

Many in one -- one in many: Towards construction of community in an electronic discussion forum

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Abstract

This paper focuses on participants in an electronic discussion forum (EDF) for young people engaging in asynchronous discussion with each other. It seeks to determine if the participants constitute a discernible discourse community which establishes and regulates the norms and conventions for electronic discussion in the forum. From a plurality of voices offering a multiplicity of perspectives in one forum (many in one), is there a distinctiveness among participants with shared distinguishing features (one in many) ? Specifically, the examination of how participants express coherence as a community centers on identifying participants' underlying beliefs or assumptions with regard to the purpose and nature of interaction, their perceptions and sense of awareness of each other as interactants in the forum, and the code used in communicating in the EDF.

1 Introduction

It is acknowledged that, in an interaction, the interplay of participants' initiatives and responses through conversational dynamics generates a network of 'social relations, commitments and responsibilities and possibly also shared knowledge, attitudes and perspectives' (Linell, 1990:147). Whether the same applies to participation among interactants who are removed in time and space from each other in the EDF is a key concern of this paper. After all, text-only, asynchronous computer-mediated communication in a multi-party set-up has been recognised to be disorganised and fragmented (McGrath, 1990; Hale, 1996; Ruberg et al, 1996) due to interactional constraints imposed by computer-mediated messaging systems.

The EDF in this study itself comprises several overlapping groups of people: those at whom the messages are specifically aimed; those who read the messages and do not respond; and those who actively participate in the EDF both by reading and contributing messages.

Whether or not these individuals in the EDF share understanding of all the 'contexts requirements' (Baym, 1996: 322) of the forum is another matter. Specifically, this paper examines the following issues:

- i) What is the evidence for participants constructing a discourse community which is identifiable as specific to an EDF?
- ii) How are norms of interaction in the EDF regulated or governed?
- iii) Are participants in the EDF aware or made aware of these norms?

1.1 Background to studies on 'community'

The notion of 'community', derived from the Latin 'communitae' meaning 'held in common', carries the sense of a common or shared set of knowledge or behaviours. Discourse analysts (Bazerman, 1981; Herrington, 1983; Freedman, 1988) note that the 'knowledge, values, perceptions, and beliefs of a given community are manifested in conventions' (Currie, 1990:128). The linguistic norms and conventions represent the linguistic behaviour which is expected of each member and considered typical of a specific group.

Studies on community refer specifically to speech and discourse communities. At the outset, a speech community comprises individuals who share a set of norms and rules for the use of language (Romaine, 2000: 23). Other definitions of what a speech community constitutes include shared norms, attitudes and values (Labov, 1972), and shared rules of speaking and interpretations of speech performance (Hymes, 1972). Despite these varied interpretations, sociolinguistic criteria for what is recognized as a speech community are noted to include the word 'shared'. Linguists are, however, in agreement that sharing a similar language does not, by itself, suffice as a criterion for the identification of a speech community (Romaine, 2000). The notion of a 'speech community' would similarly prove too restrictive a focus if applied to this study with attention confined solely to participants' language use.

Swales (1990) distinguishes speech from discourse communities. In the former, 'the communicative needs of the group, such as socialisation or group solidarity, tend to predominate in the development and maintenance of its discursal characteristics' so that the 'primary determinants of behaviour are social' (ibid:24). By contrast, in a discourse community, the 'primary determinants of linguistic behaviour are functional' and 'the

communicative needs of the goals tend to predominate in the development and maintenance of its discursal characteristics'. The defining characteristics identified by Swales (ibid:24-25) for a discourse community include a 'broadly agreed set of common public goals', 'mechanisms of intercommunication among its members', use of 'participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback', and the acquisition of 'specific lexis'.

In this study, the term 'discourse community' is preferred over speech community in that participants' functional goals and communicative needs of the goals determine the linguistic behaviour in the EDF. However, the EDF of this study differs from the Swales' (1990) perspective of discourse community in so far as the focus is on a public common goal or shared agenda among participants. Participants in the EDF are essentially individuals with varied interests and specific needs of their own. Until these individuals with specific goals and individual interests begin constructing their own messages, they are not seen to constitute a discourse community.

The construction of an identifiable discourse community in the EDF is examined based on a set of distinctive features: shared norms, expectations, perceptions and attitudes regarding language use and participant behaviour, and participants' awareness of these norms, communicative needs and interests of the community. Attention to these areas would establish whether participants in the EDF essentially work towards constructing a recognisable discourse community with identifiable norms and conventions for interaction.

1.2 Studies on virtual community

Computer networks for communication lead to people communicating with each other in 'electronic' rather than 'real' space (Barnes, 1996:211) without physically meeting each other face-to-face (Rheingold, 1991). The exchange of messages among individuals in electronic space leads to the creation of 'virtual' (Rheingold, 1991) or 'symbolic' (Gergen, 1991:214) communities. These communities are linked by participants who symbolically exchange and share information electronically, and are defined not as places in the physical sense but as 'social' networks (Spears et al, 1992: 31).

As communities take shape, norms are developed based on shared values and expectations. The concern in this paper is to identify the evidence for the EDF as a recognisable discourse

community. The norms include the underlying assumptions which participants in the forum share with regard to the purpose of communication and 'ways of speaking' (Gumperz and Gumperz, 1982) with each other in the EDF. Attention is also given to examining the notion of community in terms of the evidence for building allegiance and support among participants, that is, an 'in-group' solidarity as opposed to the exclusion of others who form an 'outsider' group.

