

THE INTERNET MILIEU: INDIVIDUALISATION WITHIN A GLOBALISED COMMUNITY

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Abstract

Communication technologies have become deeply embedded in our lives, mediating the ways in which information is presented. Due to the global nature of this channel of communication, the world has shrunk and members of the internet may share similar cultural norms of thinking and behaving. Yet, paradoxically, the Internet is personal in that each individual has an interactive opportunity in choosing the options that can expand the breadth and depth of the information they are reading, who they interact with, and the means to achieve that interaction. These options can be expressed through a variety of media techniques. This paper is based on a study of selected websites hosted in English. It looks at language use in the Internet and illustrates the paradoxes between global and individual mediations of meaning.

Globalisation and the Internet

Globalisation as a phenomenon is not new; but in the last two decades it has become a much discussed issue. People have become increasingly linked to each other as a result of advanced developments in technologies. Communication is multidimensional and goes in tandem with increasing transnational movement of goods and services, and of people. It has resulted in a rapid turnover of ideas, of images, and of ways and behaviours (Randeria, 1998 in Tetzlaff, 1998).

One of the facets of globalisation is de-borderization and de-spatialization on one hand; and qualities of compaction and interlinkage on the other (Tetzlaff, 1998). Since the 1980s advances in digitised technologies starting with the computer has enabled speedy dissemination of information, making it a totally interconnected marketplace that is unhampered by time zones or national boundaries. The very nature of increasing interdependence and interaction between people in disparate locations has eroded the primacy of the nation-state, blurring socio-political and economic boundaries creating a global village so to



peak. Borderlessness has transported the venues of interaction into a spatial venue beyond geographic sites into a state of being where everyone is linked through digitised mediums, the Internet being one of them.

Through the Internet, there is a flow of ideas, information, values and knowledges. As a result, there is an expansionist impact seen in the pervading adoption of a set of universal values and ways of being, as exemplified in the way people browse and surf the Internet. However, digitised communication by nature and limitations in terms of the capacity of the hardware and its accompanying software also tend to dictate the ways in which information can be accessed. The protocols of access then shape how the information is presented. This has shaped the discourse in the Internet through the ways of usage; an example is the way texts in websites are organised and presented. Since the presentation in websites are bound by the nature of the software that enables information to be hosted on the Internet, there would be some common approach towards accessing web-based texts. This means that everyone who uses the Internet only needs to click the 'search' icon – implying a sameness in behavioural patterns. Thus, we may argue that similar ways of behaviours mean universality, would equate to an environment that encourages the deletion of individualisation, resulting in a faceless, nameless mass. This paper argues that because the ways of access are universal, and standardised, it does not necessarily mean that the user has lost his/her individuality in the Internet. It aims to illustrate that although websites perpetuate a way of being that is communal and global in terms of a common set of navigational and browsing strategies; yet each user is individualised. It explores how these strategies are staged linguistically and semiotically in selected websites in the Internet.

The Internet as a New Media

In recent years, a new type of media output has emerged; one that is enabled through digitised technology. This domain encompasses computer-mediated communication (CMC) and digitised telecommunications with computers and cell phones being the hardware that enables the media messages to be relayed and displayed. In the case of computer assisted information output, there are five internet-using situations containing languages of their own that are significantly distinctive, viz e-mails, chat groups – synchronous and asynchronous, virtual worlds, and worldwide webs (Crystal, 2001). These outputs are distinctive in terms of the function or use of these texts, and thereby, shape the forms of the texts. Since these texts are bounded by their specific goals, they can be typed as sub-genres within the computer mediated texts (see Table 1).



Table 1: Output Genres in the Internet

Domain		Output		
Type	Hardware Channel	Medium	Output Genres (Crystal 2001)	Function
CMC (Computer mediated Communication)	Computer	Print Multimedia (Audio, visual)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. E-mail 2. Synchronous Chat groups 3. Asynchronous Chat groups 4. Virtual 5. World-wide-web 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written messages • Short chats which occur in real time • Chats whose replies are delayed in time • Graphical representations of reality • Information that are linked

Source: Lee and Lin (2005)

Within these situations of usage enabled through digital technology with the computer as a medium, the World-Wide-Web (often known as the Web, a subset of the Internet) is one that presents itself with the most enhancements in the sense of marrying the printed form with audio-visual elements. It provides a friendly way of organising and viewing large portions of information that is available on the Internet. The information employs multimedia elements to enhance its presentation, and this takes this genre of communication a step further than what conventional media (like radio, television and print) that were prominent just a decade ago could offer. Labelled as *New Media* (Hilliard, 2000; Manovich, 2000) because of qualities inherent in this new medium – the web embraces a range of communication technologies that are different: multimedia elements that can pop up in windows; sophisticated graphics that can create and transfer pictures; high interactive potential enabled through hyperlinks, and a global distribution medium that together with the modes enable worldwide access. These are qualities over and above the capacity of radio, television and the printed matter put together. The scope for expression is wider, taking into consideration the many choices of expressions – the written form is now supplemented and supported with graphics and audio-visual elements. It enables new forms of experience with new and diverse levels of expressions – one that provides information beyond mere audio-visual levels; for instance, a piece of web text can have an amalgamation of written form, with either one or all of the following features – graphics, animation, and sound effects.

As a result of these inherent and institutionalized qualities the pages of information could be disseminated across multiple screens at disparate locations and the audience is also larger, more wide-spread, and multicultural – in short, global. It is with these multivaried dimensions that form the bases for defining and framing



the language use in the Internet. In fact, the Internet is a metaphorical description of information crisscrossing over the globe not unlike a net (Crystal, 2001). As one of the components of the Internet, the World-Wide-Web or the Web provides access to a vast amount of information through Web pages so much so that for many the terms "Internet" and "Web" have become interchangeable, with a diversity of uses and functions. Built initially as a scientific database, the Web is now an added means in which millions of people the world over can connect, communicate, learn, and do business (Austin, 2003).

