Exploring Rapport Management among Culturally Diverse Students during Group Work Face-to-face Interactions: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Group work skills are commonly viewed as an important generic outcome of university for all students. Often, students working in groups for course assignments engage in potentially face-threatening interactions during discussions. The complication is compounded when students represent culturally diverse backgrounds in such intercultural communication. This study describes the rapport management that takes place during face-to-face group work interactions and examines the complex negotiation of social categories during intercultural group work interactions. This ethnographically informed qualitative study involved participants who were first-year undergraduates taking a course in English for Business. Their group discussions were observed in-situ, interactions were audio-taped and then transcribed for analysis. The study investigates the social intercultural interactions using Rapport Management as a framework to analyse intercultural interactions based on the concepts of face, sociality rights, and interactional goals. The findings confirm that rapport orientation is a key influence in strategy choice driven by the constructed social categories of the participants. Individual social categories are co-constructed and negotiated during the interaction processes. In face-threatening situations, the participants would orient to rapport-neglect and rapport-challenge during an interaction, but they would finally orientate to rapport-maintenance to achieve the successful interactional goals of group work. The study contributes towards the body of knowledge and understanding on rapport management and social categories in group work interactions in the context of a Malaysian university. The findings suggest that education practitioners need to be more interculturally competent in understanding the dynamics of intercultural communication among students during their participation in group work.

Keywords: *Rapport management, intercultural communication, social categories, group work, interaction.*

INTRODUCTION

Borderless global higher education is becoming more accessible each day. With the growing demand for transnational education and movement across countries, understanding intercultural communication (IC) becomes more crucial. IC occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds negotiate shared meanings through interaction (Hall et al., 2022; Jandt, 2020; Ong & Nair-Venugopal, 2021). As such, intercultural interactions among students are unavoidable, particularly when doing group work is the prescribed pedagogical concept in the education system.

Often referred to as collaborative learning, co-learning, or cooperative learning, group work is learner-centric (Blatchford et al., 2003; Johnson & Johnson, 2021; Yang, 2023) and used as a strategy to develop higher cognitive skills, increase intercultural understanding, improve interpersonal skills, and prepare students for the participative workforce (Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008; Dyball et al., 2010; Elmassah et al., 2020). While many studies have investigated various aspects of group work such as performance, leadership, etc., very little

attention has been paid to the ways in which rapport is managed in group work and how the social categories of the students affect IC during group work discussions.

Research on IC regarding Malaysian learners is noticeable in the works from Dalib et. al. (2017, 2019), Lee et al. (2010), Harun et al. (2021), Tamam and Phang (2003), and Tamam and Krauss (2017) that examines language, culture, and identity. Malaysian workplace rapport studies are available as in the works by Johari et al. (2015) that reviewed literature on rapport in business discourse, and Paramasivam (2011) on the importance of rapport maintenance to facilitate air traffic exchanges. However, studies on intercultural interactions, specifically on rapport management among Malaysian learners is significantly lacking.

Although intercultural group work as a pedagogical concept has gained global acceptance (Poort et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2022), studies have also found negative attitudes towards group work where students reported group members who argued, were uncooperative, or just remained silent throughout the group work (Clark & Baker 2011; Hoang & de Nooy, 2020; Ong, 2019; Popov et al. 2012). Despite the negative attitudes, students can still produce a cohesive group assignment for a course assessment project is an interesting phenomenon worth investigating. Due to their culturally diverse worldviews, students working in groups for course assignments are exposed to potentially face-threatening interactions during discussions (Guan & Lee, 2017; Ong & Nair-venugopal, 2021; Zhu & Bresnahan, 2018). These group work discussions are common sites for tensions, disputes, and even serious altercations. It is intriguing to investigate how rapport is managed and how social categories are negotiated during such face-threatening intercultural interactions. Using Rapport Management (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) as a framework, this paper explores how students of diverse backgrounds in a Malaysian university interact during their face-to-face group work discussions.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL CATEGORIES

Having roots in the discourse of language, culture and communication, Intercultural Communication (IC) is a multidisciplinary field of study. In its barest form, IC is communication between individuals who are culturally distinct (Martin et al., 2020; Rings & Rasinger, 2023; Zhu, 2019). In fact, studies in IC focus on communicative practices in interaction between distinct cultural groups (Jandt 2020; Lee et al., 2023; Ong, 2021, Piller, 2017). Nair-Venugopal (2003, 2009) advocates the dismantling of an essentialist notion of culture and places an emphasis on communication, so that the attention shifts to the 'social actor' rather than the 'cultural other'. This perspective allows for the discussion of the social categories of students from diverse cultural backgrounds who interact with each other during group work discussions. Naturally, the complexities of IC are evident during such interactions.

