of discourses or the specific patterns of language use. For Ovens (2002), the term discourse embraces all forms of communication rather than simply the verbal or written forms.

Pogner (2003) on the other hand, defines a discourse community as a social group that has common rules for language, its use, and ways of solving problems encountered by the group. As a discourse community, members acquire, transform and produce not only language but also knowledge among its members via discourse. Therefore, a discourse community generates its own norms, conventions and expectations among members of the community (Pogner, 2003).

A discourse community is not necessarily a harmonious and conflict-free group as the members are not always free of the unequal distributions of discursive, social or economic power (Pogner, 2003). An academic research community can be regarded as a discourse community whereby some members are considered experts in their fields while others, novices ((Mohd. Noor, 2001; Pogner, 2003). According to Mohd Noor (2001), research supervisors in academic environments are gatekeepers who determine the entry of thesis writers into the research discourse community. In addition, Pogner (2003) believes that the academic research community possesses mechanisms for exchange of information shared by the members using its own–specific terminologies and genres, of which may include texts which are official (e.g. articles, conference papers, working papers) and unofficial (e.g. emails, memos).

In addition, membership of a discourse community is usually a matter of choice (Borg, 2003) because it is created by the collective practices of its members who provide ideas, theories, and concepts that are appropriate to the individuals who make up the community, so as to make sense of their experiences (Ovens, 2002, Mohd. Noor, 2001). Members of a discourse

community actively share their goals so that others members are in solidarity with them (Borg, 2003).

Furthermore, a discourse community can be characterized by the use of written communication. For example, Swales (1990) suggests that a prototypical discourse community might be a society of stamp collectors scattered around the world who may be united by a shared interest in and knowledge of stamps. Although collectors do not gather together physically, they keep in touch with each other through the use of newsletters that have a particular form of text organization. This in turn creates a genre that unites them in their pursuit of a common goal. In this group, the communicative need is aimed at the development and the maintenance of members in the group (Swales, 1990).

Swales (1990) puts forward six characteristics that underlie a group of individuals to be sufficiently identified as a discourse community. Firstly, the group should have a broadly agreed set of common public goals. The public goals could be implicit and the discourse community should not serve the purpose of certain individuals. Secondly, the discourse community should have a mechanism of intercommunication among its members. This mechanism could vary according to the needs of the community, such as newsletters, telecommunication, etc. Thirdly, the discourse community uses its mechanisms of intercommunication with the sole aim of providing information and getting feedback. Therefore, 'members' belong to the discourse community by exchanging information with one another. Fourthly, the discourse community should utilize and possess one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims which '…involve the appropriacy of topics, form and function of discoursal elements, and the roles texts play in the operation of

the discourse community' (Swales, 1990: 26). Fifthly, the discourse community could develop its own lexis and use lexical items widely accepted and known only to the discourse community. Finally, a discourse community should have '…a suitable degree of relevant content and discoursal expertise' (Swales, 1990: 27) as the survival of the community is dependent on the 'expert' members.

2.2 Virtual Discourse Community

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) contend that the concept of discourse community itself is 'virtual' because such a community is amorphous or formless and it is difficult to produce concrete examples of discourse communities. For Benedikt (1991), the term 'virtual' implies that some of the traditional properties of a community are no longer part of the "real" world but appear to be real.

Nevertheless, Noblia (1998) states that the existence of relationships in virtual communities is quite real, where members share emotional support, find friends, fall in love and do everything that people do in real life. For Falk (1995), a virtual community consists of members sharing common principles and experiences that have developed norms of interactions to protect communal interests if an individual's need conflicts with the group's need. According to Aarseth (2003), the word 'virtual' is probably used in online interaction because it is fashionable and not because the activities in a virtual community are seen as virtually social. This view is shared by Stolterman et al. (1997) who views virtual communities as similar to that of a society except that its members are related to each other virtually.

The notion of virtual discourse community is developed when the community becomes a 'place' for individuals to converge. Over time these members form a system that serves their interest, thus a virtual discourse community develops (Davis & Brewer, 1997; Pogner, 2003; Ovens, 2002). Therefore a virtual discourse community is formed due to advancement and growth of a virtual community that is built upon a common goal. Additionally, the growth of virtual communities is also linked to the increasing number of online users, as noted in a report of the future trends of the internet undertaken by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2004).

Computer aided communication aids the formation of a discourse community because a community is formed by groups of people that share common interests (Davis & Brewer, 1997; Pogner, 2003; Ovens, 2002; Swales, 1990; Verderber & Verderber, 2004) and these members are connected to each other virtually online (Herring, 2001). Davis and Brewer (1997) report that virtual discourse communities are usually formed because of interactive practices that promote solidarity among online participants.

Virtual communities develop in ways similar to how traditional societies such as villages and neighbourhood are built based on geographical closeness (Falk, 1995). Sade-Beck (2004) reports on a study of Israeli online support communities for families involved in loss and bereavement. It was observed how these support communities offer solace for the mourning through public morning meet in virtual space since these families were scattered throughout Israel. The researcher conducted a content analysis on the documents on the various issues from the press and databases on the Internet was made and was followed up by an interview with the support group communities in order to acquire more information

about the subjects' socio-cultural context. The study shows that virtual communities, as in the way they evolved, can transcend into real life. Rutter and Smith (2002) report on the practices of a virtual community and they investigated the 'friendliness' of a newsgroup online forum which they called "RumCom" by visiting the homes of 'RumCommers" and interviewing them. The researchers found that the 'RumCommers" were just as friendly when they interacted virtually or face-to-face.

Brown and Davis (2004) point out that in a virtual community it is important for online users to understand cultural diversities because at the simplest level, words can can mean differently for different participants and can lead to misunderstandings. In addition, online users from different backgrounds can have different understanding of an online discussion which can cause misunderstanding among the people interacting online (Brown & Davis, 2004).

Studies have shown that the development of a virtual community can be constrained by the medium in which interaction occurs because each of the mediums (e.g. e-mail, blogs, chat room) will have its own affordances (Brown & Davis, 2004; Segerstad, 2002) and each offers a different range of functions and facilities to the users. The social implications of these affordances may not be immediately apparent to the service providers but becomes prevalent after the mediums are in use (Baym, 2006). This occurs because humans have the ability to adapt language to the constraints posed by a particular medium in order to convey more information (Segerstad, 2002; Baym, 2006). For example, the use of the symbol :) and abbreviation 'lol' have specific meaning such as to denote a smile and Laughing Out Loud (lol), respectively.

2.3 Sense of Virtual Community

Rovai (2002) proposes several factors that can help build a sense of community among participants in online interactions as indicated below:

(i)   Transactional distance

(ii)   Social presence

(iii)   Social equality

(iv)   Interaction facilitation

(v)   Community size

2.3.1   Transactional Distance

Transactional distance **refers to** the psychological distance felt among the people involved in online interactions. It is believed that when the psychological distance among online participants is reduced, the sense of community among the participants increases (Rovai, 2002).   In online interaction, transactional distance occurs when online participants are controlled by a moderator. Therefore, to encourage online interactions, transactional distance must be reduced through encouragement or by persuading the participants on the importance of partaking in online interaction such as to achieve some specific aims (Rovai, 2002).

