

**INTERACTIVITY AND ONLINE *GUANXI*  
IN WEB FORUMS IN MALAYSIA**



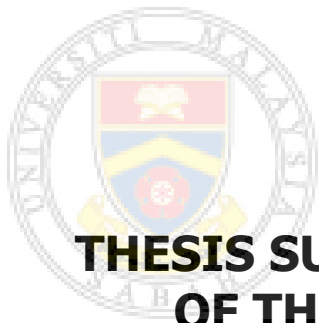
**ALICE SHANTHI A/P KASAWI @ KRISNAN**

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UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

**FACULTY OF PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH  
2017**

**INTERACTIVITY AND ONLINE *GUANXI*  
IN WEB FORUMS IN MALAYSIA**

**ALICE SHANTHI A/P KASAWI @ KRISNAN**



**THIS SUBMITTED INFULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**FACULTY OF PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH  
2017**

## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the material in this thesis is my own except for quotations, excerpts, equations, summaries and references, which have been duly acknowledged.

6th December 2016

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## CERTIFICATION

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TITLE : INTERACTIVITY AND ONLINE *GUANXI* IN WEB FORUMS IN MALAYSIA  
DEGREE : DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (TESL)  
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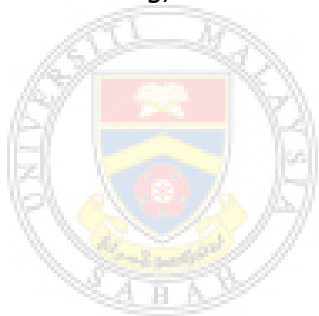


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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

*Glory and Praise to God  
who alone gives light to our days.  
Many are the blessings He bears  
to those who trust in His ways.*

This thesis could not have been written without contributions of various kinds from many people. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor Associate Prof. Dr. Lee Kean Wah for supporting me and my work from the beginning to the end. It was his personal and professional guidance that made me believe in the success of this thesis. I am no less indebted to my second supervisor Dr. Denis Lajium for contributing fruitful perspectives and helpful comments. I am also deeply grateful to my dear husband Dr. Xavier Thayalan who has been a constant source of inspiration and gave me valuable help in shaping and arranging my thoughts. Most importantly, I would like to express my gratitude to my dear friend Marie Fernandez who secured my physical wellbeing by providing free transportation, accommodation and good food during my stay in Kota Kinabalu. To my dear children; Jane Xavierine, Jude Shantiran and Joel Shayalan for their sacrifice, understanding, and unwavering support.



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## ABSTRACT

The present study contributed to the knowledge on understanding the interactive language strategies that highlighted interactivity and how this is sustained by the presence of online *Guanxi* in web-forums. Web-forum was selected for this study because it was the closest form of online interaction tool used in an academic setting. It was the lack of student interest to share information on academic discussion boards that prompted the researcher to find some answers from the public web-forums that could be incorporated in the classroom. The focus of the study was to find out how information was shared through the exchange of messages in web-forums. In this study the web-forum discussions were typically those that evolve around specific topics that were of common interest to Malaysians so that the findings of the study would reflect interactive language behaviours among Malaysians. Web-forums were selected for this study because they have the ability to seek, share and exchange information in a collaborative manner. To date, little is known about Malaysians' online communicative behaviour that encourages them to stay connected and share ideas with one another in web-forums. By using the analytical framework of Herring's Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), the study carried out a qualitative analysis of the naturally occurring data that was gathered from several web-forums in Malaysia that were actively discussing on Malaysian issues. The study found that though there was a lot of *disapproving* language functions used in the interaction, there was almost an equal number of language functions that were categorized as *being polite*. This goes to show that even though the web-forum members seem to *disapprove* of each other's views, they normally do it without damaging the "face". Next, the study looked into the language strategies that emerged from the data that seem to encourage interactivity in the web-forum. Interactivity was highlighted because it was observed that this variable was important to keep the web-forum interaction on-going by encouraging the members to post. This study found that interactivity does not simply occur, but must be intentionally built, or worked upon in web-forums. Therefore, in order to increase interactivity in web-forums, it does not need to have the entire web-forum members actively posting in order to have discussion on-going, but rather a small group of members. These members were normally the thread starters and the leaders who emerged in the process of interaction because they had the knowledge or experience in the topic of discussion. Finally, the study found that online *Guanxi* was a necessary element to increase interactivity in web-forums. Online *Guanxi* was formed when forum members felt the presence of others, and they had trust that the forum members would be able to share information that would be helpful and the whole process of seeking, sharing and exchanging information was done by respecting one another's "face".