In order to understand the EDF as a community in a computer-mediated environment, there is also a need to consider the emphasis in prevailing studies on written discourse. The individual is no longer just a single writer but 'a member of a team, and a participant in a community of discourse that creates its own collective meaning' (Porter, 1986:35). Collaborative meaning-making within a social perspective framework of writing (Faigley et al, 1985) stresses the influence of community in shaping the construction of texts. This perspective is reinforced by the principle of intertextuality which upholds that 'all writing and speech, indeed, all signs - arise from a single network', and that 'no text exists totally independent of another' (Porter, 1986:35). The principle of text-dependency and collaboration in the construction and negotiation of meaning in texts is particularly significant for text construction in electronic forums. As participants engage in electronic discussion, linguistic norms and conventions become established and accepted by participants in a forum over time (Wilkins, 1991). Because the messages created constitute 'group knowledge' (Barker and Kemp, 1990) or, at best, a means to depict the notion of community knowledge, it is necessary to study the messages in the EDF as being socially constructed under the influence, if any, of participants' underlying assumptions or shared expectations.

Studies (Bakhtin, 1990; MacKinnon, 1992; Watson, 1997) on participants' online interactions have focussed on the concept of a community based on shared group concerns among participants involved. Communication among participants in an online discussion forum is seen to be vital to the 'social health' (Watson, 1997:104) of a community, given that communication is 'a process through which a shared culture is created, modified and transformed' (Carey, 1989: 43). The generation of 'group-specific meanings' (Bakhtin, 1986) is acknowledged to contribute to the emergence of 'new forms of speech, or genres, unique to that community' (Baym, 1995:151).

One particular study (McLaughlin et al, 1997:166) of a planned, virtual community, the Tele-Garden, aimed at examining communication patterns and practices in the interactive medium. Factors affecting community formation were identified: 'the emergence of primary interpersonal relationships; the development of group identity and distinctiveness; the evolution of norms, standards and sanctions; and the creation of mechanisms for control of community space' (ibid:150).

Most messages characterised the 'communal' group with the Tele-Garden representing 'a collective of individuals united by common interests' (ibid:155). However, although half of the messages reflected participants' community-consciousness, what was still lacking was a 'top-down, concerted collaborative effort to take care of the garden' (ibid:156). Collective or shared interest does not necessarily equate with shared commitment to achieve communal goals. Further analysis revealed indicators of members' fixed identity, and virtual rituals that indicated a sense of community formation in addition to regulation of participant behaviour when standards were violated. Collective identity and shared understanding of norms and conventions governing interaction within a virtual community were evident. This is of significant interest and relevance to the EDF in this study.

The focus on shared norms of behaviour and, specifically, regulation of these norms in studies of online communities, aids in establishing what holds participants together, and influences their interaction and behaviour. Baym's (1995:157) study of a Usenet group on soap operas showed the heaviest users were more likely than lighter users to 'attend to interpersonal alignment of the interaction', indicating awareness of shared norms to some degree. Explicit censuring of users who violated acceptable norms of behaviour within the community was also evident.

A study from Sudweeks' and Rafaeli's (1998:178) project focused on the 'social glue' holding computer-mediated groups together. The cohesiveness responsible for the 'entrapment, surrounding and captivation' (ibid:173) of group CMC is attributed to the quality of 'interactivity', that is, 'the extent to which messages in a sequence relate to each other, and especially the extent to which later messages recount the relatedness of earlier messages' (ibid: 175). The extent of interactivity varied along a continuum from being a declarative or one-way communication to a reactive or two-way communication which affects participant engagement with their messages. Interactive messages are markedly more opinionated,

humorous, self-disclosing and personal than non-interactive or reactive messages. The degree to which messages are related to each other, and participant engagement with each other and with their subject matter provide useful background input for examining participants interacting as a community in this study.

The selected studies of online communities reflect the creation of a shared group culture with its attendant characteristic features and norms for interaction. What emerges is a picture of participants who engage in online interaction having a sense of who they are, and how they are projecting themselves and their identity within a specific environment. Participants show evidence of observing conventions which reflect a sense of connectedness among themselves. There is a shared understanding of norms which represent the linguistic behavior expected of each member in a community, and the behavioural pattern or trait considered typical of a particular group. Participants are seen to constitute a discourse community where their actions and behaviour manifest themselves in ways which influence each other in a virtual community. Along a similar line of investigation, this paper focuses on evidence for the norms and conventions which influence participant behaviour and interaction in the EDF which would characterise participants as members of a recognisable discourse community.

2 The electronic discussion forum

The study was based on messages posted to an EDF, 'Young Voices', set up by a local Internet Service Provider in Singapore for young people to voice their opinions and feelings on issues which interest them. It is a publicly available forum with free access open to any participant.

A 'message' in the EDF is defined as 'a single contribution from a participant to the EDF'. The original message database was narrowed down to the select 370 messages in this study based on the following criteria:

- threads which attract a minimum number of five messages,
- messages which are of topical interest and current relevance to participants at the time of the study - specifically, issues which are of general interest to Singaporeans and those which appeal to young people.

All messages cited in the study are unedited.

Messages are classified according to different threads based on a shared focus of topic. Threads of messages are named according to either the opening line of messages in a thread or, where available, the subject heading of the 'root' message, that is, the first message posted in a thread. The following are the categories of the various threads (Figure 1):

- Issues which interest young people
- Current topical issues at the time of study
- Singapore-specific issues
- Electronic discussion issues

Figure 1

A 'participant' in this study refers to anyone who engages in interaction in the EDF by emailing messages to the site. The participants who contribute to the EDF are largely in Singapore, aged between 13 and 20 years.