Crystal defines the language of the New Media as 'Netspeak' (2001, p.17) because of the functional aspects of the kinds of language used in the Internet. It is functional in the social sense in that the 'speak' itself involves writing as well as talking, and has the receptive element 'listening' and 'reading'. According to Crystal, what is common though in these five situations of Internet use is the medium of typed text. Even with the advent of video and audio elements streaming over the Internet, typed text continues to serve as the primary mode of conversing and communicating over the Internet regardless of its sub-genres.

Because of the nature of its accessibility, the Internet is global. The hardware and the accompanying applications allow information to be disseminated, stored and retrieved anywhere in the world. This has made the world shrink in terms of the areas covered, and reduce the spatial distance between parties, so much so that it has frequently been referred to as a 'global village'. To Crystal (2001), the term 'global village' raises some linguistic questions, such as whether we have a close-knit community identified by a local dialect or language which distinguishes its members from those elsewhere. By looking at websites we can then look at the ways in which users perceive and use the browsers, and navigate for information on the net. The knowledge of hardware and software becomes part of the knowledges of behaviour in the Internet.

In fact, the social usage of the Internet is described by their activities and their strategies in accessing and providing information. In doing so, they share the same literacy in the sense that each user that enters the net goes in with similar practices that makes him/her understand the norms and approaches embedded in the texts – it is either read, downloaded, ignored or even skipped - as indicated by the iconic buttons or dialog boxes that appear each time a file is opened. In addition, there are also icons that take the user/reader to different parts of the digital page, or even beyond. Because of the global nature of this form of broadcast, the information conveyed in websites assumes a generalised and worldwide audience, and a similar world-wide practice.

Added to this is the inter-cultural exchange of literacy events as when the users who are of varied multi-cultural background are linked up through the digitised



medium of the Internet. If in the past, there was decontextualised literacies mastered by an individual within communities that have distinct and clear-cut divides, the Internet now brings all these distinct communities together. Their diverse ways of thinking, ideologies, beliefs, worldviews and judgements are reconstructed by this new medium and the accompanying interaction that brought them together. Along with the Internet also comes the concept of *cyberspace*. Envisioned by William Gibson in 1984 in his novel, *Neuromancer*, this concept encapsulates the idea of virtual community, where interaction takes place through computers. It is through this virtual space which extends beyond geographic physicality that globalisation is sustained.

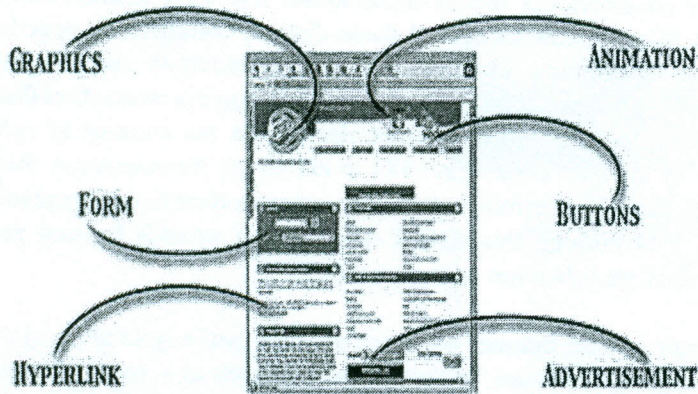
Yet, the paradox of the Internet lies in the premise that in spite of the globalisation of peoples and communities, individualisation exists in a very real sense in that each user is given an interactive opportunity to pick and choose from a variety of options that can expand the breadth and depth of the information he/she is accessing. Interactivity is the interchange of action and response; and an interactive site is one in which some actions of the user generate a response either from another human being at the other end of the connection or with a program residing on a computer (Lewis, 1999). Thus, this gives the user the opportunity to exercise his/her act of individual expression in the face of diverse possibilities. The freedom to decide the types of information he/she accesses, the direction of his/her surfing, is seen as a personalised construction. In this respect, the individual reconstructs himself/herself as a member of the global-cyber community. The options selected by the user can be expressed through a variety of media techniques in terms of different ways of conveying information; be it in the form of printed texts, graphics, pictures, sounds, and even multimedia transformations. The contents of his/her communication will embed the way he/she views the world, his/her beliefs and the environmental factors that shapes his/her thinking. The meanings that he/she makes contain the literacies that make up the individual who is able to enter into and function in the cyber world, and yet is a member of his/her other world – the real world outside the digital divide.

Global vs Personal Constructions

The way audience reads information has also determined how information is displayed. Conventionally, information tends to be available in the printed form. The printed matter is to a large extent, embedded in our lives, so much so that we tend to take for granted that information should be set in pages of print. This has largely influenced the patterns in websites; that is, they tend to be arranged like a book. Like their paper counterparts, they are made up of a number of pages; in this case called web pages. (Diagram 1 illustrates a typical webpage).



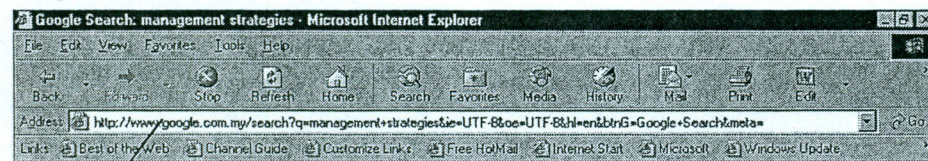
Diagram 1: A Typical Web page



Source: <http://www.learnthenet.co.za/pg13.html>

Every web page on the Internet has its own unique web address, known as a Universal Resource Locator (or URL). Each website is accessed through this address typed in the space provided in the toolbar at the top of a web page. Within the toolbar are the instructions that a user can click on to control where he wants to go and what he wants to do with the information he/she gets, whether to download, save, print or even change the sites he/she is visiting (see Diagram 2). Every individual who accesses the web comes into the navigator with such construction and therefore, operates accordingly. It is not surprising to find that most surfers have a portfolio of favourite websites or favourite search engines to look for sites for which they do not know the URL addresses.