## **ABSTRAK**

### **INTERAKTIVITI DAN HUBUNGAN GUANXI DALAM FORUM ATAS TALIAN DI MALAYSIA**

*Kajian ini menyumbang kepada pemahaman tingkah laku atas talian warga web-forum Malaysia dengan melihat kepada strategi bahasa yang digunakan oleh mereka untuk kekal interaktif. Dalam kajian ini perbincangan web-forum lazimnya sekitar isu-isu yang berhubung kait dengan kehidupan rakyat Malaysia khususnya supaya hasil kajian tersebut memberi gambaran tingkah laku atas talian orang Malaysia. Web-forum dipilih untuk kajian ini kerana ia mempunyai keupayaan untuk berkongsi maklumat melalui perbincangan yang boleh membawa kepada penghasilan maklumat atau pengetahuan baru. Setakat ini, tidak banyak yang diketahui mengenai strategi bahasa yang lazim digunakan untuk berkongsi maklumat dalam web-forum di Malaysia. Oleh itu Dengan menggunakan rangka analisis Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) oleh Herring analisis kualitatif dijalankan ke atas data yang dikumpulkan dari beberapa web-forum di Malaysia yang aktif membincangkan mengenai isu-isu berkaitan Malaysia. Hasil analisis menunjukkan beberapa dapatan. Dapatan pertama hasil analisis data menggunakan Speech Act Theory telah mengenal pasti beberapa fungsi bahasa yang digunakan semasa perbincangan untuk perkongsian dan pertukaran maklumat di web-forum. Kajian ini mendapati bahawa walaupun terdapat banyak fungsi "to dissaprove" dalam interaksi, terdapat jumlah yang hampir sama fungsi bahasa yang dikategorikan sebagai "sopan (being polite)". Ini menunjukkan bahawa walaupun ahli-ahli web-forum seolah-olah banyak menolak and menyangkal pandangan ahli komuniti lain, tetapi mereka biasanya melakukannya dengan cara sopan. Dapatan kedua, kajian ini menunjukkan warga forum mengguna pelbagai strategi bahasa untuk menggalakkan interaktiviti di web-forum. Interaktiviti telah dikaji kerana ia didapati ia dapat memastikan interaksi web-forum kekal aktif. Seterusnya, kajian ini mendapati bahawa interaktiviti tidak berlaku secara kebetulan, tetapi harus diusahakan oleh warga web-forum. Salah satu penemuan penting yang muncul dari kajian ini ialah , dalam usaha untuk meningkatkan interaktiviti dalam web forum, ia tidak memerlukan keseluruhan ahli-ahli forum untuk memaparkan secara aktif idea-idea mereka, tetapi memadai hanya dengan beberapa orang ahli. Ahli-ahli ini dikenali sebagai "Thread starter" dan ahli lain yang mempunyai kepakaran atau pengalaman dalam topik perbincangan yang dibincangkan. Akhir sekali, kajian ini mendapati bahawa perhubungan atas talian atau Guanxi adalah elemen yang mampu meningkatkan interaktiviti dalam web-forum. Guanxi dapat dibentuk apabila ahli-ahli forum dapat merasakan kehadiran orang lain dalam komuniti maya dan percayaan(trust) bahawa perbincangan dalam web-forum mampu membantu mereka mendapat jawapan kepada kemusykilan mereka.*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

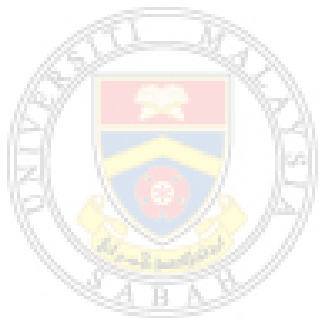
- CMC** - Computer-mediated Communication
- CMD** - Computer-mediated Discourse
- CMDA** - Computer-mediated Discourse Analysis
- TS** - Thread-starter
- F1** - Proton Saga FLX Very High Fuel Consumption
- F2** - JPA, LAN, MOHE and how to differentiate good Uni~Col
- F3** - GST reduces business cost-potentially final price
- F4** - Starting a little own business
- F5** - Working for PETRONAS V2
- F6** - *Cukai Pintu* Explained
- F7** - Insurance Talk V2
- UiTM** - Universiti Teknologi MARA
- LMS** - Learning Management System
- i\_Learn** - UiTM's Learning Management System