One important element in IC is identity as a social construction which means identity is not just a cognitive matter, but also a process that can be in interaction (Debray, 2023; Donaghue, 2018; Holliday et al., 2021). Emphasising the individual as a social actor enhances the social identities of the individual during interactions. Drawn from the Social Identity Theory (Charness & Chen, 2022; Hogg, 2020; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), social identity is relational in terms of perceived membership in-group/out-group polarities of a particular group. Social category as an extension of social identity is a way of self-sorting based on common traits. By understanding social identities as a construct which are produced within social interactions, social categories too are fluid, multiple and emergent (Debray & Spencer-Oatey, 2022; Hicks, 2020; Holliday et al., 2021; Wetherell, 2010).

The premise is that when culturally diverse individuals interact with each other, IC takes place and social categories such as age, gender, or nationality become salient. These social categories (Adnan et al., 2022; Banton, 2011; Jenkins, 2008; Patel, 2021) are shaped by values, norms, beliefs, and attitudes during the interactions (Ong & Venugopal, 2021). Consciously or otherwise, these social categories influence our communication especially with 'strangers' (Best, 2019; Harman, 1987; Kiss, 2008). When communicating interculturally in diverse groups, the participants in this study interact with 'strangers' which increases the potential of misunderstandings, arguments, and conflict (Gudykunst, 2005; Jacobi, 2020; Stahl & Maznevski, 2021) that may affect group work.

RAPPORT MANAGEMENT

Building on Goffman's (1967) face-work and extending the perspective on Brown and Levinson's (1987) 'politeness', Spencer-Oatey (2008) proposes the notion of 'rapport management' to describe ways to manage face and social relations using language. Aspects of rapport include the discussion of harmony-disharmony among people as during interactions, social relations can be maintained, enhanced, challenged, or even neglected (Culpeper & Qian, 2019; Nguyen, 2023; Tian et al., 2023; Wang & Spencer-Oatey, 2015; Zhu, 2014).

Apart from focusing on the face-saving or face-threatening factors, Spencer-Oatey (2008, 2009) recommends three bases of interactions in the framework for rapport management: face sensitivities, sociality rights and obligations (behavioural expectations), and interactional goals. First, Spencer-Oatey introduces for two faces: quality face, which is the desire to be positively evaluated by others, such as sense of worth, dignity and identity, and identity face, which is the desire for people to acknowledge and uphold social identities or roles associated with respect, honour, status, reputation, and competence (Spencer-Oatey (2008, p. 14). Second, on sociality rights and obligations (behavioural expectations), there are two perceived rights: equity rights (perceived personal consideration from others to be treated fairly such as the balance between cost and benefit and between autonomy and imposition), and association rights (perceived association with others that is in keeping with the type of relationship we have with them such as the balance between involvement and detachment in terms of sharing concerns, feelings and interests with others). Third, on interactional goals, it refers to relational goals and transactional (task-focused) goals, where failure to achieve them can cause frustration and annoyance Spencer-Oatey (2008, p. 17).

The way all these aspects are managed in interaction develops into four orientations as strategies, namely rapport-enhancement, rapport-maintenance, rapport-neglect and rapport-challenge (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, 2009). First, rapport-enhancement involves the desire for positive change to improve relationships. 'Giving of face' is a way to do this. Second, rapport-maintenance involves the desire to minimise face-threats by preserving relationships. It can be done by choice of appropriate terms of address, honorifics, social indexing markers, and other aspects of register in interactions. Third, rapport-neglect happens when the speaker is more concerned about maintaining their own face than maintaining or restoring rapport. Fourth, rapport-challenge happens when the speaker deliberately causes people to lose face.