3 Identifying defining features of community in the forum

This section examines specific characteristics which participants in the EDF share as an underlying set of commonalities which contribute towards an understanding of the concept of community in the forum.

3.1 Shared norms and expectations

Attention first turns to what participants in the EDF share with regard to specific norms and expectations. These pertain to the purpose of the EDF, appropriacy of nature of interaction and discussion type, and the language used for interaction.

Purpose of the EDF

The original purpose for setting up the EDF can be viewed from various perspectives, namely, the administrators and the participants themselves. The concern is whether a match exists between these two perspectives.

The administrators of the EDF stipulated clearly the purpose and type of discussion it was hoped the EDF would generate. This is evident in the following introductory message by the administrators, drawn from the home page of the EDF:

(1)

Singapore's first and only forum for youths to voice your thoughts, experiences and feelings. Youths are encouraged to post messages on any topic or issue that is of interest and concern to you. Examples given include posting a topic about the music you listen to, or your feelings on friendship, or your experience of holding a vacation job.

with an explicit description of how participants are expected to use the EDF:

(.2)

We hope it will be a place for students to share ideas, make friends etc. The only thing is for this to work students must be willing to introduce themselves and start exchanging (opinions).

The administrators' perspective of the EDF is reinforced by participants. This is reflected in a participant's response to a query on the function of the EDF:

(3)

It's just a place where young people exchange their opinions, comments and supposedly everything under the sun! Sort of email-cum-chat place. Have fun!:)

Participants are generally agreed on the overall purpose and function of the EDF. This is strongly conveyed in the following where the participant distinguishes chatting from the purpose of discussion the EDF is purported to fulfil:

(4)

Are students more mature nowadays?
Chatting on the internet is a waste of time, what i mean by chatting is alamak (name of another informal chat room) & irc (Internet Relay Chat) chat.I

believe Young Voices is a more decent way of chatting. Not only u (you) can make new frens (friends)... U can express your opinion towards subjects that's being discussed and bring up a general topic to review again. What is the real meaning of Young Voices? I'm sure many teens have different things to say, or they have things to say to the world....but lack the chance. In Young Voices, u get the chance !!!!! We are bubbles bursting with new ideas and stuff.....say it out in Young Voices. As i said...it's only a matter whether u use chatting correctly or not. Don't be so "wu liao" (Hokkien: crazy) and type undecent (indecent) topics.

The messages show administrators and participants sharing similar expectations on the purpose of the EDF. These expectations do not appear to be in direct opposition to each other but reinforce and support each other.

Appropriacy of nature of interaction

Related to the purpose of the EDF is interaction which is considered appropriate and acceptable. What participants clearly do not tolerate is using the EDF to meet possible partners:

(5)

I cannot believe some pple (people). HEL-LO this is like, a discussion group, which means pple post messages to discuss things, not to 'get to know' pple. IF YOU Want to do that go to chat lines fer (for) crying out loud, like <http://www.alamak.com/chat...yeah!>

Okay, I know some of you guys out there aren't like that. But lately there's this big influx of pple posting messages that don't concern anything at all...except maybe for themselves of course. This is not like a computer dating loveline here, this is a forum where students can discuss things and not to get hit by desperate pple.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not against getting to know pple, just that this is supposed to discuss something, not to meet your future boyfriend/girlfriend.

So anyways, at least try to find something to talk about.

A distinction is made between posting messages 'to get to know' people and to 'discuss things'.

This is further reinforced by the following messages which show participants' reaction when the original purpose of the EDF is not recognised:

(6)

I agree!!!If people were to look for stead, can go chat, not here!!!This place is to only discuss about school stuff not to look for stead or friends!!!

(7)

I noticed that some people are sort of using this site as a chat place. Please people, this is sort of a forum page, not a chatline!!! Please do the right thing at time right time at the right place.

(8)

Hmmm. Your(you're) probably right about what you said earlier. Yeesh. Making friends in a discussion group!Terrible!Revolting! By the way, why don't you leave me your home number so we can talk this over dinner? (Just kidding).

Participants clearly share specific expectations with regard to the appropriate use of the EDF, namely, for discussion of issues and exchange of opinions, and not solely for making friends. There is a concern, even with newcomers to the EDF, over the appropriate manner of interaction in the EDF. The 'correct' or proper way of using the EDF is raised in the following:

(9)

do u people know how 2 make use of this forum.please use this forum page in the way it should be used, thanks!

(10)

Hmm.....i dont (don't) really think have a one sentence message is the correct way of using this forum too.....do U ??? In this case, why dont U tell me or rather tell everyone how is the use of this forum....will U ?? Pls (please) enlighten us.

For first-time participants in the EDF, queries on the procedure and 'how-to' (11a) of participation are answered with explicit instructions (11b):

(11a)

Does one intro (introduce) oneself or just segue (sashay) into postings like a drunk interrupting a conversation...

(11b)

well Dave,you just post whatevercomes to mind. that would be it. No intros, no "please introduce yourself". who you are isn't important it is what you have to say.

hi pple (people), well, i'm here looking for people who are genuinely sincere in making friends.....not juz (just) out to look for potential GF (girlfriend)/BFs (boyfriends)..... people who are interested in carrying out mature , perceptive and intellectual discussions abt (about) current up-to-date happenings ard (around) the world...do leave a note or email me.

(16)

I would like to correspond with u on a higher level. (of intelligence) Are u the sort of boy who indulges in deep thought about stuff? Do u have revolutionary ideas that go against the norm? Or am i a little too deep for u...

Participants show awareness of what is generally recognised in asynchronous discussions as a 'breach of "netiquette" ', that is, to send messages that contain no significant content (McLaughlin et al, 1995; Herring, 1999).