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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

The Internet today has become a powerful tool of communication and it is used by people across ages. Communication via the Internet is termed as Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). While the information sharing practice can be understood as a set of activities by which information is provided to others, either proactively or upon request, as such the information shared has an impact on one or more people's view or knowledge of the issue under discussion (Savolaine, 2015). This form of interaction is said to be a hybrid of spoken and written language, as suggested by the very use of the terms chat and discussion to characterize written interaction (Hogan, 2013; Herring, 2010; Crystal, 2004) that takes place via the Internet.

It has been noted that information shared via CMC tools such as blogs, discussion forums or web forums, wikis, emails and instant messaging have become gateways for the formation of virtual communities whose members are held together by some common interest (Zaphiris and Ozok, 2011; Nathan, Syahirah, Tan, Thambiah, and Lai, 2011; Volkman, 2011). Members of the virtual community who communicate regularly online do not come together just for social purpose but they are engaged mutually in a common endeavour; and through such mutual engagement, some common practices would emerge (Chung, 2011).

Though there are many web 2.0 tools used for CMC, the focus of this study is web-forums or also commonly known as discussion boards. This is because web-forums are commonly used in the academic, health and business settings when it comes to sharing of information that leads participants to discover new information in the process of sharing and exchanging information among a group people online who share the same interest. Additionally, the popularity of web-forums is

increasing because it creates a safe and easy-to-use and easy to access online environment where community members are there to offer help and support that is protected through anonymity for people who need to share but might want to do so in anonymity (Dresner and Herring, 2010).

Since this virtual world is created in a cyber place where people share their thoughts, it can be deduced that CMC besides having a social function, can be a useful tool for information sharing among members of the virtual community. In the Malaysian context CMC has long been warranted as an area that needs a detailed investigation because of the vast opportunities that it provides for creating successful experiences of sharing of information in many different fields such as learning, health, economy and business, or finance.

Additionally as web-forums provide opportunities to examine information shared from the point of both sender and receiver, it is possible to examine how participants offer information to potential readers by writing messages and how the readers comment on them. With the two-way nature of interaction found in web-forum, it has become a useful tool for sharing information on any issue. Thus by "creating a climate that supports and encourages probing questions, expressing skepticism and the contribution of more explanatory ideas" (Garrison, 2011:32), web-forum can become a useful tool for sharing and exchanging of information if members participate in the web-forums collaboratively. In the broadest sense, when information is shared and exchanged in CMC, ideas are reshaped by actions of the senders and receivers of information as both parties debate on the information shared, and in the process the information shared become more refined, authentic and reliable.

The focus of the research is the practice of seeking, sharing and exchanging of information in web-forums as forms of CMC. Though the use of web-forums for online interaction in Malaysia is aplenty, where the systematic study is concerned it has been described as "less-well-charted territory" (Fadzil Mohd Tahir et.al. 2015:42). Therefore the findings of this study would add to the existing field of knowledge on how best to conduct interaction in web-forums. It is hoped that

information gained from the study could be used by people from the different fraternities such as academic, health or business to have a better understanding of how information is best sought, shared and exchanged online.

## **1.2 The Premise of the Present Study**

Language plays a key role that enables participants to share and exchange information. According to Wood and Kruger (2000:5), when studying the role of language in communication “Language must be seen as action”, and therefore, how this action is carried out in CMC where facial cues and nonverbal communication are not available to assist effective communication is the essence of this study.

Hence, the focus of this study is computer-mediated discourse (CMD) in web-forums. Web-forum interaction was selected for the present study because a web search in “EzAccess”- an online database owned by *Universiti Teknologi MARA* that host numerous local and international online journals and eBooks revealed no records of the existence of any research conducted in Malaysia in regards to online discourse features and social behaviour.