Various studies on managing rapport have been conducted in the workplace in healthcare, Tian et al. (2023) investigates the rapport strategies between doctors and noncompliant patients. They found that doctors who simultaneously use rapport-building

strategies such as compliments, jokes, and appropriate titles, in the face of patients' rapport-challenging behaviour creates closer bonds between them. In a study on the review response genre of a hotel management's responses to negative online reviews, Ho (2020) attempts to link the role of metadiscourse in rapport management. His study showed that managers of hotels of higher ratings tend to rapport-enhance than rapport-challenge, and the different degree of commitment was evident in the metadiscourse of rapport-enhancing and rapport-challenging moves. Paramasivam (2011) analysed the linguistic devices used in air traffic interactions between controllers and pilots. Her findings showed a display of rapport management shared in mindfulness and team thinking. Planken (2005) analysed negotiation discourse among *lingua franca* speakers of English for specific business purposes. Her findings showed that 'safe talk' such as greetings or leave-taking in routine communication is an important source of building rapport. Besides that, projecting a professional identity is also crucial within the negotiation event as it manages rapport (Planken, 2005). The findings show that the interactions are primarily oriented to rapport-maintenance.

Apart from the workplace, studies on managing rapport have also been conducted in the classroom. In an educational setting, Nguyen (2023) examines how rapport is managed by an international teaching assistant (ITA) in the face of misunderstanding and schema mismatch during an office hour (OH) consultation. Nguyen finds that rapport is enhanced, maintained, and challenged in multiple ways despite collaborative efforts by the participants. These include small talk, complimenting, scaffolding by questions, example, and direct requests. The study highlighted that rapport management is impacted by various factors as in face, rights, and interactional goals that are shaped by their schemas and expectations. Robinson et al. (2015) investigated the complex social aspects of communication required for students to participate effectively in group learning and explored how these dynamics are managed. The study found that when the chair failed to manage rapport effectively, it can influence the quality of group learning. Face-threatening situations need to be managed by considering the three bases of rapport of face, sociality rights, and interactional goals, so that students are free to contribute in group learning. Studying two unorganised English Corners, Zhu (2014) investigates strong disagreement among the Chinese speakers of English. She finds that strong disagreement was used to preserve rights, conduct facework, and achieve interactional goals. These include maintaining or enhancing, rather than damaging the rapport of the participants. Instead of perceiving strong disagreements as negative, it is perceived as appropriate. Reasons for this could have been the way strong disagreement was expressed, the link between perception and behaviour, the value of face and rapport to the participants, their English proficiency and pragmatic awareness, interactional goals, and identity construction.

Studying face-needs should take an identity perspective in interaction (Debray, 2023; Donaghue, 2018; Nguyen, 2023; Wang & Spencer-Oatey, 2015). Face and sociality concerns are managed through both pragmalinguistic features of our interaction such as the structure of our utterances and sociopragmatic features such as discourse choice, style of interaction, etc. Because any form of utterances during interactions is potentially face-threatening, this framework allows analysis that goes beyond the linguistic strategies used by the interlocutors such as face and identity. It includes the construction and maintenance of social relationships in intercultural interaction.

To summarise, the framework of rapport management is particularly suitable for the analysis of interactions on culturally diverse students during group work discussions. In the data examples discussed below, both face needs and sociality rights appear to be a significant factor for consideration to balance the relationship by practising rapport management.

METHODOLOGY

This ethnographically informed qualitative study (Flick, 2018; Hammersley, 2006; Neuman, 2011) was from part of a larger qualitative research project (Ong, 2019; Ong & Nair-Venugopal, 2021) that seeks to find out the influence of social categories in physical face-to-face interactions among university students during group work. However, this specific paper explores rapport management among culturally diverse students. The study employs Rapport Management (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) as the framework to analyse rapport, as well as the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features in interactions. Two research questions guided this study:

1. How is rapport managed during group work interactions?
2. How are the social categories in IC negotiated in such interactions?