Appropriacy of language use

There is a further shared expectation among administrators and participants in the EDF over language use that is admissible in the EDF. The act of 'flaming' (glossary) characterised by uninhibited 'remarks containing swearing, insults, name calling and hostile comments' (Kiesler et al, 1984:1129) is not tolerated in the EDF. A certain level of decorum in participants' manner of discussion is expected. This is evident in the following EDF administrator's message:

(17)

NOTICE FROM THE WEBMASTER: FLAME WAR

In the last few days or so there's been a heated discussion on the Singaporean attitude between various parties. While such discussions are very much encouraged, it appears that much of it has degenerated into a flame war involving lots of name-calling. Would appreciate if everyone involved can show some restraint.

Thank you.

-Administrator, Young Voices-

An explicit notice such as this provides the external regulation of participants' interaction from the EDF administrator in stating clearly what is acceptable within the forum and what is not.

Internal monitoring among participants themselves who show disapproval over the use of insults and unacceptable language is also evident in the EDF:

(18)

So we have a discussion on what constitutes a typical local *'Beng' or 'Lian' and what we think of it and here we have people that are stereotyped as the above mentioned crossing insults and hurling obscenities at each other knowing the veil of secrecy provided for and so why bother to have such meaningless discussion then?

*'Beng' and 'Lian':

Colloquial term used in Singapore to refer to Chinese male and female respectively with unrefined speech, mannerisms and outlandish dress sense.

Participants take the responsibility of ensuring a certain standard of acceptable language use upon themselves and do not hesitate from correcting what is considered inappropriate in the forum.

Participants also express the need for sensitivity to each other's feelings and in exercising restraint so as not to give way to excesses of emotion:

(19)

One more thing. I know many ways in which when one touches on a subject that is very sensitive to some people, the natural reaction is of course to be upset. However, I believe that things can be discussed without having to hurt each other's feelings. For when one talks badly about or to the other person, the other person will naturally defend himself and try to find more ways to hurt that person back. Come on! We're all just humans, aren't we? It is understandable for one to do so but I think this situation can be avoided. I'm sure there are many things that need to be discussed. However I am also sure that one has to be careful and tactful in the way he or she presents her opinions. One has to remember that not everyone shares the same opinion for his or her own reasons, be it personal or whatever it is. So one advice from me is: Please consider the feelings of other people before you decide to write something in a certain manner...

The examples indicate that while rules for acceptable behavior in the EDF do get broken, there is, nevertheless, an awareness among both administrators and participants when this happens. A distinct self-awareness of norms of acceptable behaviour is evident in the EDF.

The shared understanding and assumptions which regulate norms of behaviour within the EDF define participants as members of an identifiable discourse community. Through participants' messages and the notice from the EDF administrators themselves, the norms of interaction and behaviour identify participants as belonging to a specific community sharing similar expectations in the EDF. External monitoring of participant behaviour is evident in

the EDF administrators exercising their responsibility by reminding participants of the need for restraint, particularly when norms are not adhered to. Participants in the EDF themselves show an awareness or are made aware of these norms, particularly when these are broken. The norms and expectations in the EDF are noted to extend their influence over the following:

- Purpose of the forum
- Appropriacy of nature of interaction
- Appropriacy of language use.

3.2 Shared perception of sense of place

Although the forum is electronically mediated, it is perceived by participants to assume the physical form of a distinctive 'place' which is identifiable by participants when they make contact and interact with each other. This is evident in the following messages which carry lexical items (italicised) reflecting the EDF as a geographical entity with a spatial dimension of its own:

(20)

Why??Why does nobody *come around here*? *This place* is really boring. I don't think that *this place* is totally unconstructive.

(21)

I'm not saying that u cannot *visit this website*.

Participants, in accessing the EDF, in effect 'go to' or 'visit' a specific place on the website.

Further, the need for sustaining intelligible communication is so strongly shared among participants that even when the site of the EDF 'physically' shifted to a new location as indicated in the Internet site address, the desire for continued communication was clearly expressed:

(22)

Why isn't anyone writing in *the new web page* for Young Voices? I am just wondering , but why isn't anyone writing in *the new "In Charge" Webpage* meant for Young Voices ?

(23)

WHY?????!!!!!!?????

hi ! pple (people).....why not goin'(going) to the *new young voices*???? went *there* but nobody *there*, waited for 3 weeks, but still noone.....so decided 2 come back *here*.....why no one goes *there*????????? wat's (what's) wrong with it????????? can't bear 2 (to) leave *this place*?????????well, hope you'll reply me, so i can noe (know) where 2 go.....there less pple, easier 2 tok (talk).....come lah !!!!!please?????????

It is interesting to note the concept of a physical place or location realised through deictic reference of going 'there', coming back 'here' and leaving 'this place' which signify a destination or place to link with other participants on the network. The 'new web page' for the EDF is perceived and acknowledged among participants as a recognisable site in concrete terms.

Table 1 captures the range of linguistic signals which show participants' awareness of a sense of place. When the lexical items occur more than once, the figures in brackets indicate the number of occurrences in the EDF.

Table 1: Linguistic signals of sense of place

Linguistic signals of sense of place	
<i>Nouns</i>	
forum (12)	forum page
web page (3)	website
email addresses	the screen
<i>Deictic reference</i>	
this place (3)	here
this page (3)	there (3)
<i>Verbs</i>	
come round	come back
going	goes
drop by	leave
visit	

The range of nouns and nominal phrases, verbs and verbal phrases, and deictic references point to a distinct perception of the EDF not merely as an electronic forum in virtual space but one with a strong physical presence of its own which participants recognise or are made aware.