Diagram 2: A browser toolbar



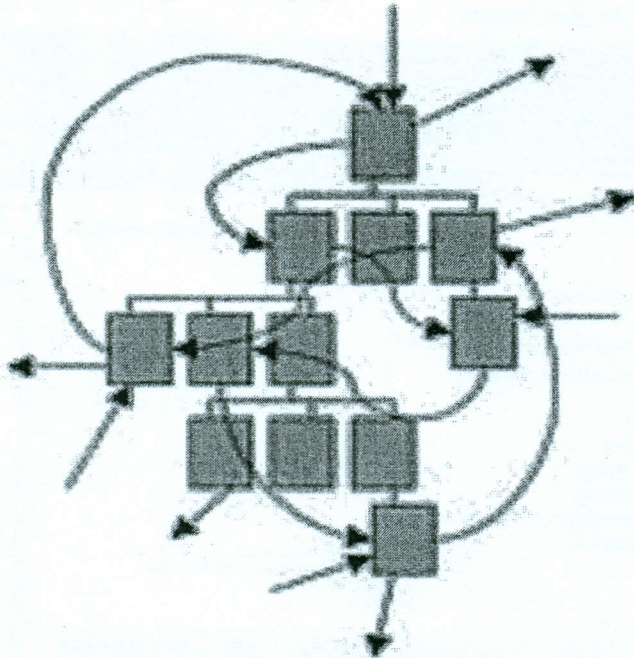
The URL address

The Web enables information to be organised and presented according to pages. On any such web page, the person developing and designing the web page can include various elements of information. These elements of information can include text, graphics, photographs, animations, sound files and even video files. The web page, or the electronic page is displayed in the form of a screen, (i.e., the computer screen), which unlike their paper counterparts, is dynamic in the sense that it has numerous links that can take the reader to new sets of information. Because of that, websites are dynamic, arranged according to the specific purposes for which the site is designed. The major key in the web is the



element of interactivity and is designed according to the needs of the target audience. These are manifested through the navigational links and hypertexts. Because of this type of approach, the texts are linked in a series like a chain as exemplified in Diagram 3. This chain-like linkage can go to several levels, each having a page of information.

Diagram 3: Chain-like linkages of web pages



Source: <http://www.learnthenet.co.za/pg13.html>

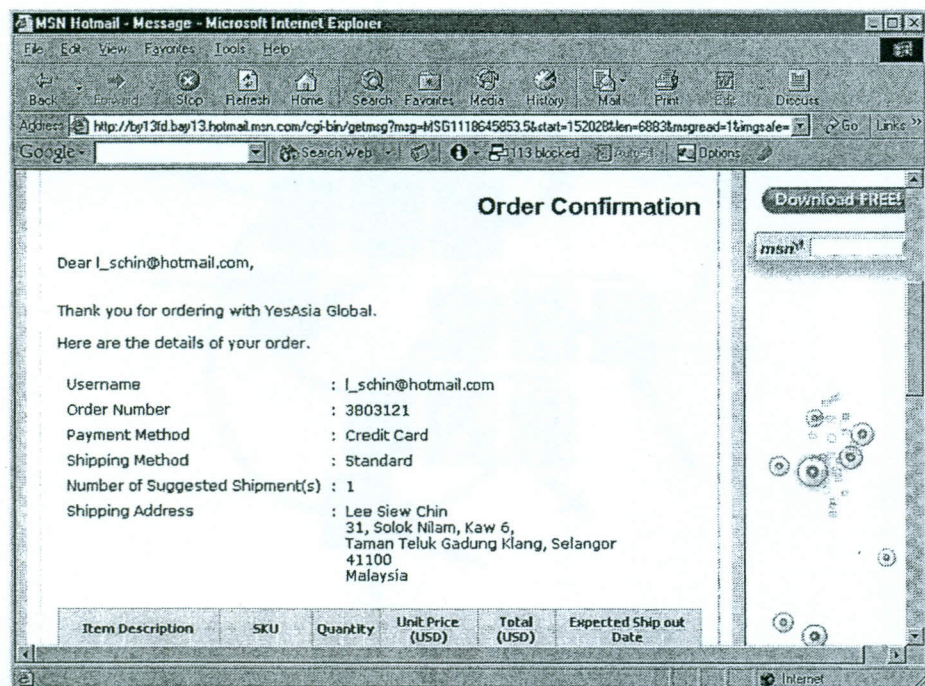
The global nature of access and the immediacy of the readers' response is also a key factor in describing the web. Thus, interactivity becomes a key element in the sense that websites are often designed to anticipate readers' reactions. As Ries and Ries (2000, p. 31) define, "Interactivity is the ability to type in your instructions and have the site deliver the information you requested in the form you requested". However, interactivity does not stop there. In anticipation of the varied kinds of feedback or customers' comments, some hosts have even devoted space to elicit comments from customers; as in the case of Amazon.com an online business, which has a section that indicates how many people have bought the particular item, plus reviews from customers who have bought a particular product.

The fact that websites even provide auto responders - automatically generated replies that are e-mailed direct to people who have posted a purchase or comment is proof of the significance of interactivity on the web (see Figure 1). This is where the paradox



exists, where the reader is happy to receive a personal note of thanks in the form of an e-mail for the purchase that he/she has made, and yet, that e-mail has only been auto-generated – an example of the impersonal nature that exists in the globalised context. This auto responder is part of the institutionalised norm of the Internet, whereby software applications can be utilised to generate standard letters.