Participants and Setting

To explore rapport management and social categories in group work face-to-face interactions, authentic discourse data were obtained from an English for Business classroom where the researcher taught. With a composition of 47% Malaysians and 53% international students forming 31 groups from a total of 193 participants, they were mainly first year undergraduate students. English was the *lingua franca* and they were all non-native speakers of English. Their age ranged from 18 to 34, 38.3% females and 61.7% males, and they come from 27 different countries. The participants were selected for the study through convenience sampling through the researcher's role as the assigned lecturer to the participants. They all agreed to participate in the study.

Data Collection

Prior to conducting the study, verbal consent was obtained from the participants. The purpose of the study was explained, and their anonymity was assured. The researcher handed out a simple form to collect information on the participants' identities and made them aware they didn't have to fill in the form if they had any objections to the study. All participants submitted their forms to the researcher. Verbal consent was obtained from the participants as it is important that the participants feel at ease and be themselves during the study. This also allowed the researcher to gain naturally occurring data for the study. Apart from the assurance of anonymity of profiles and information in the researcher's work, the participants were also assured that they were allowed to withdraw their consent at any time.

For six weeks the researcher audio-taped the weekly group work interactions which ran for about 15-20 minutes at the end of the class time. As the assigned lecturer to the participants, the researcher was able to conduct direct participant observations of the groups and made field notes.

Data Analysis

To identify the data corpus of verbal disputes for analysis, the researcher selected the discourse data based on some evidence of arguments or disagreements in the audio-recordings of the group work discussions. These recorded excerpts were then transcribed using Jenks (2011, 2018) transcription conventions and subsequently analysed line by line by the researcher. The excerpts used in the study were carefully checked multiple times against the audio-recordings to ensure accuracy. To ensure participant information was held private, their names were anonymised. Viewed as communicative episodes (Heller, 1988), each line in the transcription is seen as interactive strips of data which were the unit of analysis for the study. For analysis, Spencer-Oatey's (2008) Rapport Management Framework was suitable for this study because it offers a broader perspective on rapport building such as discourse, participation, and style (Aoki, 2010; Culpeper & Qian, 2019; Nguyen, 2023; Zhu, 2014). This framework not only foregrounds the concept of face, behavioural expectations, and interactional goals but also the fluidity of these concepts as they vary according to culture.

To ensure the validity of the analysis and its interpretation, the researcher also conducted unstructured post-hoc interviews with the participants who were identified in verbal disputes during their group discussions. The interviews were conducted at the end of the term after they submitted their assignments. The interviews allowed the participants to explain the instances of disagreement that were present in the audio-recordings. The researcher was also able to clarify doubts and fill in missing information so that transcriptions were as accurate as possible for analysis. During the post-hoc interviews, the participants revealed that their social categories play a role in how they manage rapport. Feedback from expert informants (lecturers teaching a similar course) were obtained to control potential researcher 'insider bias' (Fleming, 2018; van Heugten 2004). For this study, the expert informants' roles were to describe their experiences with and observations on rapport management in culturally diverse group work in their respective classes. The feedback provided was consistent with the researcher's insights in which social categories are negotiated during rapport management. These multiple methods served to triangulate the data collected for the study as it is mainly qualitative in form and interpretive.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of this paper is to explore rapport management strategies used by the participants in culturally diverse students' group work interaction. The focus is the ways participants manage rapport in potentially face-threatening situations and how social categories are negotiated during the interactions. The following three examples are selected based on audio-recordings that indicated some verbal disputes, disagreements, or arguments among the participants. Because these tense exchanges often result in face-threatening situations, it is noteworthy to explore how rapport strategies are employed and social categories are negotiated during group work interactions. In the three examples below, the names of the participants have been pseudonymised for anonymisation of personal data.