2.3.2   Social Presence

Social presence is the feeling of being there or being able to project oneself as real persons using the opportunities given by online service providers in cyberspace communication

(Robert et al., 1996). Short et al. (1976) refer to social presence as the degree to which people are perceived as 'real persons' in mediated communication. It is the imagined experience of users as being in a 'real-time' communication although they are in 'cyberspace'. Accordingly, the reciprocal awareness of other individuals communicating online can create a mutual sense of awareness among online users. In Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), the degree to which a person is perceived as present determines the way individuals interact with one another (Gunawardena, 1995). Nevertheless, CMC is often perceived as less personal due to reduced social presence and social context cues such as non-verbal communication compared to face-to-face interaction.

It is believed that the social connectedness enjoyed by online participants also diminishes when social presence is not perceived by online participants because online communication is not physical, and the interactive strategies mediated via the internet are not dependent on the physical co-presence of interlocutors (Riva & Galimberti, 1998). Steuer (1993) hypothesizes that two variables may facilitate the notion of social presence in online communication: (i) vividness and (ii) interactivity.

- **Vividness:** According to Steuer (1993), vividness refers to the way an environment presents information to the human senses. Steuer (1993) uses the term breadth and depth to describe the range of sensations delivered at one time by a technology medium. For example, the radio delivers audio stimuli, but television and film provide a combination of visual and audio stimuli, thus, television can be said to have more breadth than radio. For Steuer (1993), the depth of sensory information refers to the quality and amount of information that is embedded in the presented stimulus. Therefore, the more information we perceive through a range of senses, the more presence we feel ourselves to be in. Therefore, text-based forms of communication like email, and blogs are, theoretically, low on the breath dimension as compared to virtual reality which uses images, sound and animation, thereby stimulating a range of human senses

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(Jacobson, 2002). Jacobson (2002), argues that the absence or low levels of sensory can actually enhance the social presence felt as communicators adapt language to make up for the missing cues.

- **Interactivity**: In online communication, interactivity refers to the extent users can effect changes to online environment such as the synchronicity of interaction. For example, emails and private chat rooms focus on one-to-one interactivity but a large number of audiences can be involved in blogs. Steuer (1993) states that a high level of interactivity in virtual communication tends to produce greater perceptions of realism that mirror real-time interaction among online users.

Based on the discussion, it can be seen that social presence promotes interactivity in online communication due to the perceived presence of others (Steuer, 1993). Mc Millan (1998) writes that interactivity increases when online users:

- are not controlled by a moderator;

- perceive communication as beneficial;

- are allowed to participate in a two-way interaction; and

- feel comfortable with the medium.

Thurmond (2003) and Burge (1994) confirm that certain user behaviours are essential for interactivity. The four major types of user behaviours and descriptions are:

(i) Participation behaviour: Users are allowed to share different perspectives and ideas, and show interest in what is being said by other users;

(ii) Response behaviour: Users give feedback, respond to questions and share solidarity with one another;

(iii) Affective feedback behaviour: Users recognize others and encourage an atmosphere that provides a sense of community or belonging; and

(iv) Focused messaging behaviour: Users do not sway from the intended reason for online interaction.

2.3.3 Social Equality

Social equality refers to the equal opportunity shared by all participants interacting online. If an individual participant exhibits an aggressive communication style, s/he may dominate the online interaction and create enmity among the participants. This may reduce or destroy the sense of community among participants. Social equality occurs when a user solicits alternative views from others (Rovai, 2002).

2.3.4 Interaction Facilitation

Interaction facilitation refers to the efforts taken by online moderators to ensure that participants have reasons to engage in online interaction. In order to facilitate interaction, Rovai (2002) suggests that online users should be allowed to take on various roles as they may prefer such as the role of an initiator of an interaction, follower or a compromiser.
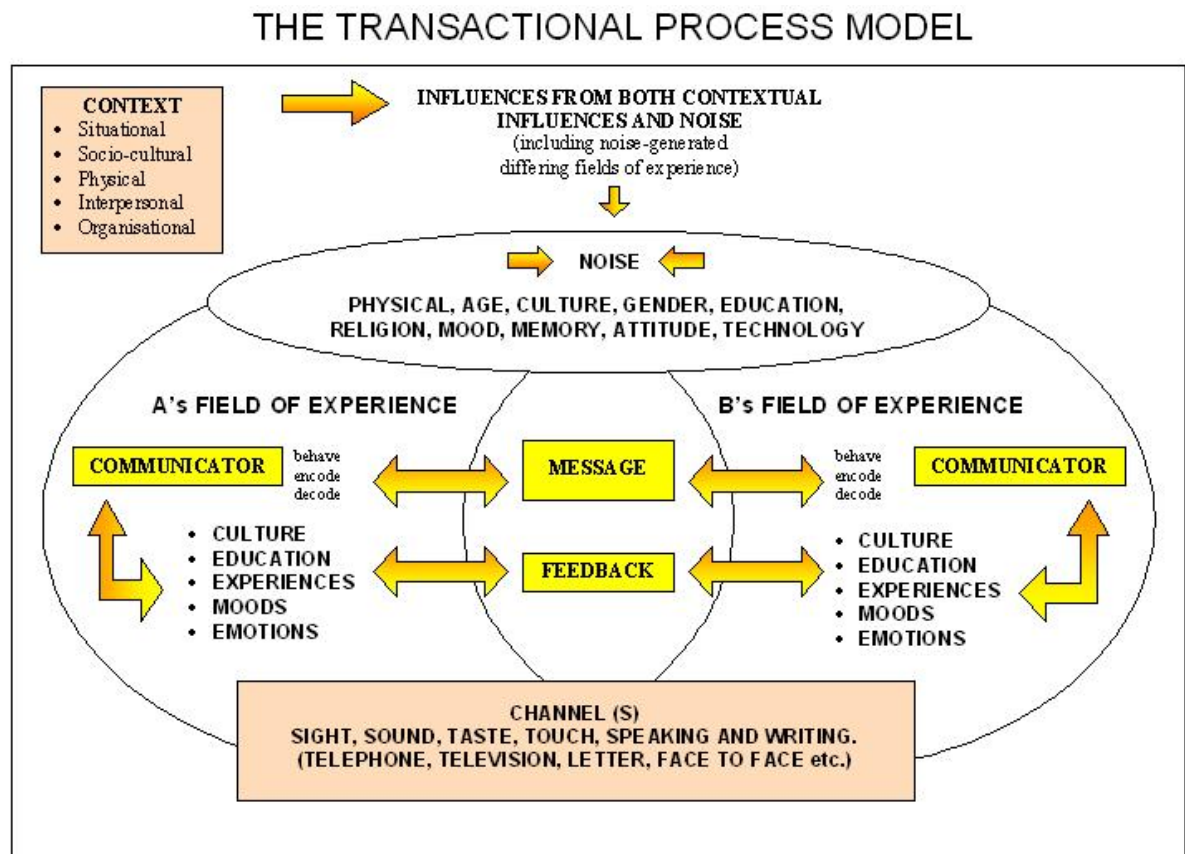
2.3.5 Community Size

Community size refers to the number of participants communicating online. The number of people communicating online can also bring about the feeling of social presence as this could result in more interactivity (Gunawardena, 1995). A small number of participants may produce little interaction whilst a big group may generate the sense of some online users overpowering the online interaction. A group of thirty participants is a reasonable

community size if they are active online, otherwise, the group can become rowdy (Rovai, 2002).