Fig 1: An Auto-Responder



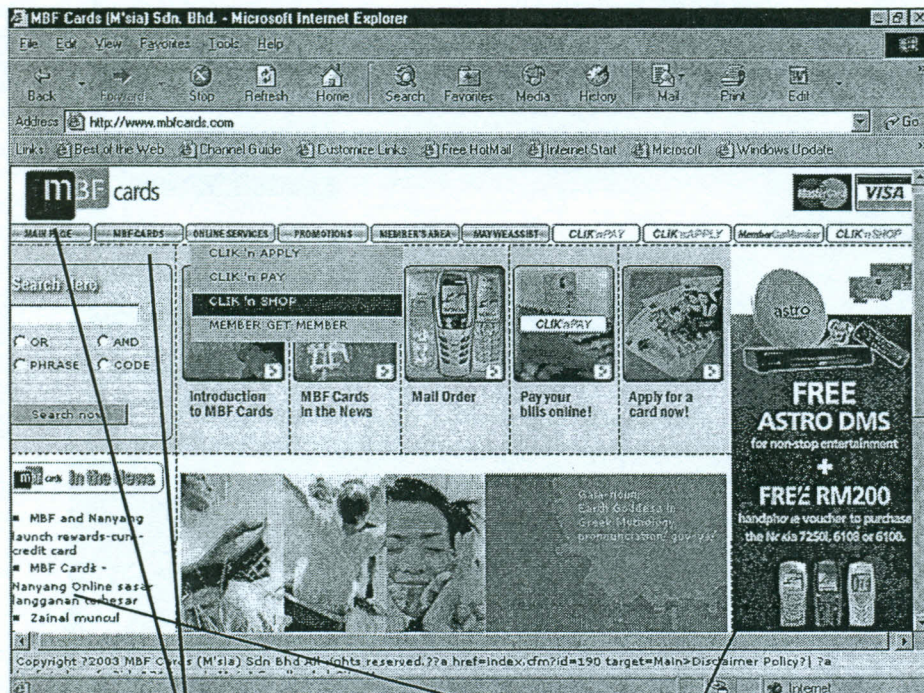
Hence, whether the website functions as a medium or as a business there seems to be one crucial element present – an interactivity that is written into all their online activities. This interactivity is made possible through use of hyperlinks. Such has become an accepted norm associated with web use. As Hilliard (2000, p. 415) neatly puts it, “the Internet process dominates the content”. Therefore, in any study of the language in websites the process in which the website is used must not be overlooked.

As a communicative medium, information, ideas and stimuli on the web pages are presented in the form of hyperlinks. Because of this type of approach, the texts that appear tend to be non-linear and are structured in a chain series (see Diagram 3). For instance, a hyperlink can point to a specific piece of information or topic either within the same page, or in another page. This information can be as short as a paragraph or as long as a page. As a result, information is often truncated to chunks of information that is brief and focused, and slotted under various headings. Each



heading can act as an iconic label with a hyperlink function attached to it and which connects to another page devoted to the subject matter such as 'online services', 'promotion', 'pay bills online', etc. Fig. 2 is an example of different hyperlinks of different subject matters found in the website of a credit card company - such as 'click'n'pay' in the menu toolbar, 'mail order', 'Mbf cards in the news' in boxes that promote their products. The menu toolbar is usually more or less constant in that users expect them to be present whenever they access the particular website. However, the hyperlinks in the promotional boxes tend to be temporary and seasonal in nature as the information may change from time to time.

Fig. 2: Mbfcards.com

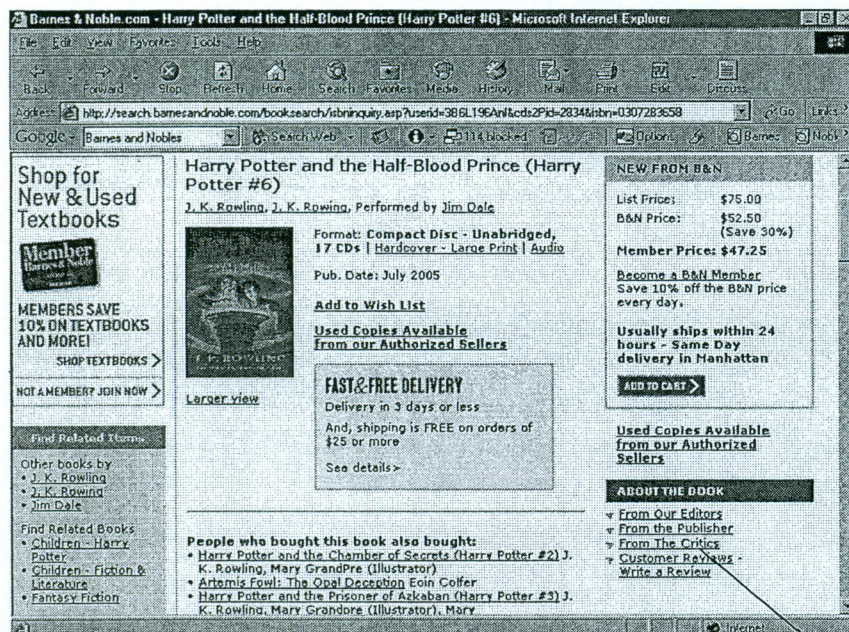


*Permanent iconic labels
in the menu toolbar*

hyperlinks - temporary in nature

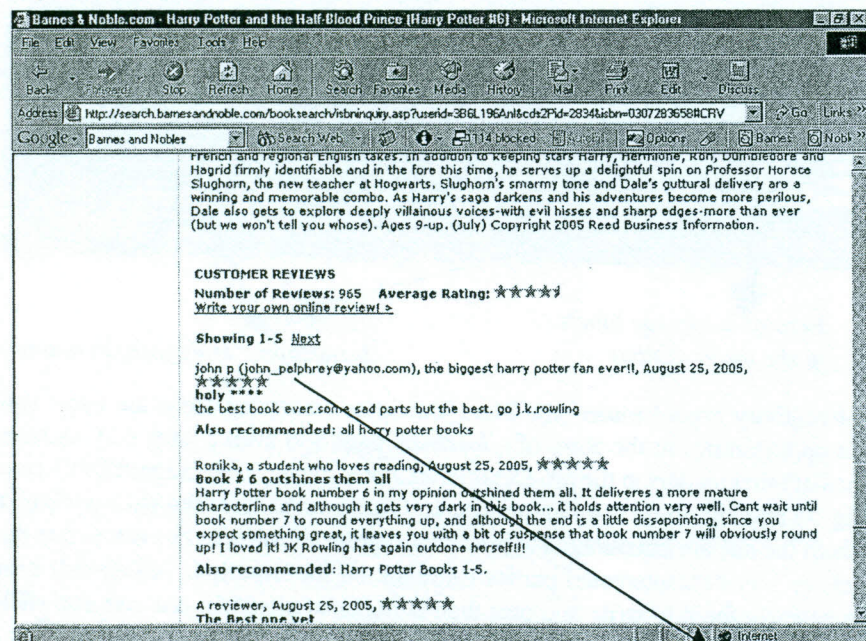
The interactivity aspect means the hosts anticipate reactions from the users and provide opportunities in the form of a feedback page and even a page that contains reactions of other readers to the product offered. For instance, in BarnesandNoble.com (see Fig. 3a and 3b), there is a section whereby readers who have bought a particular book from the site are encouraged to post their opinions/feedback, or even to rate the products or services. Interested parties can click on the hyperlink, which will then open a page for them to write and post their comments. Similarly, one can also click on the same link to read the comments by other users.