Example 1

This excerpt shows five active interlocutors: Z (20-year-old, male, Malaysian Malay), A (24-year-old, male, Somali), F (24-year-old, male, Iranian), L (23-year-old, male, Iranian), and M (20-year-old male, Kyrgyz). An argument breaks out and is highly face-threatening among the culturally diverse members.

```
20  A  : hey↑ hey↑ hey↑ i do my part here
21  L  : you make up your part?
22  A  : yeah
23  L  : where is your part? last one?
24  A  : readers readers profile when i sent you my part
25  L  : you know what
26  Z  : you know [guys guys guys okay okay never mind we should…
27  A  :            [you don't know
28  F  : i don't know what's your country in my country if somebody call me
29        at one thirty a.m. i will put the phone and i will say shut up <expletive> up
30        (1.0) like this
31  A  : are you in your country? are are you in some iranian?
32  F  : yes
33  A  : no no no no that wait wait
34  F  : you can be my friend he call me at one thirty a.m. you know what it is?
35        i'm sleeping it's not time to work it's late you're fired (1.0) it's late
36  A  : you're fired?
37  F  : you understand?
38  A  : [i don't understand i don't understand
39  F  : [you're fired (1.0) it's too late
40  A  : the worry want to finish i i don't hear
41  L  : you wana finish you call it you wanna finish it write
42  M  : hey guys relax relax relax
43  A  : you know (.) we don't have anything in common (.) what all we have
44        to be is just work and separate (.) we don't have any anything in
45        common (.) so we don't have to discuss (.) leave it leave it
```

Figure 1: Excerpt for Example 1

In this example, a highly face-threatening situation is presented. The interaction began with A, in line 20, bursting out in anger and raising his voice hey↑ hey↑ hey↑, he claimed that he submitted his part of the report earlier. This would constitute rapport-neglect as he was not interested in maintaining harmony among the group members. Feeling dissatisfied, in line 21 and 23, L retorted and repeated his question *"your part?"* to A which would constitute a rapport-challenge. Heated arguments took place between F and A from lines 28-41. Stressed expletives such as "*shut up <expletive> up*" in line 29 were used which is a clear rapport-challenge. Rapport-neglect can be seen from line 28 to line 30 when F retorted in anger that back in his country, Iran, he would be extremely angry if someone were to call him at 1.30am. References to national identifications are drawn as in *"are you in your country? are are you in some iranian?"* (line 31). A clear rapport-challenge is exhibited here. In lines 34-45 F again justifies his reason for being angry when someone calls him at 1.30am. Refusing to back down, A pretended that he did not understand what F meant by "*you're fired*" in line 36. Sensing that interactional goals of the group are at stake, in lines 43-45, A attempts rapport-maintenance through the utterance "*leave it leave it*" (line 45) as a face-saving strategy to restore the interactional goal of the group work. He declares that other than the magazine proposal that they all must complete, they have nothing in common and they will go separate ways once the assignment is done. Here is an indication of preserving the interactional goal of the group by maintaining rapport.

In this example, all three bases of rapport are at risk because face, sociality rights and obligations, and interactional goals are clearly threatened. The participants orient to mainly rapport-challenge and rapport-neglect. Rapport-neglect is the lack of concern or interest in

the quality of relations between the interlocutors, due to possible focus on self; whereas rapport-challenge is the desire to challenge or impair harmonious relations between the interlocutors (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, 2009). The perceived rapport-challenge is found in equity rights-threatening behaviours, association rights-threatening behaviours, and face-threatening behaviours among A, L and F. All these are potential threats to the interactional goal of the group work but then rapport is restored when A finally starts to calm down.

It is noteworthy that there are attempts made by Z (line 26) and M (line 42) to rapport-maintain to restore the interactional goal of the group work. Realising that the argument is not getting them anywhere, in line 26 Z attempted to mitigate using rapport-maintenance with the utterance *"guys guys guys okay okay never mind"*. In line 42, again, an attempt to orientate to rapport-maintain can be seen when M tries to tell everyone to calm down "*hey guys relax relax relax"*. Both Z and M attempt to minimise face-threats by preserving the relationship through the use of the utterance 'guys'. Drawing on the desire to create a positive in-group identity (Charness & Chen, 2022; Hogg, 2020), they identify themselves as 'guys' which makes it a social category that is constructed and negotiated during the interaction. This also resonates with the insider versus outsider or 'us-them' notion of group membership.

The action of openly challenging the face of the interlocutors as in the data example above is particularly interesting. Evidence of the construction of social categories in interaction can be seen during F's identification of his nationality as an Iranian (line 32). F identifies with the cultural aspect of being an Iranian who does not appreciate being disturbed at 1.30am. The amount of interactional work F puts into justifying his actions as an Iranian is evidence that he is cognisant of the negative view that the group members may have on Iranians not responding to telephone calls in the middle of the night. He goes through the trouble to explain it twice in line 28 and line 34. It appears that this explanation serves to justify his use of expletives to restore his positive face. In line 31, A challenges F's reasoning on behaving like he is back in his country, thus giving a dimension to the social category 'foreigner'. Both A and F are non-Malaysians. This shows how nationality as a social category (Adnan et al., 2022) is emergent and negotiated during interactions.