2.4 Human Communication in Virtual Community

This section discusses the theory of human communication in a virtual community. In the context of this study, preference is given to looking at the transactional view of the communication process because it can provide a comprehensive theory-model that enables the researcher to draw insights into blog interactions. Adler and Towne's (1999) Transactional Process Model as in Figure 2.1 below appears relevant to this study.

THE TRANSACTIONAL PROCESS MODEL

CONTEXT
- Situational
- Socio-cultural
- Physical
- Interpersonal
- Organisational

INFLUENCES FROM BOTH CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES AND NOISE
(including noise-generated differing fields of experience)

NOISE
PHYSICAL, AGE, CULTURE, GENDER, EDUCATION, RELIGION, MOOD, MEMORY, ATTITUDE, TECHNOLOGY

A's FIELD OF EXPERIENCE

B's FIELD OF EXPERIENCE

COMMUNICATOR behave encode decode

MESSAGE

behave encode decode **COMMUNICATOR**

- CULTURE
- EDUCATION
- EXPERIENCES
- MOODS
- EMOTIONS

FEEDBACK

- CULTURE
- EDUCATION
- EXPERIENCES
- MOODS
- EMOTIONS

CHANNEL (S)
SIGHT, SOUND, TASTE, TOUCH, SPEAKING AND WRITING.
(TELEPHONE, TELEVISION, LETTER, FACE TO FACE etc.)

Figure 2.1: The Transactional Process Model

Source: Adler and Towne in Tyler, (1999:20)

The transactional model accounts for the way we receive and send information simultaneously in a communication process. The mind is capable of sending and receiving information at the same time (Tyler, 1999) and is shown by the 'feedback' arrows which indicate the sender and the receiver as communicators. The transactional model does not label one person as a sender and the other as a receiver. In fact, both are termed communicators in the communication process (Tyler, 1999; Wood, 2004). In this model, communication is seen as an ongoing two-way communication process.

In Figure 2.1. the outer lines in the transactional model indicate that communication occurs within a context that affects how people communicate and meanings attached to this communication process. The contexts include the shared systems of both communicators, such as their workplace, and the personal systems of each person, such as their families, religions or friends (Wood, 2004). The context of communication also determines and influences the communicative behaviours of both communicators and the messages that are being produced. The model recognizes that noise is present throughout interpersonal communication. Noise can impede understanding in a communication process and this can occur due to different fields of experience and the attributes of the people involved in the communication such as their gender, attitude, moods, culture and religion. However, noise can change over time in the process of communication (Devito, 2000).

Tyler (1999) points out that the transactional model incorporates the idea of a relationship in the communication process. That is to say, we have a certain relationship with the person with whom we are communicating. The relationship whether intimate, casual or impersonal, is guided by the situational context or setting within which the communication

takes place. Through this way, when we communicate with someone we already know, the communication process takes place within the context of a previous communicative experience. Hence, over time the relationships may become more informal and intimate (Wood, 2004). In accordance to this, in a virtual community, the following variables can affect how communication occurs among its members.

(i) The synchronicity of communication

(ii) The role of perception

(iii) The personal characteristics of participants

The following sections elaborate on the variables that can affect virtual communication

2.4.1 The Synchronicity of Communication

Synchronicity (or real-time) of communication refers to the process whereby the sender and the receiver of a message simultaneously compose messages as in real conversation such as in chat rooms (Verderber & Verderber, 2004). The level of synchronicity conditions how language is used and it is believed that both expression and content are dependent on whether communication takes place in real time or is separated in time.

Crystal (2001) notes that no synchronous computer mediated communication (CMC) is fully synchronous in the way spoken face-to-face is structured, because even synchronous communication in chat rooms, IRC (Internet Relay Chat) and the like are also constrained by their response time and the speed of typing. Crystal (2001) believes that synchronicity level, whether delayed or immediate, affects message exchange in a discourse community

because online users can produce a more thought out message exchange in asynchronous communication.

2.4.2 The Role of Perception

According to Verderber and Verderber (2004: 24), perception is the process of 'gathering sensory information and giving meaning to it' and therefore, in order to understand interpersonal communication or relationships depends much on our understanding of perception. One of the concepts that may explain the development of perception, as proposed by Werner and James (2000) is the schema. Schema is the cognitive structure that consists of organized knowledge about situations and individuals that has been abstracted from prior experiences. A schema is used for processing new information and retrieving stored information (Werner & James, 2000). Bennett, Hoffman, and Prakash (1989: 3) explain that 'perception involves learning, updating perspective, and interacting with the observed'.   In an online interaction, therefore, it is possible that perception influences the way online participants communicate with each other. Additionally, online participants could piece together the various bits of information about the people interacting online and draw conclusions about them.

Werner and James (2000) state that perception is often influenced by assumptions whether conscious or otherwise, and it appears to be governed by our cultural expectations, motivations, moods and attitudes. We are conditioned by our own perceptions thus, at best our perceptions are incomplete and different people react to the same entity differently. Therefore, our perception does not always provide an accurate picture of the events we

perceive (Verderber & Verderber, 2004). Hence, it can be said that perception varies individually and it would be wrong to assume all online participants have similar perception of a communicative event.

2.4.3 The Personal Characteristics of Participants

How a content of a message develops is dependent on how the message producer translates his thoughts and feelings into forms that others can receive, interpret and react to appropriately (Devito, 2000). In addition, the personal qualities of the producer such as his attitude, beliefs and values affect the messages that are produced as much as they affect the way the recipient interprets and reacts to the message (Devito, 2000). Therefore, in an online interaction, the personal qualities of an online user can influence the message produced and in turn affects the messages produced by other online users.

2.5 Conventions in Human Communication

When we interact, we monitor the input we receive from other individuals and adjust our behaviours accordingly (Ross, 1989). We have the schema or the back ground knowledge of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour during an interaction because specific conventions guide our interaction (Werner & James, 2000). A convention is thus a behavioral regularity that sustains itself because it serves the interests of everyone involved (Hewitt & Hewitt, 1986; Becker & Mark, 2002). A convention governs the conduct that is acceptable to everyone within the communication system. Some social conventions are articulated by explicit agreements or are defined by law (Ross, 1989).