3.3 Shared code

Attention now turns to discourse features which show participants sharing a distinctive code associated with electronic communication. The term 'code', as defined by Romaine (1995:121), refers not only to 'different languages but also to varieties of the same language as well as styles within a language'. However, it is used here in the general sense to refer to that which characterises particular 'styles within a language', and not the 'different languages...(and)...varieties of the same language' which will be examined in the next chapter. The examination includes textual representation of visual and verbal cues in the absence of face-to-face communication. Unless otherwise stated, the features are italicised or enclosed within brackets in the examples given with complete lists of specific features provided in Appendices 1-3. The features are as follows:

- (a) emoticons (emotion icon) or 'smiley' icons ('smileys') comprising alphanumeric characters and punctuation symbols to depict participants' emotional state:

(24)

...For your information, we got an 'A' ;-)) (a winking, smiling face)

(25)

...I prefer someone petite...or at least shorter than me... ☺ ☺ ☺ (a smiling face: 'smiley')I feel more comfy, more at ease..someone that I can protect...

- (b) 'emoting' or 'posing', that is, the explicit verbalisation of actions through specific verbs and verbal phrases to symbolise gestural qualities of face-to-face communication enclosed within asterisks and brackets (Appendix 1):

(26)

...This is really tiring... *yawn!*

(27)

Elton John's song really moved me...thru'out (throughout) the whole ceremony, nothing else but the song drove me to tears...my goodness, she's really dead...and to think that I had actually wanted to meet her someday.... *sob*...

(28)

You are the coach of 1/1 runners ah? Aiyoh! (*Putting a hand to my head...my foot, your head!*) Anyway, good luck... Guess who? I'm from Candice Yong's CLASS!

(c) onomatopoeic devices used as a general term to depict participants' feelings and/or attitudes, and in verbalizing oral effects as in laughter (Appendix 2):

(29)

please e-mail me if you are doing the book for "O" levels or whatever..i need help..!! *Bleah!*

(30)

Tsk! Tsk! Now you had definitely given your true heritage away...

(31)

Oh!!!!Please don't make fun of her.She just needs someone to laugh right into her face. So let's do it to make her happy.*Hahahahahahahaha...*

Almost all the onomatopoeic devices (Appendix 2) in the EDF, except for the duplication of sound effects and verbalisation of laughter, express negative reactions ranging from frustration, disgust, disapproval to condescension.

(d) punctuation through manipulating the sequencing, spatial and size elements of text to produce auditory and visual effects in order to simulate speech:

(i) spacing of letters and hyphenation to replicate the pace of delivery of oral discourse

(32)

..Let me explain once again. And for yours and other's benefit, let me do that very *S-L-O-W-L-Y...*

(ii) upper case as a marker of emphasis to signal disgust or disapproval

(33)

..It strikes me as odd that you would publicise your distain (putting this very, *VERY* lightly!) for those people, our fellow students, who just happen to study in a neighbourhood school....*YOU ASSHOLE! R (Are) U (you) CRAZY? U TRYIN'(trying) TO RUIN US OR WHAT?!!?? YOU ARE SUCH A JERK. NEVER, NEVER LOOK DOWN ON OTHERS!....*

(iii) asterisk as a marker of emphasis

(34)

Of COURSE not. And why **should** they be, anyway?

(iv) multiple punctuation as a marker of emphasis

(35)
Wat's (what's) wrong with it ???!??

(36)
IT'S URGENT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

(e) orthography in unconventional forms (Appendix 3):

(i) to capture the aural effects or pronunciation of words

(37)
dat (that), wif (with), wassup (what's up), sumthin (something)

(ii) to signal emphasis or as a marker of stress

(36)
beeyooteful (beautiful), puhleese (please), sooooo (so)

(iii) to simplify through the use of abbreviations or acronyms

(39)
btw (by the way), B4 (before), 4ever (forever), r(are), 2 (to), u (you)

(f) visual puns in the form of highly marked idiosyncratic manipulation of word representations:

(i) to convey a creative effect of fun and play

(40)
If u (you) dun (don't) believe..juz (just) listen to her *FaYe LiVe Cd or Vcd..wow..Her LiVe singing is FaNtAsTic!*

(41)
hiYeEee ppLe~! hOwz 1st wK oF sKooL?? hehehe nOt baD kinda fuN
(Hi, people! How was the first week of school? He he he, not bad; kind of fun)

(ii) to represent a visual or pictorial representation of an object

(42)
Anyone here likes the tamagotchi?!! (a Japanese computer-based 'pet' toy which was the attraction for teenagers at the time of the study)

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The code representing messages in the EDF is also noted to display linguistic features referring to written and spoken forms of discourse.

Written form of discourse

The discourse features which show messages as an electronically written form of discourse comprise both verb and noun types, and specific forms (italicised) relating to closure in written messages:

Verbs

(43)
Don't be so "wu liao"(Hokkien:crazy)and *type* undecent (indecent) topics....

(44)
Someone brings up a point, like you did, and people *write back* their views, like me. I don't think that this *plave* (place) is totally unconstructive.

(45)
I guess it's a lot easier to *post* a message than to *reply to* a message.

Nouns

(46)
Even if people do use it as a way to make new friends...what's the harm in that, if you're not interested just click on *the headlines* that sounds interesting to you, not those that say hi! or i want to meet new people...

(47)
Anyway I agree on some of the things you said about some people. They are just abusing *this page*.

(48)

Hmm.....i don't really think have *a one sentence message* is the correct way of using this forum too.....do U ???