Fig. 3a: BarnesandNoble.com – Interactivity in websites



Links to post comments

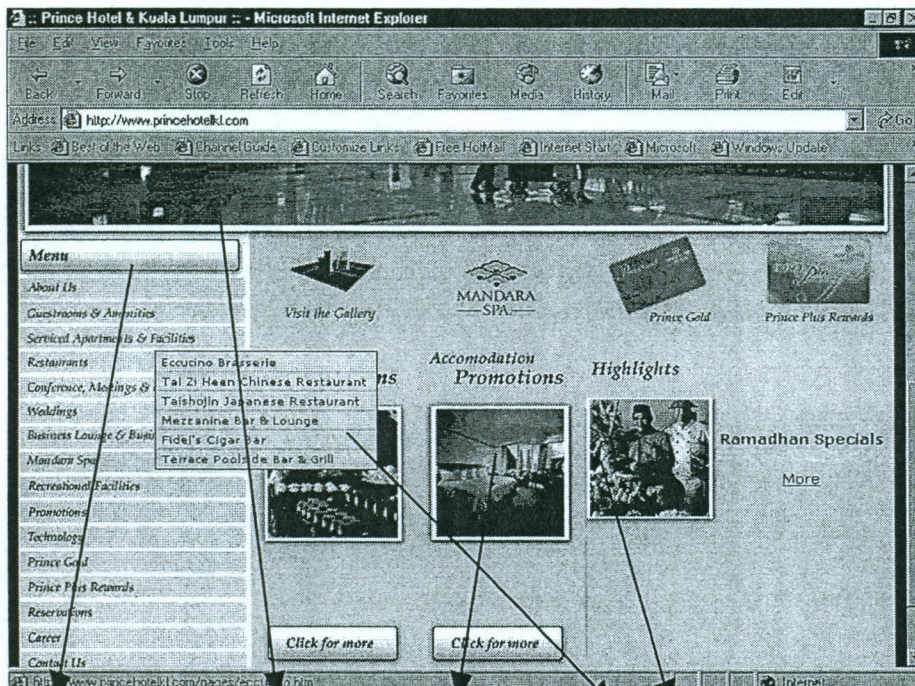
Fig. 3b: BarnesandNoble.com – Interactivity in websites



Response from buyer

On the web pages, ideas, concepts, impressions, information can be integrated and presented in any form, placement and mixture. This is where information about the products and services is presented differently depending on the goals of the sites - the display of the product and services can be done through a variety of colours, concepts and impressions. Thus, a store that sells books is expected to provide pictures of the front cover of the book itself in full colour. On the other hand, a promotion by a credit card company that provides services (Fig. 2) would prominently display their promotional caption "Free Astro DMS + free RM200" to promote applications for its card. The caption itself, typefaced in bright bold fonts with the letters evenly arranged in bold on a dark background reflects the excitement of a 'free' gift. Overall, the impact is through the ways words, graphics and colours are arranged. A hotel, on the other hand, that places its information on the net (see Fig. 4) is expected to display rich colourful pictures of its rooms, restaurants and facilities to attract potential guests.

Fig. 4: Prince Hotel.com



Menu (iconic labels) pix of hotel foyer (partially hidden) pix of room hyperlinks and pix to showcase restaurants

Interactivity is linked to approach and process. As an approach, the hypertext links information, stimuli and presents a multitude of information and ideas about any and all things related to the ideas initially presented. The process can be seen in such a way that if the user clicks the computer mouse on whichever part of

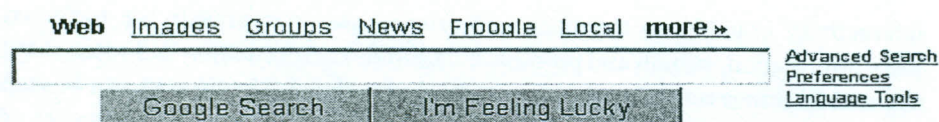
the text or item, he/she can either download or access more information related to that specific item. For instance, a website selling shoes is expected to present pictures of every designs-how else would a prospective buyer select the goods? He/she could click on the picture to find out the price, sizes and colours available, or even view it in multimedia form as worn by a model. The user may also expect to find comments and feedback from others who have bought the particular model he/she is interested in.

The power of the Web (and the individual) comes from the fact that by adding hyperlinks to a web page and pointing to other web pages, the individual can move in any direction - from one page up to another page on a higher level, sideways to a page on the same level, down to a page lower on the organisational structure, or over or across to a web page that is part of another website. This ability to link or jump in any direction means that the individual tends not to follow a hierarchical (or linear) structure as is so often the case with conventional print media, but has the advantage of being able to jump around in a manner that pleases the user. The non-linearity of information and texts can be seen as brief chunks of information. This seems to be the prevailing characteristic of written information of the new millennium. Internet readers tend to scan in an 'S' curve down the screen hopping from one heading to another, and information is written in chunks - the language tends to be concise, with short and succinct sentences and paragraphs. Hence, the universal construction of the web is a S-curve reading - i.e., users do not read linearly, but skips or even focuses on the subject of their choice in the menu or in words that are highlighted or underlined to indicate a hyperlink.