In social philosophy, social conventions have been described as normative rules of conduct which are based on implicit ethical imperatives (Hewitt & Hewitt, 1986; Becker & Mark, 2002). According to this outlook, a social convention may retain the characters of an 'unwritten' law of customs that are accepted by a group or community members even if they have the opportunity to behave in a different way. The members of a social system implicitly know the proper behaviour without guidelines or written rules. Social conventions determine how one should behave within a group and it defines certain behaviour as unsociable (Hewitt & Hewitt, 1986; Becker and Mark, 2002). It can be said that social conventions guarantee the stability and consistency of a social system and in order to do this, group members violate Grice's (1975) cooperative principle and observe Lakoff's (1973) rules of politeness. This will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

2.6 Politeness and Human Communication

The rule of politeness is governed by the politeness theory which provides insights into human communication (Mohd. Ali. 2000; Morand & Ocker, 2003). The theory posits that face-threatening acts (FTA) are an inherent and unavoidable aspect of any human interaction that uses language. FTA's are acts that infringe on the hearers' need to maintain their self esteem and respect and as a result politeness strategies are developed for the purpose of dealing with these FTA's. Politeness in language represents an effort by interactants to support and preserve the self-esteem or the face of others so as to minimize the impact of face-threatening acts that may create conflicts. According to Brown and Levinson (1978), politeness strategies are developed to save the hearers' "face" as 'face' is synonymous to respect that an individual has for a person and the intention to maintain that

respect in public or in private situations has to be maintained in certain ways. Four types of politeness strategies were identified by Brown and Levinson (1978) that they claim are manifested in human interaction and they are: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record-indirect strategy.

Bald on-record: This is a direct, up front interactive strategy that makes no attempt to soften a request. This is often seen in the imperative form: "Get me those figures," "Go away"; it may also include aggravating, threat-escalating clauses: "Don't just stand there, I want that report, now" (Morand & Ocker, 2003).

Positive politeness: The use of this strategy indicates an appreciation of the other's wants in general (Morand & Ocker, 2003). Positive politeness tactics help group members to bond and to locate the common ground among group members to remain together. Positive politeness points out that people are to be respected and the relationship is cordial.

Negative politeness: The strategy attempts to avoid negative face by demonstrating distance and preventing group members from coming too close by keeping appropriate distance (Morand & Ocker, 2003). Negative politeness is similar to positive politeness in that the speaker recognizes that the hearer wants to be respected. However, a speaker hopes s/he is not imposing on the hearer. Examples of negative politeness are expressions such as 'I was thinking if I could…' or 'Is it possible if ...'

Off-record Politeness: This strategy is used in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act. In other words, the speaker leaves a number of defensible interpretations and it was the responsibility of the addressee

to interpret. Such off-record utterances are essentially indirect uses of language (Morand & Ocker, 2003).

2.7 Politeness in Virtual Communication

Politeness in virtual communication can be different from that in face-to-face interaction. The differences arise because the sense of anonymity among online participants encourages them to be impolite and express hostility or resentment explicitly (Reid, 1995). Additionally, the absence of social context cues in virtual communication can give rise to impoliteness or violations of politeness in the form of hostility and inhibitions (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Furthermore, there is no guarantee that a polite message in virtual communication will receive a polite response (Riva & Galimberti 1998). Crystal (2001) contends that hostility in virtual communication is flaming and a violation of Grice's principle of cooperation.

Morand and Ocker (2003) claim that online interactive strategies such as requests for information, giving directives and disagreements can be marred with potential FTA similar to that in face-to-face communication. However, Bunz and Campbell (2004) argue that cooperation among participants in virtual communication can be achieved by politeness markers and indicators. This could be partly due to the fact that virtual communication lacks non-verbal cues which enable participants to have more control over the planning, composing, editing, and delivering of their messages than face-to-face communicators in order to create more polite messages (Walther, 1996). In a related study Duthler (2006)

observed that participants were more polite when they made requests online than by voicemail. This provides support for Walther's (1996) observation that CMC technologies, particularly asynchronous text-based CMC, can facilitate socially desirable communication. In another relevant study, Burke and Kraut (2008) investigated the impact of politeness and rudeness in online communities and found that language rudeness and politeness must be tailored according to groups and the intention of eliciting responses from online users. The study found there was lower reply rate in technical group online environments. However, in political groups, language rudeness elicited more participation from online users.

Therefore, it can be said that more studies need to be conducted on politeness in online communication as not much is known about politeness observation by online users in virtual communities.

2.8 Social Networking Strategies in Computer Mediated Communication

Crystal (2001) and Herring (1999) claim that text-only CMC is interactionally incoherent because of its limitations on turn-taking and reference. However, the popularity of CMC continues to grow because online users have the ability to adapt to a communication medium to increase interactivity (Crystal, 2001; Herring 1999). The interactive practices in CMC have facilitated the formation of virtual communities over time (Herring, 2004) and serve as tools for online participants to share information and engage in social dialogues (Job-sluder & Barab, 2009).

Every act of communication, no matter how trivial or brief, has an effect on others (Mullholland, 1991). In terms of online communicative acts, Woods & Ebersole (2003) term

them as social networking strategies which online participants use to scaffold or to connect with the people they are communicating with. Social networking strategies are basically interactive 'strategy' and 'tactics' that participants use when they interact online. Nierenberg (1973) however, views 'strategy' as the technique used in a negotiation process while 'tactic' is the device used to realize the strategy. Social networking strategies, therefore, encompass both linguistic resources and the mechanism used by online participants towards achieving particular goals in online interaction. Linguistic resources are language items such as lexical and grammatical items and the mechanism refers to the management of speech function in order to achieve certain interactive ends.

Strategies and tactics are used to describe communicative actions (Kim, 1993). Generally, strategies are viewed as action sequences that are used to attain goals. Tactics, on the other hand, are behavioural actions that people manifest in their goal-directed interactions with others. Goals are the primary desire from an entire interaction and an overall strategy and specific tactics for carrying out a strategy is implemented only if one selects a functional outcome desired from an interaction (Kim, 1993).

Since participants in online forums, spend most of the time communicating with others, they apparently have communicative goals which they intend to achieve. The communicative goals are the purpose and they can only achieve these goals by mean of language tactics (Mullholland, 1991). Studies on identifying and classifying a variety of situation-specific interaction outcomes or goals, such as to persuade others, seeking information, and gaining acceptance has interest researchers (Mohd Noor, 2000; Mohd Ali, 2000). Goals are functional outcomes of a communication text for which a wide range of

different tactical goals can be used (Kim, 1993). For instance, if one has the interaction goal of seeking information, there are a number of different tactics (i.e. hinting, asking, keeping eye contact with the partner) can be used.

Herring (2001) posits and defines the interactive strategies produced in CMC as computer-mediated discourse (CMD) because CMD is produced when human beings communicate with one another by transmitting messages via network computers. However, Chester (2004) claims that the term cyberspace interactions is now commonly used to refer to computer-mediated communication because the term cyberspace now includes a wide range of manifestations and is not limited to the five forms of CMC interactions, namely blogs and home pages, email, newsgroup, and chat rooms (Chester, 2004).

Tan (2006) proposes that online interaction can be viewed as functional moves. The functional moves are used to achieve the desired interactive goals of the online participants. According to Crystal (2001) as CMC lacks interactional features such as those used in face-to-face interaction, the participants use interactional moves such as 'emoticons' (e.g., ☺,) to convey their emotional state and attitudinal intention. Crystal (2001) views CMC as time-governed and the participants usually expect an immediate response even when they are writing and not speaking the language. The 'utterances' used in CMC display much of the urgency and energetic force of face-to-face communications and not that of writing

Bordia (1996) contends that CMC is a combination of written and oral styles of communication and this has led some to posit that the computer medium is "impoverished" and unsuitable for social interaction (Baron, 1984). For example, the language used in chat

rooms is often treated as less correct, complex and coherent than standard written language (Herring, 1996). This assumption may be incorrect as there is ample evidence to suggest that users compensate textually for missing metacommunicative features such as facial expression, posture and tone of voice by finding ways of making virtual communication as near as possible to face-to-face interaction (Riva & Galimberti, 1998).