Example 2
This excerpt shows three active interlocutors: E (34-year-old, female, Arab), S (19-year-old female, Thai), and O (28-year-old male Nigerian). The discussion revolves around the selection of a group leader.

```
9    O   : =yeah we can use brainstorm because i was thinking=
10   E   : =yeah
11   O   : ladies are more creative so [ladies they should lead heh heh heh=
12   E   :                             [no no no no actually actually i have
13         something
14   S   : =why ... why every time lady
15   O   : yeah ladies are more [creative
16   E   :                      [creative (2.0) the way that they have been
17         trying to convince us to do all the work (1.0) heh heh heh heh=
18   O   : =no no no that's sorry that's not no that's not the idea
19   S   : no actually man should be the leader everytime male is the always
20         or maybe lady
21   E   : the reason is always the lazy people twisted all the words heh heh
22   O   : no that's not true=
23   S   : =okay so you guys
24   O   : i'm very supportive of the leader you see heh heh heh heh
25   E   : want fight [heh heh
26   O   :            [heh heh heh heh
```

Figure 2: Excerpt for Example 2

The interaction flows from an interesting topic on selecting a leader for their group work. In this example, the interaction begins with O in line 9, suggesting that they brainstorm for someone to lead the group. E agrees in line 10, showing a classic case of rapport-enhancement which supports harmony in interaction. In line 11, O suggests that women are more creative therefore they should lead the group and again repeats it in line 15. His suggestion backfires when both E and S disagree signalling rapport-challenge in the subsequent interaction. Outright disagreement from E in line 12 and S's question in line 15 *"why every time lady"* are both face threatening. O's face sensitivities, sociality rights and obligations are at risk despite his attempt to defend his suggestion in line 15 with the compliment "*ladies are more [creative".* Still disagreeing with O, in line 17, E accuses O of being cunning, "*trying to convince us to do all the work"* and followed by laughter which acts as a softener to the accusation, signalling an attempt to restore rapport-maintenance. In line 18, O tries to explain the misunderstanding, but S insists in line 19 *"no actually man should be the leader"* and continues on with a rapport-challenge. In line 21, E continues with a rapport challenge when she says, *"the reason is always the lazy people twisted all the words heh heh"*. Such an utterance is clearly face-threatening to O as it connotes O as someone lazy and who plays around with words to suit his needs. However, the utterance ends with a chuckle *"heh heh"* which signals a playful banter which could qualify as a joke and not to be taken seriously. O again denies that is true in line 22 and S quickly latches on in line 23 attempting to end the rapport-challenge so that they could proceed with the task given. Thus, the interactional goal is given a priority even though there are issues of disagreement among the group members. Still attempting to justify himself, O in line 24 worked on a rapport-enhancement orientation to enhance positive social value (Goffman, 1967) by saying that "*I'm very supportive of the leader you see heh heh heh heh*" and trails off with a long laughter. In line 26, O again hedged it with laughter after S offered O to fight in line 25. Thai speakers commonly use intensifiers and spontaneous expression to show involvement and a fun tone in their interactions (Aoki, 2010). Thus, S's remarks in line 25 can be considered a form of rapport-enhancement management that contributes to positive group work.

In this data example, E, O and S orient to rapport-challenge, rapport-enhancement and rapport-maintenance in their rapport work which is evident through several interactional actions. By disagreeing with each other regarding the gender of a supposed group leader, it is perceived as an orientation to rapport-challenge. However, the interaction does not escalate to a heated argument as the participants employ laughter as a face-saving strategy. They are enhancing each other's face, enhancing each other's equity right, and enhancing involvement to improve rapport with each other. The enhancement of the individual's face is achieved by E and S supporting each other against O. Furthermore, when O chooses to laugh off S's playful offer to fight, they orient to rapport-maintenance in their rapport work. In this interaction, laughter arguably helps alleviate the face-threatening situations (Matsumoto, 2018; Mullany, 2004; Petraki & Ramayanti, 2018).