The Social Literacies of Internet Usage

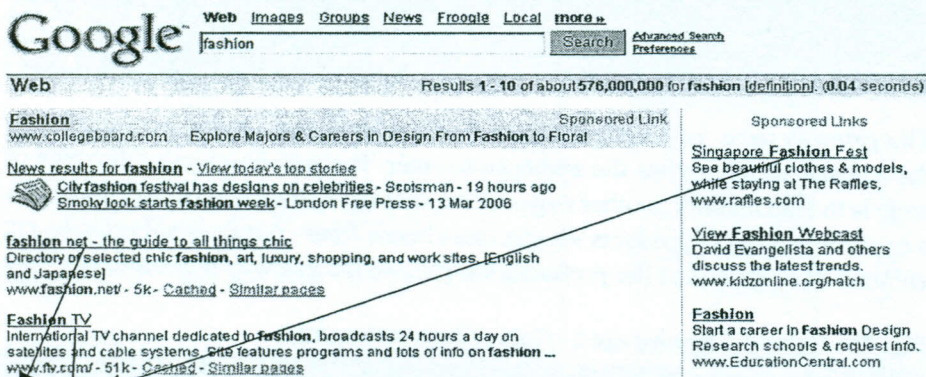
Finding the information on the Web may be difficult if one is not cognisant of how to go about it. One way of accessing information is to use a search engine. Search engines are specialised software programs that are able to sift through the hundreds of millions of pages of information available on the Internet to seek out keywords that the user entered. Search engines (also known as software robots) all have a query box: a place where the user can type in the keyword or concept that he/she is searching for (see Fig. 5).

Figure 5: A query box in a Google search engine



Web users not informed or unaware of the culture surrounding the use of a search engine may often enter a word or two and then be presented with a list of pointers to thousands of pages that may only bear a slight relevance to what the user is looking for. The more savvy ones will enter words with the '+' sign or conjunction 'and' to limit his search. The following figure (Fig. 6) shows a list of results produced by a search engine. The list of results produced by a search engine (also known as 'hits') is usually shown in groups of ten. If a result seems to be appropriate, the user can link to the web page that the result points to simply by clicking on its web page title or URL, which is always coloured. The minute the user clicks onto the hyperlink, it will immediately change into another colour indicating that the hyperlink has been selected. This helps the user to know which link he has selected. This concept is another element of the cultural understanding that a surfer brings along as he manoeuvres in the virtual world.

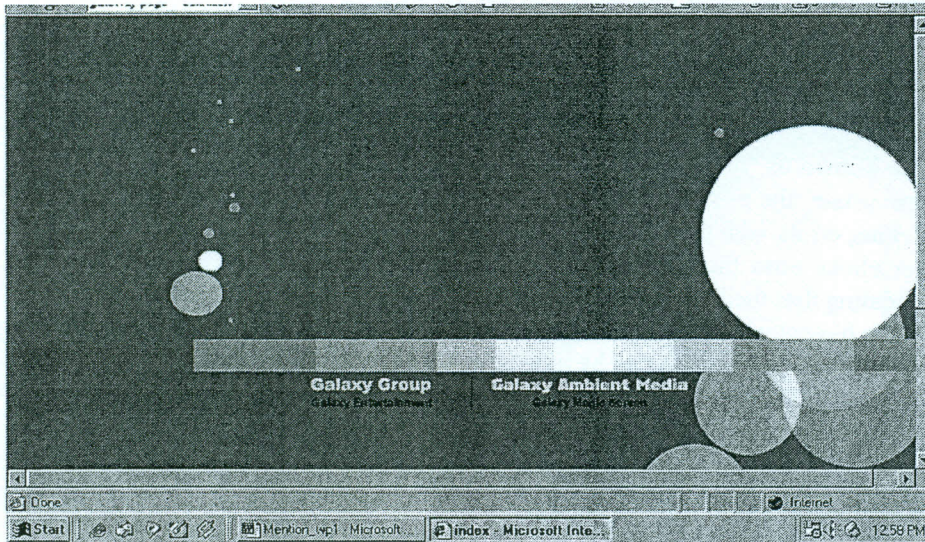
Figure 6: Examples of search results (hits) on 'fashion'



Hyperlinks to websites related to the subject 'fashion'

According to Gauntlett (2000, p. 6), "The Web...has no central point, no capital city". Yet it is a site for information exchange, a site which is a "realistic mirror (or in fact the primary embodiment) of the ways in which we work and play and socialise". This points to its globality – being accessed anywhere and understood in its language. Therefore, a definition of the language of the web should be seen through the ways in which the audience members read and interact with the web. This is because the psychology of a typical web reader requires information at a glance with the iconic labels and toolbars. Therefore, structurally, the web is usually designed with a homepage – an "opening or main page of a website, intended chiefly to greet visitors and provide information about the site or its owner" (<http://www.answers.com/topic/homepage> 05/09/2005). The homepage also contains hyperlinks which can bring the reader to other related sites or groups of information. However, sometimes there is a 'gateway page' (Temple, 2003) before the homepage; a gateway page is the initial page that visitors will see. These are the pages which have a flash intro, or an "Enter Here" graphic.

Fig. 7a: Galaxy – A Gateway Page



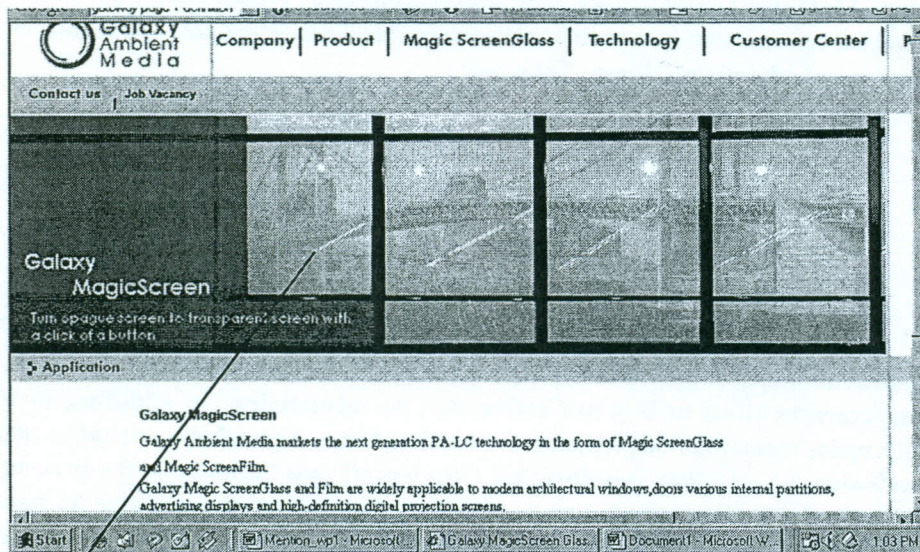
The gateway page is a metaphorical 'door' to the virtual world encapsulated by the website which invites the audience to enter. The sole function of this type of page is to lead visitors to other pages of the site; for example, a page that provides a hyperlinked list of products visitors can choose from - but does not provide any detailed descriptions of the products. On its own the gateway page does not have