In addition, web-forums are selected for this study because it allows people to read and exchange comments while expressing views on a particular subject. Thus it is a good tool for generating dialogue between and among users, and to solicit feedback from others. According to Annand (2011:46), “discussion board forum is an interactive channel which allows users to be active and engage in a two-way communication”. Furthermore, it has also proofed to be an “inexpensive way of information seeking and sharing tool” (Ean and Lee, 2010:30) because information is stored orderly in chronological order so that the flow of information is also in order, and not lost in the frantic exchange of information as in synchronous type of communication (e.g., chatting). Hence, this is the main reason why the researcher chose to focus on asynchronous communication in web-forums.

Web-forums have the sort of ability to share information that can lead to the discovery of new information because web-forums are places that one goes to meet people with similar interest and to talk about topics that hold interest to them

as a group (Barnes, 2012:38; Fang and Chui, 2010). Therefore web-forums or discussion boards are good tools for generating dialogue between and among users, and to solicit feedback from others. Hence, it is common in web-forums for members to question others' views, give comments based on personal experience or background knowledge, and correct information that they deduce as inaccurate. This kind of communicative practice that paves the way for reshaping and reconstructing of ideas does not occur in all web-forums. In addition, web-forum discussions are also very close to that of discussion boards commonly used in the academic setting, since one of the future extensions of this study is to explore avenue to adapt the findings of this study to that of academic discussion boards so web-forums were selected for the present study.

On a different note, observation on the group interaction by the researcher revealed that not all web-forums can attract people to actively participate in online discussion. Some web-forum interactions die a natural death after a few exchanges because participants leave the discussion group because they lose interest, while in contrast there are web-forum interactions that can go on for days, weeks and months. This disparity could be due to as DeVito (2012:67) puts it, "in any communication, a speaker and the listener (message sender and receiver in online interaction) is confronted with choices as to what to say and how you say it, whom to communicate with, what one don't say, how one phrases what one wants to say, and so on". With such intricate web of process involved in the web-forum communication, it gives researchers many angles to explore CMC to find answers on how some web-forums communication is able to maintain interactivity, and have the ability to form online *Guanxi* (pronounced "gwan-shee") or loosely translated as bonding or social connection.

Research in discourse field in CMC usually involves two modes which are synchronous and asynchronous CMC (Herring, 2011). In synchronous CMC, such as chat or Instant Messaging, people exchange messages immediately and in real-time; all participants are online at the same time and respond to messages straight away and only with a minimum delay to messages from other participants. Whereas in asynchronous CMC, such as e-mail, web-forum and other forms of group

discussions, users are not online at the same time to interact; the reader of a message may both read and respond to it at a later time.

In the present study, text-only asynchronous CMC was selected because it is most commonly used for sharing and reshaping of ideas as a collaborative effort in CMC (Arendholz, 2013:34). Researchers also argue that compared to synchronous communication, asynchronous mode of communication offers participants more time to reflect on their own ideas, therefore promotes critical thinking among participants (Ziegler, Paulus, and Woodside, 2014; Speare, 2012).

The premise of the present study is that, the process of seeking, sharing and exchanging of information can only occur when members of the web-forum interact collaboratively with one another. By utilising interactive language strategies combined with social norms such as politeness and social presence to make the members of the virtual community to stay on and post more messages to either seek, share and/or exchange information, or else they might leave the group. Thus, by the analysing of discourse in web-forums, the researcher hopes to shed light on effective CMD in web-forum so that web-forums become a useful tool for the mentioned purpose. The findings of this study would help to draw up a conceptual framework which depicts the best way to carry out web-forum discussion so that it would be a useful tool for seeking, sharing and exchanging information in CMC.

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

Prior to choosing public web-forums for the study, the researcher collected data using the official website for online discussion board in her university. It was the researcher's assumption that a class of about 100 students would really get into sharing thoughts about academic or general topics. "I tried to have a discussion today, but hardly any student said anything". That was the researcher's sigh. It was a common statement of educators across the researcher's faculty. Many attempts were made to inspire online discussions where the instructor posted new topics of discussion every week or every fortnight, then asked the students "What do you think about ....?" then waited for some responds from the students. However most students either said they were busy, or they waited for others to respond. It seems