Closure in written messages

Specific phrases (italicised) which explicitly state the end of the message and postscripts at the end of messages resemble written memos or notes:

(49)

So, I'll *end my message*, saying that nobody's perfect, not even God. So let's party and forget about this superiority stuff.

(50)

In conclusion, I want to say that the ranking of schools does have its advantages.

Postscripts

(51)

PS. Do not attempt to understand the above if u aren't a Rafflesian as extensive cerebral exhaustion can be fatal@!!

(52)

PS—Please don't bother to understand this pig language if you belong to the 'higher breed of students' like the Rafflesians.

Oral form of discourse

Features which show EDF messages to take on an oral form of discourse are illustrated in various verb and noun types (italicised):

Verbs

(53)

Chatting on the internet is a waste of time, what i mean by *chatting* is alamak & irc (Internet Relay Chat) chat. I believe Young Voices is a more decent way of *chatting*.

Nouns

(54)

Does one intro oneself or just segue (sahay) into postings like a drunk interrupting a *conversation*...

The range of lexical items referring to written and oral forms of discourse is summarised in Table 2. Figures in brackets indicate frequency of occurrence of features which occur more than once:

Table 2: Lexical items representing discourse type

<i>Type of discourse</i>	<i>Frequency(N=174):</i>		<i>Lexical item</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>		
Written	N=71	40.8	message	(36)
			post	(11)
			write,writing, write back	(7)
			type	(6)
			email	(5)
			note	(5)
			headlines	
Oral	N=103	59.2	say	(64)
			talk	(16)
			discuss ,discussion	(12)
			chat	(7)
			argue,argument	(2)
			introduce yourself	
			conversation	

Table 2 shows a relatively higher frequency (59.2%) of lexical items representing an oral form of discourse with a comparatively smaller proportion (40.8%) making reference to written discourse. Despite the forum being electronic, there is evidence of a code type in the EDF reflecting forms of expression associated more with an oral rather than written mode of discourse.

3.4 Shared awareness of community

The focus now turns to whether participants show an awareness of community through discussion with each other, and how this awareness is expressed in the EDF. Studies on writer/reader relationships and the extent of involvement or detachment with writers/readers have explored this issue linguistically through the usage of pronouns (Fowler and Kress, 1979; Chafe, 1982; Chafe and Danielewicz, 1987). Reference to self and others in the EDF

provides valuable feedback on the varying levels of involvement of participants among themselves, and their awareness of each other as interactants in the EDF.

The pronouns examined in this section comprise those which show participants' awareness of themselves as members (or outsiders) of specific groups or a community. The analysis of the type and frequency of pronouns used in the messages was based on the following considerations:

- a) form - degree of explicitness in terms of whether the specificity of referent is indicated (generic or specific)
- b) function - rhetorical purpose of pronoun use

First person plural pronoun

The data indicate that over half the pronouns used in the EDF are first person pronouns (54.2%). Out of this, approximately 18% are in the plural form. 'We' is evident as a collective term of reference for a general group of participants to whom a message is addressed. This generic reference of 'we' is reinforced by the all-inclusive phrase 'each and everyone of us' as in:

(55)
It is up to each and everyone of us to determine if *we're* inferior or on the other hand, superior, to the opposite sex.

The above use of 'we' whereby all participants are included in the discussion group differs from the following where 'we' fulfils a specific role in establishing solidarity with and allegiance to a select group:

(56)
Hahahaha.....Liverpool..continue dreaming for the title!!!!Man U won again..... Effortlessly i must say...Hahahaha All Liverpool Fans out there...better ask Roy Evans to resign.... MANCHESTER UNITED RULEZ (rules)!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! WE R (are)THE CHAMPIONS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The 'we' here refers to the group of fans (including the writer of the message) associated with the football team, Manchester United. This inclusive use of the pronoun, at the same time, creates an 'out-group' by deliberately excluding other participants (namely, supporters and

players of the opposing team, Liverpool) who do not belong to the Manchester United group of supporters. The deliberate keeping participants out of a group is reinforced in the phrase 'All Liverpool Fans out there'. The inclusive use of 'we' works towards building support and allegiance to a specific group, and comes across as 'community-creating'. The contributor of the message is very much part of the group referred to and is not merely a passive outsider providing comments from a distance.

In the EDF, the following categories of use for first person plural pronoun 'we' were identified:

- i) the specific, inclusive use where the author is included
- ii) the generic use which refers to participants in general

Table 3 provides a summary of the type and frequency of first person plural pronoun 'we':

Table 3: Type and frequency of first person plural pronoun 'we'

<i>Type of pronoun use</i>	<i>Number (N=146)</i>	<i>Percentage of total number (%)</i>
Specific	91	62.3
Generic	55	37.7

A higher percentage (62.3%) of the specific inclusive type of 'we' where the author is included is observed in the EDF compared to 37.7% of the generic type. This indicates greater attempts at community building and fostering allegiance among participants in the EDF. As a strategic device, it serves as an in-group marker to deliberately work towards building participants' sense of awareness of each other in the EDF. Participants become directly included in the discussion and associated with the group under focus, instead of being 'excluded' out of the discussion as distant, uninvolved and passive observers. There is engagement of participants with the subject under focus and with each other in the EDF. More of this point of developing affinity and identification with specific characters will be further elaborated in the next chapter.

Second person pronoun

Second person pronoun is useful as a tracking device in marking reference across messages. It addresses specific and general groups of addressees through singular or plural forms in the EDF.