In spite of these views, CMC is believed to have features that have the characteristics of both spoken and written language (Crystal, 2001), even though the spoken and written language forms are two different aspects of a language. For example, in chat rooms, where communication is expressed through the medium of writing, the 'interlocutors' display the core properties of speech with the use of symbols (Crystal, 2001). However, Segerstad (2002) claims that there is no difference in the language of the internet and language used in real life. According to Segerstad (2002),

> Much of what is communicated via the (internet) could just as well have been accomplished with traditional letters. Factors such as ease of production with its low demand on physical and cognitive effort, immediacy and availability, fast transmission at a low cost and relative anonymity of electronically medicated text all invite informality and perhaps also communication which would not have been conducted if it had to rely on pen-and-paper communication.
>
> (Segerstad, 2002: 260)

Even though scholars differ in their claim on how best to define the language features in CMC, Markel (1999) and Davis & Brewer (1997) view that the interactive strategies in CMC can be analyzed according to the speech acts the strategies appear to perform. Additionally, Chester (2004) believes that online interactive practices can be facilitated for the following reasons:

(i)   The opportunity to remain anonymous and;

(ii)   The ephemeral nature of interaction

2.8.1 The Opportunity to Remain Anonymous

According to Chester (2004), anonymity allows online participants to interact in the manner they wish and be confident to say what they want. Online participants usually use nicknames to hide their real identity but Crystal (2001) warns that nicknames allow participants to introduce all kinds of exaggeration and deceptions. In addition, anonymity leads to messages that are aggressive to an individual. However, Chester (2004) states that CMC exists on a continuum. At one end of the continuum, online participants can be identified by their real names and features of email address. And at the other end of the continuum they can be completely untraceable. Chester states that somewhere between the two extremes of the continuum, online participants can be identified based on their choice of words and views (Crystal, 2001; Chester, 2004).

2.8.2 The Ephemeral Nature of Communication

Online interactions vary in their ephemeral nature. In some modes of communication, such as blogs, a permanent record of interaction exists. The permanent record keeps track of what has been said and done when participants interact socially online (Thayalan & Mohd. Noor, 2006). This, may, in turn enhance online relationships as online participants can keep in touch with others and form friendships that appear to remain intact for a longer period of time.

2.9 Background and Cultural Profile of Participants in Communication

An attempt to study the language features in any communication must take into account the cultural profile of the participants involved the study. This section aims to provide a brief cultural profile of the ethnic groups in this study because when cultures differ, the way communication occurs can also differ (Gudykust, 1993).

2.9.1 The Malay Culture

The Islamic religion is an important component of the Malay culture. In the Constitution of Malaysia, a Malay is defined as a Muslim who speaks the Malay language habitually and conforms to the Malay customs. The Malay culture places great importance upon proper *patut conduct* - as Mahathir (1970) puts it: "there is always a proper way to do things" and they tend to regard themselves as *halus* (refined) and others as *kasar* or coarse (Wilson, 1967). It is important for the Malays to adhere to proper or refined behaviour or they could be considered rude or insensitive to the dignity of others. They generally expect a certain degree of social distance and decorum in female-male interaction. Therefore, a female who is seen to be too friendly or mixes freely with males would endanger her reputation negatively, similarly, when a male is seen to be too friendly with females (Burhanudeen, 2003). This contends with Abdullah (1996) who states that female Malays are expected to be reserved when they socialize.

2.9.2 The Bajau Culture

The Bajau community, the second largest aboriginal ethnic group after the Kadazandusun in Sabah, is also known as the *Sama* community. The Bajau are mainly split into groups

that reside in the west and the east coasts of Sabah and have strong association with the sea is the *tanda* (sign or ethnic marker). As such, they are traditionally recognized through their language, and in fact, it is only by speaking the language can a member of the group convince both outsiders and fellow members about their ethnicity (Torres, 2005). The Bajau language consists of words borrowed from the Suluk and the Malay languages (Lasimbang & Kinajil, 2008).

Bajaus are seen as individualistic people but their shared identity of Islam creates a powerful unifying bond among them (Joshua's Project, 2002). Torres (2005) describes the Bajau as peace-loving people who avoided war and violence. However, an in-depth study of the Bajau culture is limited (Mohd. Yakin & Mahali, 2007; Liang, 1985).

2.9.3 The Kadazan-Dusun Culture

The Kadazan-Dusun are several groups of people who traditionally inhabit the northern and western coastal plains and the areas around Mount Kinabalu. They speak fundamentally similar languages with great variations in dialects (Lasimbang & Kinajil, 2008). The Kadazan-Dusun men and women enjoy equal social status, and in fact women are considered important custodians of indigenous information and knowledge (Lasimbang, 1997).

The Kadazan-Dusun traditionally share an animistic belief system which provides for a variety of religious customs and practices. This religious system centres largely on their staple food, rice, and rituals to maintain the balance and harmony between man and his

environment to provide conditions for successful cultivation and harvest (King, 1978; Liang, 1985). Kadazan-Dusun culture is heavily influenced by home-brewed alcoholic drinks. *Tapai* and *lihing* are rice wines served and consumed and are a staple in their social gatherings and ceremonies (Evan, 1922).

2.9.4 The Chinese Culture

The Chinese in Malaysia are usually followers of Buddhism and Taoism. Incorporated into both the religions is the teaching of Confucius which is aimed at moral influence and code of ethics, rather then spiritual attainment. Taoism and Buddhism shape Chinese life and thought about life after death and the supernatural (Mohd. Ali, 2000).

The Chinese culture is strongly based on family ties, the community and entrepreneurship. As such they are in some ways driven to provide a better life for themselves and their family. For the Chinese, social norms such as respect for elders and exchanging of pleasantries are very common and serve to strengthen ties (Mohd. Ali, 2000).

2.10 Common Malaysian Culture

Malaysians live in a multi-racial and multi-religious environment. Therefore, issues of ethnicity and culture are important to Malaysians as they play a significant part in social ~~and personal~~ interactions and to distinguish one ethnic group from the other (Guinee, 2005). Guinee (2005) states that the characteristics of Malaysians in communication are notable in the following areas:

(i)   Politeness System

(ii)   Relational Styles

Malaysians are generally receptive to behaviours that exhibit good manners in face-to-face interaction. This could be due wholly or to the fact that Malaysians observe a politeness system that represents specific codes of verbal and non-verbal interactive behaviours. Besides, Malaysians emphasise social relationships and they tend to work in a communal sense (Mohd Ali 2000).

Abdullah (1992) observed that Malaysians identify themselves as collective groups of people. This is evident when members become part of a group from whom they can seek advice and support one another. According to Mohd Ali (2000) collectivity in the Malaysian context is an attempt to maintain interpersonal harmony. For example, Malaysians act with diplomacy when they deal with their superiors and colleagues. They are usually diplomatic and tactful by using a *'wakil'* or spokesman when they express frustrations to their superiors.