Fig. 7b: Galaxy – Homepage 1: Galaxy Entertainment



much content; its primary function is to offer greetings together with a pictorial glimpse of what the site is all about. One example is seen in the website of a media event organizer called Galaxy. Fig. 7a shows the gateway page of its corporate. In this page it allows links to enter either one of its 2 homepages – one devoted to its entertainment arm of its business (Fig. 7b), while the other displays its second business—selling commercial products, such as advertising displays and high-definition digital projection screens (Fig. 7c).

Fig. 7c: Galaxy – Homepage 2: Galaxy Ambient Media



Display of its commercial product

A Marketing Perspective

Another aspect of the literacies of the Internet is the perspective of sales. The addressors of each website have a message to tell and their receiver is the potential buyers. The message is encoded through the mode of communication – in this case, the computer and its applications. Websites make use of the channel or contact, which are print, audio, visual and multimedia elements to convince the buyers to subscribe to certain products or services.

The language features within the structure and the context of advertising also have a purposive role in a persuasive manner to market a product. The language is strategised to arouse the interest of consumers. That presumes on the parameters of the strategy; i.e., who (i.e., the website host)

communicates with whom (in this case, the readers and potential customer) and why, through what advertising tool (the website and the accompanying mediums of communication – print, graphics, typeface, colours, animations, etc), and what kind of communication is involved (whether the site arouses responses from the readers in terms of a desire to interact with the host).

In advertising, there are practical models which are developed to enable effective sales. McDonald (http://www.hpiresearch.com/img_Media/Theory.pdf,) has provided reference to four such models which has been developed over a span of 70 years of advertising theory. They are:

- STARCH: See, read, remember, and act upon.
- DAGMAR: Awareness, comprehension, conviction, action.
- AIDA: Attention, interest, desire, action.
- AIETA: Awareness, interest, evaluation, trial, adoption.

These models assume a passive consumer whose brand knowledge, attitudes and consideration to buy are influenced by advertising. In addition, they rely upon conscious advertisement recall at time of purchase or trial to the exclusion of all other possibilities. The underlying premise in the present study looks at the websites as a sales tool that invites the users to go into and read or experience the message therein. All of the models starts from awareness of the product and ends with the action to buy. For this paper AIDA is selected because it describes a potential buyer's psyche when encountering a product or service (Hopkins, 1923). There are 4 stages: first, the buyer's *attention* is captured and he is made aware of the product; next, the *interest* is aroused, which builds up to a *desire* for the goods or service, culminating in *action* taken to buy. Hence, AIDA depicts the users' psyche when approaching a product. In advertising, AIDA has become a sales-driven tool that is strategised to lead the potential buyer towards an end suggested by the advertiser.

According to Temple (2003), there are 3 basic considerations in the contents and design of a website: the objective, the audience, and the subject matter. Since the website is a marketing tool in any business, it is purpose-driven, and the homepage of the website acts as an advertisement for the organisation. Therefore, the website is designed around the audience as potential consumers of any goods and services offered by the host of the website. Information is designed like a digital 'book' that has many pages



of information. The homepage functions as the content page which includes a menu with navigational items that a user would expect in any website – ‘About Us’, ‘Corporate Information’, ‘Company Profile’, ‘Home’, ‘Products and Services’, ‘FAQs’, ‘Contact Us’ – all of which are written towards describing the products and services and graphically enhanced with multimedia elements and colours.

The language is focused on the audience from a marketing perspective. It is worded to create a personal and intimate relationship with the audience. Because the aim of the web is market-driven, and the scope is global, there tends to be a move towards homogenisation of cultures in the language. Gender is often suppressed; the third person pronouns like ‘he’ and ‘she’ are often substituted with a neutral gender ‘you’. This change from the third person singular to the second person singular also reduces distance and generates a more individualistic and personalised mode.

Because of the intent to persuade audience members to stay longer in a particular website, the homepage is structured like a sales letter. Whether the nature of the web is a business or a medium for their business, the persuasive intent does exist in some form or another as the number of hits would determine the popularity of the site, and by extension, the organization that the web represents. Thus, the web can be analysed using a marketing framework. As websites are often designed like sales letters loosely structured around the mental framework similar to the AIDA, this framework was modified in line with the parameters around which websites are constructed. However, the difference between the ordinary sales letter and the web is the presence of interactivity, in audience feedback and response. Therefore, an additional interactive element ‘I’, which stands for ‘interactiveness’, is added to modify the existing framework. The proposed framework for websites is thus called AIDAI: Attention, Interest, Desire, Action, and Interactiveness (Lee, 2006). Table 2 illustrates the suggested AIDAI framework with examples of navigational items commonly found in websites. The interactive element is not, however, restricted to the feedback and responses. It also refers to the hyperlinks and this means connectivity that occurs when the surfer reads and decides to take the pathways legitimised by hypertexts. Hypertexts, or words that are marked specifically link or connect itself to another work or document or even other websites, providing pathways to other sources of information. It is also characterised by the sensation of movement and connection over and beyond geographically marked territories. Therefore, hypertexts are not linguistically narrowed to nouns or adjectives, but to lexical items that match in term of similarity of content. This tends to happen more in search engines and portals like Yahoo! or Google and seldom if ever in e-commerce/corporate websites, which tends to limit its hyperlinks within its webpage.