Second person plural pronoun 'you' when accompanied by a combination of lexical items, can, as in the use of 'we', be both inclusive as in building allegiance, loyalty and pride for a group, and exclusive as in keeping out opponents who do not support the group. This is evident in 'ur (your) stupid Man Utd "kelong" team' (57), 'ur Man Utd butt' (58) which reflect the animosity of Liverpool fans against their rival Manchester United supporters:

(57)

Don't come here and blast a team that has won more championships than *ur* (your)*stupid Man Utd "kelong"* (Malay:deliberately out to create a loss)*team!* Take *ur shit* somewhere else u (you)poser!!!

(58)

FYI (For your information), Liverpool is going to kick *ur Man Utd butt* all the way back to that so called "old trafford" stadium of *urs* (*yours*)! So y (why) don't u just shut up and keep out of trouble till the match comes, *u stupid Man Utd poser!* I bet u (you) can't even name me the starting 11 of *ur* (*your*) so called "*champion team*".

The choice in pronoun use fulfils a rhetorical purpose in deliberately including and/or excluding participants and other referents addressed, and in heightening the impact of the rhetoric levelled at specific groups. A sense of awareness of community and of showing allegiance to a particular group is evident in the use of specific pronouns or combinations of pronouns and their accompanying address terms.

4 Overview

This paper focuses on the construction of what constitutes a discourse community in the EDF. Participants engaged in discussion in the EDF comprise a group of individuals with nothing in common initially other than the assumptions that they are largely in Singapore and within a specific age range. The discourse community which characterises participants in the EDF differs from conventional notions of community, namely, that the EDF is a self-created

community which emerges only when participants contribute messages to the forum. In the EDF, there are no specific, pre-determined goals at the start which drive the interaction other than the acknowledged purpose of the forum for exchanging opinions. The interaction instead evolves over time, leading to the formation of an 'emergent' community, that is, it becomes apparent as a result of the interaction, instead of being shaped right from the start. The EDF is also a community which is seen to 'exclude' participants when allegiance to shared norms and expectations is not evident. At the same time, it is a community which seeks to encourage links to be forged among participants in the EDF. It shows evidence of both 'in-group' and 'out-group' community building.

The examination in this paper provides evidence of shared norms on the purpose and nature of interaction, perception of a sense of place, code and awareness of community. Participants are in general agreement over the purpose of the EDF as stated expressly by the EDF administrators, namely, for young people's free expression of views and opinions on issues which interest them. With regard to appropriacy of the nature of interaction, what is not favoured is the use of the EDF for the sole purpose of meeting potential partners. Participants are also specifically clear over what is considered acceptable discussion. Deliberate and uninhibited hostile remarks are not tolerated in the EDF.

Norms of participant behaviour are both externally and internally regulated in the EDF. Not only do the EDF administrators directly intervene with specific messages on the expected behaviour and manner of interaction, but participants themselves monitor and follow-up on other participants where necessary. There is evidence to indicate that participants new to the EDF are made aware of the expected norms of behaviour.

The study, contrary to what has been claimed of computer-mediated interaction as being unsuited for the social purpose of language because it is decontextualised (Kiesler et al, 1984; Walter and Burgoon, 1992), reinforces the emotive, expressive and participatory nature (December, 1993) of CMC in reflecting qualities of oral communication which would otherwise be conveyed through non-verbal cues in face-to-face contact. Rather than reducing social cues (Spruill and Kiesler, 1986), the EDF stimulates participants to create or invent new ones. To compensate for the absence of paralinguistic cues, an innovative set of devices with 'socioemotional cues' (Rice and Love, 1987) creates the effects of voice, tone and gesture through unconventional and imaginative use of iconographic features, orthographic

variations, punctuation and a combination of these features. This practice of 'making things which would normally be non-verbal into verbal forms' in text is what Todd and Walker (2000:64) classify as a 'verbalian' mode with a pragmatic force, exerting an impact of its own on participants in a computer-mediated environment. Computer-mediated discourse has been likened to a 'text-based orality' (December, 1993: paragraph 2) and is seen to be at the oral end of the oral-written continuum which suggests discourse 'need not be based upon sound in order to have oral characteristics' (ibid: paragraph 2). The EDF reinforces this view in showing a higher proportion of features which reflect more of an oral mode of discourse than written. These features are participants' creative means of expression to 'convey the semantic load' (ibid: paragraph 2) usually carried by non-verbal cues in oral discourse. The innovative communicative devices convey the same nuances and emotions as oral expression and give the messages an 'electronic intonation' (Zuboff, 1988) by the method and format in which information is conveyed. This gives the discourse generated its distinctive 'electronic' properties.

Further, although participants' messages may bear similarities to one mode of discourse or the other and even comprise features specific to the electronic mode, what comes through is that the overall effect has been consciously constructed by participants in the EDF. Participants deliberately take pains to build or create association or membership within a distinctive community through choices made in a range of features including lexical items, punctuation, spelling, and representation of text. Participants' conscious and selective choice of linguistic devices used gives rise to a distinct identity actively and collaboratively created and shared by participants in the EDF. The distinct linguistic features created by participants help to develop and define the EDF as a symbolic, virtual community. According to Lee (1996:287), 'new members embrace the lingo as signs of belonging', and, in so doing, create an identifiable community of participants who display shared understanding of the nature of communication in the EDF.

5 Conclusion

What emerges from the investigation in this paper are factors which McLaughlin et al (1997:150), as seen earlier, recognise as indicating community formation, namely, the development of collective identity and distinctiveness; the evolution of norms and shared

expectations; and the creation of mechanisms to regulate interactional norms of participant behaviour. These essentially shape and define a distinct discourse community characterised by the identifiable linguistic features and strategic devices used by participants in the EDF for specific purposes.