Abdullah (1996) asserts that while Malaysians '...differ in many symbolic expressions, our common denominator lies in our deep-seated Asian values' (p. 8). This is also noted by Hirschman (1986) that a great degree of harmony and cooperation persists, though there were elements of ethnocentrism among the various ethnic groups in Malaysia. Nevertheless, there are significant commonalties across these groups. These include the emphasis on group orientation, a concern for face saving, harmony and religious beliefs (Abdullah, 1992; Mohd. Ali, 2000; Guinee, 2005).

(i) **Group Orientation** – For Malaysians, the family is the centre of the social structure. Therefore, there is emphasis on unity, loyalty and respect for the elderly in the communities. The family is the place where the individual can be guaranteed both emotional and financial support. Families tend to be extended, although in the larger cities this will naturally differ.

(ii) **The Concept of Face** – Malaysians strive to maintain face and reluctance to provide feedback and adherence to protocol. Face embraces qualities such as good name, good character, and being held in esteem by one's peers. It is considered a commodity that can be given, lost, taken away, or earned. According to Mohd Ali (2000), the desire to maintain face makes Malaysians strive for harmonious and cordial relationships. Face can be lost by openly criticizing, insulting, or putting someone on the spot; doing something that brings shame to the group; challenging someone in authority, especially if this is done in public; showing anger at another person; refusing a request; not keeping a promise; or disagreeing with someone publicly. Conversely, face can be saved by remaining calm and courteous; discussing errors or transgressions in private; speaking about problems without blaming anyone; using non-verbal communication to say "no"; and allowing the other person to get out of the situation with their pride intact.

(iii) **Harmony** - For Malaysians, harmonious relationship is preserved when the face need of others is heeded or taken care of. In order to preserve relationship Malaysians may not be too direct with negative comments. They usually hedge and may not always express truth openly. Therefore, one has to look for subtle evidence of conflict.

(iv) **Religious Beliefs** – Religion correlated strongly with ethnicity with all Malay Muslims, most Chinese Buddhist/Taoist, most Bajau Muslims and most Kadazan-Dusun Christians/Muslims. There are substantial religious boundary markers among the ethnic groups and most Malaysians have a strong sense of how their religious practice differs from that of others. This is believed to be a factor for religious tension among Malaysians to be at its lowest. As such Malaysians know that expressing the religious differences among them openly can undermine ethnic harmony.

From the description, it can be said that Malaysian communication styles are characterized by forms of politeness and diplomacy. The underlying drive is the preservation of the existing harmony among the ethnic groups. As such, communication among the ethnic

groups can be somewhat formal and this is especially true in the workplace (Mohd. Ali, 2000). In their study, Barton et al. (2006) described the cooperation among Malaysian as *'quanxi'* that brings about *'silaturahim'* (harmony and understanding) among the different ethnic groups.

2.11 Ethnic Groups and Communicative Styles

The following sections give the general communicative styles of the different ethnic groups in this study.

2.11.1 Communicative Styles of Malay

The Malays are expected to be indirect, non-confrontational and choose to avoid hurting relationships (Mohd. Salleh, 2006; Mohd Ali, 2000). Asmah Hj. Omar (1987) contends that Malays do not tell the offender directly that s/he has committed a breach of etiquette. They consider it impolite to 'tell off' anyone, even a child, let alone adults. Additionally, Asmah Hj. Omar (1987) states that in the Malay tradition, one can be seen as *'kurang ajar'* (ill bred), *'tak ada budi bahasa'* (lacking courtesy) and *'tak tahu adat'* (lacking knowledge of Malay customary laws) if one is being direct in giving comments. For the Malays, directness can be construed as being boastful, arrogant and ignorant of the Malay traditions.

In their study, Osman and Tan (2002) report that in general the Malays are warm and courteous when they make statements. Additionally, they can adapt to changing subjects and situations especially during negotiation. Within this politeness system, there are different

forms of address for the varying degrees of status. There is a tendency to introduce the important person to the lower ranking person and the older person to the younger person. Therefore, it is important to know the correct salutation as this indicates good manners. Asmah Hj. Omar (1990) states that for the Malays:

> If a speaker, native or otherwise, makes a mistake in the use of certain affixes, his listener may think that all he needs is practice of those grammatical items. However, if he chooses the wrong honorific, he will be labeled as coarse, rude, not well-bred, etc.
>
> (Asmah Hj. Omar, 1990: 1)

A great deal of what it means to be *halus* hinges on one's speech and non-verbal behaviour (Goddard, 1997). The importance of speech *(bahasa)* to proper conduct is attested by the fact that *bahasa* has a secondary meaning of 'courtesy, manners'. For instance, the collocation *tahu bahasa* ('know speech') is explained by Hussain (1990) as *sopan santun* 'well mannered'. Other similar expressions are *melanggar bahasa* ('attack speech') 'breach etiquette' and *kurang bahasa* ('less/under-speech') 'ill-mannered'.

2.11.2 Communicative Styles of Bajau

The communicative style of the Bajau is characterized by their nature as people who love to go together (*magbeya-beya'*) and who readily help and cooperate (*magluruk-lurukan*) with others (Torres, 2005). Nevertheless, the relational style among the Bajau is basically clientage with severe social stratification (Torres, 2005). Joshua's Project (2002) regards the Bajau to be individualistic people but studies on the communicative styles of the Bajau are limited (Mohd. Yakin & Mahali, 2007; Liang, 1985).

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2.11.3 Communicative Styles of Kadazan-Dusun

Ongkili (1999) states that the feeling of oneness is yet not realized among the Kadazan-Dusun communities. Though most Kadazan-Dusun have embraced either Islam or Christianity, Ongkili (1999) states that, on the whole, *adat* (customs) gives direction to all communal and personal behaviours of the Kadazan-Dusun. Nevertheless, it must be made known that documentation on the communicative styles of the Kadazan-Dusun is sparse (Liang, 1985).

2.11.4 Communicative Styles of Chinese

David and Kow (2002) point out that Malaysian Chinese are polite, though they can be explicit and direct in their views and comments. It is believed that the Chinese are not wasteful of time and they dislike indirectness and long windedness. In terms of relational styles, Barton, et al. (2006) note that Chinese observe *guanxi* which stresses on collectivism, obedience, and obligation to one another as in traditional Chinese familism. Therefore, communicative styles among Chinese are focused on high-trust and long-term relationships that allow individuals to assist one another over long period of time.

2.12 Virtual Intercultural Communication and Competence

Kramsch, (1998) views intercultural communication as communication that occurs between people from different ethnic, social or gendered cultures within the boundaries of the same

national language as intercultural communication. Womack (1990) defines intercultural communication as communication between individuals or groups from different cultures or from different subcultures of the same socio-cultural system. Asuncion-Lande (1990), on the other hand, defines intercultural communication as interactions among individuals or groups who possess recognized cultural differences in terms of perception and behaviour. Hinner (1998), states for effective intercultural communication to occur, the encoding and decoding of communicative messages among members of different ethnic groups are not given erroneous interpretation. However, it is believed that in virtual communication, even when participants are not conscious they are interacting with people from another ethnic group, it is still intercultural communication (Thayalan and Mohd. Noor, 2006).