O's utterances in line 11, 15 and 24 are forms of reducing face-threatening acts to a minimum to achieve communicative equilibrium or balance (Goffman, 1967) to avoid situations that can lead to embarrassment. Using compliments such as 'creative' women and stating support for women leaders, are seen as a classic rapport-enhancement strategy. The rapport is achieved by managing face and sociality right for effective group work. The discussion of face and self are fundamentally inseparable as this concern the issue of identity (Debray, 2023; Hicks, 2020; Spencer-Oatey, 2009). The construction of gender as a social category is evident in the interactive episode. In this data example, the participants demonstrate co-construction of identities through talk and interaction. E, O, and S jointly construct a discourse about social categories such as 'creative women' and 'women leaders. Although O actively constructs a predominantly prejudiced discourse about females, the group continues to maintain rapport for the obvious interactional goal.

Example 3
This excerpt shows two active interlocutors: T (19-year-old female, Malay Malaysian) and N (29-year-old male, Iranian). This data example is separated into three short segments to only include relevant parts for analysis. This discussion revolves around negotiation on dividing tasks for group work assignments.

```
6    T    : divide the work so everybody can type whatever thing=
...  ...
11   N    : i complete all of the (2.0) e::r format of the magazine in photoshop
12   T    : [no i mean divide
13   N    : [i divide them into=
14   T    : =no (.) because in here=
15   N    : =i i waiting for the
16   T    : it says (.) such as we have to just tell how you are suppose to do it
17        (0.6) um part of the magazine we're suppose to write about reader
18        profile (.) advertiser profile (.) and you have to do marketing plan (0.1)
19        so everyone [have to do=
20   N    :            [i already did everything
21   T    : you already did everything
22   N    : i did everything heh heh
...  ...
34   T    : [heh heh] cause we have been waiting cause we didn't know=
35   N    : =because i think it's very late and er=
36   T    : =yeah yeah (.) because we thought you didn't do anything (.) we are
37        thinking you are very lazy [heh heh
38   N    :                          [no no no i er
39   T    : em can you (.) email it to me so i can read my part=
40   N    : =yes yes i will email everything (.) about the magazine (.)
```

Figure 3: Excerpt for Example 3

The interaction above begins with T in line 6 who wants the task to be distributed among the group members for them to proceed with the work given. Her utterance *"divide"* is stressed thus making such a demand is inherently face-threatening to N who is the leader of the group work. N replies in line 11 by uttering *"i complete all of the…"* and his inability to explain himself properly causes confusion to T who insists again that they divide the task in line 12. It is evident that N's face sensitivities are at risk when being interrogated by a group member like T. Sensing N's misunderstanding, T proceeds to explain in line 19 *"so everyone [have to do="* and before she finishes off her utterance, N interrupts *"[i already did everything"* in line 20. In a state of disbelief, T reiterates N in line 21. T is surprised to discover that N has already completed the assignment on his own, as in line 20 *"[I already did everything"* and repeats in line 22 with a chuckle *"heh heh"*. The interaction continues with an uncomfortable laughter from T in line 34 because she is not aware of what has happened to their group work. In line 35, N tries to justify his actions for not including other group members because he does not think they have enough time. In lines 36-37, T acknowledges their time limitation and utters "*because we thought you didn't do anything (.) we are thinking you are very lazy [heh heh"* (lines 36-37). Her confession on thinking that N is being "very lazy" in line 37 is a massive face-threatening situation which orients to rapport-neglect because she disregards N's equity face. T's utterance is marked with laughter as a face-saving strategy to hedge her disagreements. N in line 38 attempts to dispel T's negative impression of him but was unable to explain further when T requested for N to send the part that she is supposedly to work on through email. Without hesitation, N agrees in line 40, signalling rapport-maintenance so that the main objective of the interactional goal is not affected.