Table 2: The AIDAI framework

AIDAI Framework	Navigational items in websites	Sample items from Amazon.com, RHB Bank & Maybank.
Attention	About Us, Corporate Information Company Profile	<i>About RHB</i> <i>News and events</i> <i>Site map</i>
Interest	Product Services	<i>Today's deals</i> <i>Asset Management</i> <i>Unit Trust</i> <i>Online loans</i>
Desire	Special deals Product Advice	<i>Top sellers</i> <i>Tell me more</i> <i>Member services</i>
Action	Contact us Buy / Subscribe	<i>Add to shopping cart</i> <i>Sign up</i>
Interactiveness	Customer's Comments (Words that triggers similar texts)	<i>Editorial Reviews</i> <i>Customer reviews</i>

Source: Lee 2006

The difference between a web and a sales letter in its non-linear form of presentation is seen in the many navigational items and hyperlinks that sectionalises the texts into chunks of hidden information that can be revealed or called out by clicking the mouse over the navigational items. The navigational items or hypertexts organize the text into categorical order, breaking information into chunks. Each navigational item is a text in itself, containing its own subject matter. The headings for the navigational items are usually brief, written in short and succinct phrases, like 'Search', 'Login', 'About Us', 'News and Events', 'Asset Management', 'Securities', 'Add to shopping cart', 'Sign up', 'Customer reviews'. These are found both in the homepage and at the top (the Menu Bar) and sides of every web page and are inserted either in boxes or highlighted in coloured print. The lengths of typed texts in websites vary, depending on the purpose of the website. They are purpose-driven; for instance, search results in a search engine web page may contain lists of items with the keyword strings in some form of logical order (see Fig. 8) or in strings of truncated sentences.



Fig. 8: Google.com search results

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list of search results with truncated sentences

Hyperlinks allow for an integration of limitless number and variety of ideas, concepts, impressions, information which are presented in any form, placement and mixture. A menu is often ordered categorically. Yet, when the reader clicks onto the item with a heading, the next screen may be in the form of a text, like a press release, a description of the goods and services offered, or a picture may even pop out. The types of graphics depend on the purpose and nature of the website. For instance, in Fig. 6, the aim of the website is to showcase a hotel. To this end, glossy pictures of the hotel, its eating outlets, and room facilities are pasted in the website to attract attention and to arouse the interest and the desire to stay in the hotel. The combination of graphic features and placement of the text are aimed at creating the ambiance that represents the image projected by the hotel.

The communicative element is seen through the ways the user interacts with the information provided by the Internet. This interactive element in the web is emphasised by Hilliard (2000). His definition of interactivity suggests an exploitation of the multimedia potential in the Internet "not only in a mix of audio-visual, but also live action, controlled sound, still photographs, charts, graphs, text, and animation" (2000, p. 415). Although websites are presented in the printed form, he points out the larger variables in the texts compared to the conventional forms of media like the radio, television and the printed matter. In fact, there seem to be several levels or kinds of interactivity. At the one end would be the order-form type of page which allows the user to request some services or merchandise from a distributor and have those items sent to a given address. There is certainly meaningful interaction in this exchange, however limited it might be. At the opposite end of the scale are those sites that encourage ongoing interaction between the people involved - bulletin boards, forums, chat, newsgroups, etc. These web sites provide a more or less rapid form of human communication (Lewis, 1999).



Interactivity also allows the user to make choices that generate varying responses from a computer program relatively quickly. In these cases, interactivity means the exchange of action and response between human and machine, rather than directly between humans. It is a kind of "inter-species" exchange (Lewis, 1999), one that talks back to the user when he/she inputs some response to what is on the page, or one which allows the user to affect the action in a game or the display of information based on his/her actions with mouse or keyboard. An interactive web site is one which does not just present information for the user to absorb, but which invites him/her to take an active part in determining what the computer program does next. The level of interactivity ranges from a program that checks the answers to a quiz and gives the score to a complex game in which the user is challenged to respond to constantly changing conditions which are affected by and arise from his/her responses. It is this human/machine exchange of action and response that defines true interactivity.

Conclusion

The electronic revolution and the process of globalisation has changed the expectations and practices of the spoken and written language, resulting in a new variety (Crystal, 2001). Because access to it is worldwide, the notion of a global village with its attendant implications arises. For a 'village' or 'community' to exist, there must be some "shared features of language" to give the users of the language a sense of identity (2001, p. 6). His argument re-emphasises Foster's (1996) view that an understanding of the concept of virtual reality is grounded in its communicative act.

While Crystal's description points to the language of the Internet as a variety, his parameters of that term is broad, referring to genres within his description, which are shaped by situational factors. Crystal's label 'Netspeak', (2001) is taken from the situational manifestations of Internet use in its vocabulary, graphology, acronyms, the succinct manner of speaking and writing; the shortening of ideas, concepts and places into short phrases as well as the acronymic forms in spellings; all of which points to its functionality – whether to provide straight information or to appeal to the senses. These new varieties of linguistic use merely reiterate the point of the shared milieu: global because the users and readers in the Internet understood the cultural norms embedded within the semiotic activities; yet individualised in approach due to the interactive element surrounding the various activities in the Internet. For example, in addition to the marketing forces at work in the way the websites are designed seen in the AIDAI parameters, members entering this virtual world also brings with him/her their own cultural practices with a value-added component – the norms and ways of behaving in the websites – how to access; through knowing which browser software to use, what URL



address to key in, or alternatively, which search engine to use and what keywords to type in, and whether there is a preferred site from which the user uses as his/her launching pad into the virtual world. This also includes an understanding of the basic icons in the toolbar and their meanings, as well as the nature of the digitised texts which differ from the linear form of conventionalised printed texts. There is definitely a new literacy to reading the Internet, and this literacy is fast catching on and influencing the ways people communicates – i.e., talk, write and interact with one another. However, these shared activities are also imbued with the individualised psyche because the decision of where to go, which icon to click, what information to input is in the hands of the individual user. It is personalised to the likes of the user, which proves that the behaviours over the Internet may be globalised, but it does not equate to a faceless mass.

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