Gundykunst (1993) states of cultural variability occur when people of different cultures communicate. The individualism-collectivism distinction is drawn to explain the variability in communicative behaviours between cultures. In collectivistic cultures, people belong to in-groups in which individuals seek group memberships to foster harmonious interaction. In collectivistic culture group members are interdependence, maintain in-group membership identities and are aware that they are socially connected (Gundykunst, 1993, Ting-Toomey, 1993).

Ruben (1976) identified seven categories when one is evaluating effective intercultural communication. They are a display of respect, interaction posture, orientation to knowledge, empathy, role behaviour, interaction management and tolerance for ambiguity. Although evidence was provided that the categories could be used to evaluate intercultural

communication effectiveness, there has been little empirical research demonstrating how these dimensions were enacted behaviourally (Martin, 1993).

Hammer, Gudykunst and Wiseman (1978), on the other hand, derived three basic factors for successful intercultural communication. These three factors, ability to deal with psychological stress, ability to communicate effectively and ability to establish interpersonal relationships were subsequently tested for generalizability to other cultural groups.

According to Raymond (2003), virtual intercultural communication can be a difficult area to research on because the identities of people such as their ethnicity and societal status are absent. Besides, these identities are not important for online users because what appear to be important are their arguments and ideas. As such, Raymond (2003), believes that virtual communicative styles may not be taken positively in some cultures and conflicts may occur. For example, Raymond (2003) states that for the Japanese, it is important to use language to convey aspects of feelings and relationships but for the American, language is used to relay information.

Nonetheless, Matsumoto et al. (2005) view that virtual intercultural communication comprises the continuous adaptations and adjustments individuals make when they interact online with people from different cultures and background. Adaptations as defined by Matsumoto et al. (2005), is the process of altering one's behaviour to fit in with a changed environment or circumstance which is important to enable a person to operate in a cultural

specific group. Adjustment, on the other hand, refers to regulative behaviours for well-being. For Matsumoto et al. (2005), positive adjustments occur when:

(i)   relationships are built among the people interacting online; and

(ii)   interaction occurs in a cooperative manner.

Consequently, adjustment can be seen as the result of adapting to a communication context. Therefore, adaptation can either have positive or negative adjustment outcomes such as the development of self-confidence, self-esteem and stress reduction. However, negative adaptation can be a cause of depression or anxiety which can have psychological and psychosomatic consequences.

Intercultural competence is the adaptive behaviour of individuals to accommodate themselves to the demands of a host culture Taylor (1994). As such, intercultural competency is an ongoing, individual internal process which can be manifested in their ability to adapt to the culture of others (Davis et al., 2005).   Collier (1989) defines intercultural competence as the mutual avowing or confirmation of the interactants' cultural identities where interactants are engaged in behaviour perceived to be appropriate and effective in advancing both cultural identities. Cultural identities are identifications with and perceived acceptance into a group with shared systems of symbols and meaning as well as rules for conduct (Collier, 1989).

Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) derived three components of competence: motivation, knowledge and skills. Motivation refers to the desire to communicate appropriately and

effectively with others. Of particular importance to the analysis is motivation to communicate with strangers. Knowledge refers to the awareness or understanding of what needs to be done in order to communicate appropriately and effectively in a given context. Skills are the abilities to engage in the behaviours necessary to communicate appropriately and effectively.

Gudykunst (1993) proposes that Spitzberg's and Cupach's (1984) component of motivation can be seen as interlocutors' motivation to sustain an interaction by presenting themselves as non-prejudiced and caring people. Motivation would lead interlocutors to be open and establish interpersonal relationship that would encourage in-group social bonding. Knowledge, according to Gudykunst (1993), involves recognition of the similarities and differences that exists among people in their interactive behaviours. Skills involve the ability to tolerate ambiguity, ability to empathize and to adapt and accommodate our communication behaviours (Gudykunst, 1993).

It must be pointed out, however, that Martin (1993) is of the view that instead of focusing on communication as competent or incompetent, interaction should be viewed as requiring moment-to-moment strategies to correct or adjust the conversation to keep it running smoothly and harmoniously. Identifying characteristics of competent communication, no doubt useful, does not explain how individuals go about the task of improving conversations that are not meeting expectation or not proceeding smoothly.

Zakaria and Cogburn (2007) state that research on virtual intercultural communication is still limited particularly in understanding intercultural communicative competence. In their

study, Zakaria and Cogburn (2007) found four patterns of online intercultural interactive style among members of a civil society. The researchers suggest that in highly contextualized communication, members were indirect and ambiguous because they understood each other but in low contextualized communication, they were straightforward and kept to the point. It can be said that in order to enhance collaboration among online users, it is important for online participants to understand the cultural differences that exist between people.

Hence, in order to be competent communicators, Davis and Cho (2005) say openness and flexibility is needed in virtual intercultural communication. Being open to the cultures of others helps individuals to be familiarized whilst respecting the intercultural environment they are in. An open minded person tends to have the cognitive flexibility in adapting to new ideas and a willingness to change. Open minded individuals are also likely to be tolerant towards ambiguity and unfamiliar situations in an intercultural context (Davis & Cho, 2005). According to Davis and Cho (2005), flexibility enables people to adapt to the social and cultural differences of others.

2.13 Gender and Communication

This section gives an overview of gender differences in communication in an attempt to draw its relevance to virtual communication. The section begins by describing gender communication and reviewing past studies on the communicative styles of men and women.

According to Diane & Phil (2008), gender communication occurs when the notion of sex begins to influence the choices of what people say and how people relate to others. In other words, gender influences what people say or how they relate to one another (Kramsch, 1998). Mulvaney (1994) states that gender differences in communication occur because of the differences in worldview, language and the nonverbal communication between males and females. All these elements are different due to the differences of culture and where they come from (Mulvaney, 1994). Rayson et al. (1997) and Coates (1996) also share similar thoughts. They say both men and women differ in word choice and topics of discussion. Men prefer topics on things and avoid personal issues and women like topics relating to people, relationship, feelings and personal experience. This concurs with Tannen's (1990) view that each sex does not just have its preferred topics - boys talk about things while girls talk about feelings - but its own conversational style.

Tannen (1990) also adds girls are collaborative and are likely to include others and establish intimacy and connection, compared to boys who use conversations to establish status. However, Freed and Greenwood (1996) claimed that men and women were cooperative in conversations. This is further echoed in a study by Rodino (1997) which found no difference in the language used by men and women in online conferences. Rodino (1997) found that both genders constructed and expressed their ideas in a variety of ways and the language used remained flexible and dynamic. This differs from the findings of Garland and Martin (2005) who found significant gender disparity in the manner females and males interacted online. For example, males were found to be more direct in what they said whilst female were more indirect.