In this example, the participants orient to mainly rapport-neglect, which is a lack of concern or interest in the quality of relations between the interlocutors. As shown, both T and N place their own individual interests first during interactions. Firstly, by not including

other group members in the assignment, N orients to rapport-neglect when confronted by T. His lack of interest for the other group members' concerns shows a high focus on self. Other group members were not involved in the decision-making process. Actions such as these are potential threats to the interactional goal of the group. Another instance is in line 36 where T tells N that she thinks him lazy, which is a massive face-threatening situation as she does not consider his quality face in her utterance. Despite the prominent rapport-neglect, the interaction does not orient towards rapport-challenge. In this case, face-saving strategies using laughter can be seen as a softening device (Matsumoto, 2018; Ladegaard & Ho, 2014; Murata, 2007) to achieve rapport-maintenance, which is the desire to maintain or protect harmonious relations between the interlocutors.

In a subsequent post-hoc self-report interview with T, she disclosed that she had difficulty working with 'older male' students like N because she felt that they tended to dominate the discussion and disregard others' input. This interaction is also a display of the social category of gender, where male dominance is demonstrated. An interesting observation is on the use of pronouns. T consistently utters 'we' in lines 16, 17, 34, 36 which is regarded as involvement and cooperation in comparison to N's use of 'I' in every utterance. Dominance by male speakers can be seen from the pattern of self-oriented conversational style via storytelling and claiming expertise (Pakzadian & Tootkaboni, 2018; Itakura & Tsui, 2004). In this case, N claims expertise by finishing the assignment on his own.

CONCLUSION

The general aim of this study was to investigate rapport management strategies employed by culturally diverse students during face-to-face group work interactions. In the present study, students' group work interactions are actively marked with expressions including agreements, disagreements, and questions, and these may be implicitly or explicitly constructed and negotiated in interactions.

Regarding the first research question: How is rapport managed during group work interactions? All four orientations of rapport emerged during group work interactions to ensure the group achieved successful interactional goals. Consideration for the other two rapport bases on face sensitivities and behavioural expectations are displayed during interactions. While rapport-neglect and rapport challenge are clearly observed during face-threatening interactions, the data examples show that participants will eventually gravitate to rapport-enhancement and rapport-maintenance for the sake of achieving successful interactional goals. It is their overall goal to complete the project or assignment given. The study showed that the participants from different cultures worked at building and maintaining rapport to achieve successful group work interactions. In fact, evidence of laughter in examples 2 and 3 indicate laughter as an essential part of rapport building, as also found in other studies by Matsumoto (2018), Ladegaard and Ho (2014), Schnurr and Chan (2010) and Davies (2003). The study is consistent with findings from Nguyen (2023), Tian et al. (2023), Ho (2013, 2020), Zhu (2014), Robinson (2011), and Robinson et al. (2015) with regards to managing rapport.

Regarding the second research question: How are the social categories in IC negotiated in such interactions? The observations found the flexible nature of the discursive presentation of social categories in interactions. Group work interaction is a site where cultural assumptions are negotiated, and this study has highlighted several social categories that are present during the interactions. Social categories are inherently present during

interaction and cannot be ignored when studying the management of rapport in IC. When culturally diverse students interact with 'strangers' (Best, 2019; Harman, 1987), their individual social categories are co-constructed and negotiated during the interaction processes. From the examples above, social categories have a significant influence on the interaction. The findings showed the discursive work involved in the negotiation of stereotypes such as the stereotypes of women being more creative than men, exhibited in data example 2.

This study gives priority to the quality of analysis over quantity. The study only involved the undergraduate students who were present in the researcher's classes. The data collection tool was also limited to audio-recordings which confined the study to verbal elements, instead of video recordings which would then enable non-verbal elements of interaction to be analysed. However, it is with the qualitative in-depth analysis of the interactions that the study can uncover the nuances of social categories that foreground the interactional rapport management strategies among the participants.

Lastly, higher education practitioners need to be more interculturally competent in understanding the dynamics and elements of intercultural communication that highlight the social categories of culturally diverse students during group work interactions. What makes or breaks culturally diverse group work may well depend on how social categories are managed among the students. Being strangers commonly entails a high level of uncertainty and avoidance (Gudykunst, 2005; Jacobi, 2020) among tertiary students in such interactions, rapport management that orientates to enhancement and maintenance prevails due to the existing common interactional goals.

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