There is, as Bex (1996:66-67) notes, an interdependent relationship between the discourse community and text production. What results is a dynamic process where 'individuals either produce, or produce interpretations of texts according to the norms of the discourse community and the functions which the text is intended to serve within the discourse community' (ibid: 67). Participants develop characteristic modes of expression that remain 'internal to the group' where the specific meanings are 'never simply immanent, but are always developed by people interacting in particular communicative situations' (ibid: 67). The messages created conform to the norms of the group which establish and regulate interaction in the EDF. In so doing, participants incorporate and generate the linguistic behaviours of the group to signal their membership. When these are accepted and regarded as meaningful, participants are recognised as members of the discourse community. Membership in the community is thus established and maintained primarily in terms of interactional norms. The community constructed by participants can be likened to an 'interpretive community' where 'new spheres of shared knowledge' are established and 'norms for membership and for ways of talking with one another' (Fish, 1980:14) are developed.

About the Author

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Appendices

Figure 1

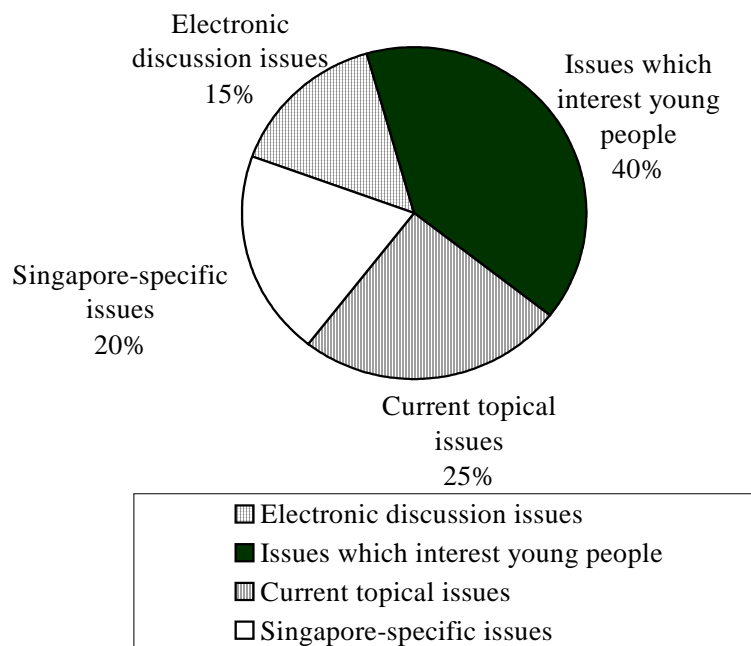


Figure 1

Appendix 1

Verbal descriptions of actions and gestures ('Emoting')

Verbs	
blush *blush*	(2)
gasp	(2)
giggle	
grin	(2)
laughs	
scratch head	
shakes head in disbelief	
Total: 19	

Appendix 2

Type of onomatopoeic devices

<i>Onomatopoeic devices</i>	<i>Function</i>
Aaaaaahhhhh!!!!!!Ah!!!!!!! ...Argh!	Signal of frustration/disgust
Bleah	Signal of disgust
Boing boing boing	Duplicating sound effects
Duh	Signal of disgust
Ehemmmm!	Taunting effect
Neneneneneeeeh!	Taunting effect
OooOOoh	Signal of disgust
Poooh	Signal of disgust
Sheesh	Signal of disgust
Soooooo	Emphasis and exaggeration
Tsk! Tsk!	Signal of disapproval
Hahahahahahaha)	Verbalising laughter
HAAAHAAA!)	
Hahahaha)	
Hee)	
Heheheh)	
Kekeke...)	
Neneneeeeh!)	

Appendix 3

Forms of orthography

<i>Type of orthography</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
<i>Representation of pronunciation</i>	A	or
	Ah	I
	*allady	already
	Aniwae	anyway
	Becoz, b-coz,	because
	Bery	very
	c-ya	see you
	Catigorie	category
	Dam	them
	dat	that
	Dos	those
	Dun	don't
	Dunno	don't know
	Familiees	families
	Frenz, frens	friends
	Geddit	get it
Grouppee	groupie	
Happee	happy	

<i>Type of orthography</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
	Harloe, harlow, hilow,harow	hello
	Iz	is
	Izzit	Is it
	Juz	just
	Klients	clients
	Korporations	corporations
	Lemme	Let me
	Lurve ,Luv	love
	Merelee	merrily
	Mi	me
	Neber	never
	Nite	night
	Noe	know
	Nuthin nthg	nothing
	Ol'	old
	Oki doki	Okay
	One	want
	Onli	only
	Oso	also
	Rite	right
	Shuddup	Shut up
	Solee	sorry
	Speeking	speaking
	Sumthin	Something
	Thot	thought
	Thru	through
	Tink	think
	Todae	Today
	Toking	talking
	Tryin'	trying
	U	you
	Wassup	What's up
	Wat	what
	Wha	
	Wif	with
	Y'knoe	You know
<i>Emphasis</i>	Beeyooteeful	beautiful
	Deliveree	delivery
	Farneee	funny
	Grrreeeaattt	great
	Puhleese	please
	Sooooo	So (for emphasis)
	Reeeeaally	really
	Sooooo	So

<i>Type of orthography</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
<i>Simplification</i>	Abt	about
	B	be
	B4	before
	4	for
	4ever	forever
	gf gF bf	Girlfriend boyfriend
	govt	government
	N	and
	No.	number
	Pls , Plz	please
	Ppl pple pp	people
	P/time	Part-time
	Thanx	Thanks
	Tt	that
	U	you
Ur	your	