Other differences in the use of hedging devices between men and women found by Holmes (1995) involved the use of the lexical items 'you know', 'I think' and 'sort of'. This agrees with empirical results reported by Herring (1994) that women and men use different styles when posting to the internet although these styles are not exclusively used by women or men. Pasternak et al. (1997) view that interpreting gender studies must be done with caution because gender differences are not characteristic of all societies and they generally do not conform to a general pattern.

2.13.1 Communicative Styles of Men and Women

According to Tannen (1990), the communicative styles of men and women differ in many ways. Males preferred public 'report' talk that has to do with negotiating and maintaining social status while females preferred private 'rapport' talk in order to establish and maintain relationships. Tannen (1990) provides an overview of the questioning styles of men and women, interruption, making suggestions and giving opinions. Tannen (1990) claims that the communicative styles between men and women in 'report' talk, tend to favour men.

In a relevant study, Coates (1996) and Holmes (1995) found women to be more cooperative in conversations. Features like overlapping speech appear to be an essential feature of conversation among women, as opposed to the more adversarial style of men in single-sex interaction. In addition Holmes (1995) found that women use tag questions as forms of positive politeness devices while men use them more to ask for information or confirmation of assumptions. Women tend to use the solidarity marker 'you know' and they were more positive politeness device oriented when it protects the speaker's positive face needs.

Similarly, Herring (2000) found that women were more likely to thank, appreciate and apologize and to be upset by the violations of politeness cues. Men, however, were less concerned with politeness strategies.

In gender studies on the Malaysian context, Ibrahim and Ismail (2007) found that the communication style of Malaysian men denotes friendliness compared to Malaysian women. They found that men often started a conversation in a men-women interaction context. Additionally, Jedin and Saad (2006) found that male students use 'you know' to presuppose shared knowledge or to hedge to denote politeness and collaboration.

The communicative style of men and women appears to be fundamentally different in face-to-face interaction, but these differences may not be prevalent in virtual communication. This will be discussed further in the following section.

2.13.2 Gender and Virtual Communication

Gender differences in text based virtual communication are not as prevalent as in face-to-face interaction. In addition, since there is no bodily presence in virtual communication, online users rely purely on language as cue for meanings (Pohl & Michaelson, 2005). However, issues surrounding gender and discourse styles in virtual communication have been an important interest for research (Arbaugh, 2000; Rodino, 1997; Garland & Martin, 2005; Herring, 2001; Nowson et al. 2005; Riva & Galimberti, 1998; Lewis & Fabos, 2005).

It is believed that that CMC reduces gender-influenced inequalities that are often observed in face-to-face communication (Wojahn, 1994). Given this assumption, CMC enables both

male and female participants to share, confront, and discuss differing viewpoints which allows students to engage in critical discourse (Johnson & Johnson, 1992). However, research findings have not been conclusive as social constraints manifested by gender differences continue to place a significant influence on gender behavior and participation in CMC. For example, studies on gender participation in CMC have found that males tend to post more and longer messages than females in mixed gender discussions (Herring, 1993; McConnell, 1997; Ross, 1996; Vanfossen, 1996). Although females have been found to participate less than males, females have been found to be less disadvantaged in online discussions than in face-to-face discussions (McConnell, 1997). In contrast, other studies found that females posted more messages than males (Herring, 1999; Savicki, Kelly, & Ammon, 2002) and females posted more substantive comments in both threaded discussions and chats in small groups.

At the same time, studies have also found no significant differences between genders (Allen, 1995; Wojhan, 1994), and that the comments posted by males and females have been found to be similar in type and frequency in large group discussions and chats (Davidson-Shivers, Morris, & Sriwongkol, 2003). These mixed findings could be attributed to differences in group-task (e.g., information sharing, argumentation, problem solving), task structure (e.g., graded participation, minimum required postings, assignment of roles or teams), and methods used to measure participation (e.g., message frequency vs. message-response frequencies).

In one of the earliest studies, Crowston and Kammerer (1998) examined how the communication style of an online discussion group affects the participants' desire to engage

in online interaction. The study found that online participants were less interested in joining forums that were dominated by masculine-style language. Markel (1999), on the other hand, noted that female students used direct questions and responses to invite discussion, while male students made statements in challenging tones in online virtual conferences among in-service teachers. As a result, Markel (1999) believes the males were more successful in receiving responses and therefore contributed to the inequality of the group's online discussion participation.

In a relevant study, Savicki et al. (2004) found that women did not disclose much information about themselves in discussion groups but they attempted to reduce tension in online participation. However, males tended to use impersonal language, and they were less concerned with politeness and they sometimes violated the expected online conduct (Savicki, et al. 2004).

In another study, Savicki and Kelley (2000) found that in mixed gender online interaction, the difference in the communicative styles of men and women is not apparent. The findings coincide with a study by Thomson and Murachver (2001) who found little difference in online communicative styles of men and women compared to that found in face-to-face interaction. In addition, Pohl and Michaelson (2005) contend that online communication styles of men and women correspond to mixed gendered style and persona.

Nonetheless, Herring and Paolillo (2006) claim that virtual communication is independent of the author's gender and they invariably use certain kinds of language, irrespective of their gender. In addition, online participants can hide their true identities such as their

gender and ethnic group (Chester, 2004; Herring, 2001; Raymond, 2003). This supports the views of Witmer and Katzman (1997) who speculate that women are more likely to use male communicative styles online than in person. In addition, women prefer to disguise their gender in virtual communication (Jaffe et al., 1999).

There are studies, however, that have found clear gender differences in communication styles in CMC. Men tend to use expository style to assert opinions strongly as facts and place more value on presenting information are more likely to use crude language, violate online rules of conduct, and engage in more adversarial exchanges; and sometimes terminate exchanges when there are disagreements (Blum, 1999; Fahy, 2002, 2002b; Herring, 1993, Savicki, Lingenfelter, & Kelley, 1996).

In contrast, females tend to hedge, qualify and justify their assertions, express support of others, make apologies, and in general, and portray a consensus-making interactive style. Females are also more upset by violations of politeness and more likely to challenge participants who violate rules of conduct (Smith, McLaughlin, & Osborne, 1997). At the same time, students in discussion groups have also been found to modify their communication styles in the direction of the majority gender (Baym, 1996; Herring, 1996).

These differences in communication styles can potentially affect how males and females exchange messages and responses with one another. Studies have found that females are more likely to respond to messages addressed to them and are likely to make contact with a greater number of participants in discussions (Fahy (2002). Nevertheless, studies have yet to examine how males and females exchange messages with one another and how the

patterns of exchange affect the extent to which males and females contribute messages that support critical discourse, critical thinking, argumentation, and group problem solving. The absence of studies on the patterns of interaction between males and females can be attributed, in part, to limitations in the theories and assumptions used to frame current research in CMC (Dillenbourg, Baker, Blaye, & O'Malley, 1996). Additonally. new computer tools and software are needed to assist researchers in measuring, identifying, and analyzing interaction patterns in online discussions (Pilkington, 1999).

2.14 Summary

The chapter reviews the various aspects of communication that are relevant to this study. Attention has been given to virtual communication and the transactional view of communication in a discourse community as adopted in this study. The description of virtual communication alerts researchers on the conditions that must be heeded for the formation of a virtual community in online communication. Besides, the chapter provides a variety of insights into the ways Malaysians interact.