

# The Use of WhatsApp Group to Maintain Intercultural Friendship

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## Article Information

Submission August 06, 2020  
Revision September 07, 2020  
Accepted September 25, 2020  
Published October 01, 2020

## Abstract

This research aims to analyze the use of WhatsApp Group (WAG) as a medium for maintaining intercultural friendship among people with different cultural backgrounds namely the alumni of The Ship for Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Program (SSEAYP) batch '89. This research used a case study approach with a qualitative research design. The data were collected through direct observation of the texts, pictures, emoticons, and videos shared in the WAG and interviews with 20 informants who are the members of the group coming from different countries. The Needs Hierarchy Theory of Maslow and the Social Exchange Theory of Thibaut and Kelley were used in this research. The findings show that the alumni of SSEAYP Batch '89 joined the WAG to maintain intercultural friendship among them by exchanging information about their and their families' conditions; expressing birthday wishes; congratulating each other's achievements of studies or works; congratulating religious celebrations; fundraising for certain events; and coordinating reunions. To maintain their friendship, the WAG members implicitly agreed to an unwritten rule that they must respect each other, be tolerant, and be open-minded. They also agreed that topics related to politics and religion are not allowed to be posted and discussed in the group, except for greetings on religious occasions. In addition, humor that causes unnecessary laughter and pictures and videos that tend to be pornographic or demeaning to women should not be posted in the group. The discussion about football also should not be too deep to avoid fanaticism with certain teams or players which might result in division or enmity between the group members.

**Keywords:** Social media, WhatsApp Group, intercultural friendship

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## Introduction

Multiculturalism is often perceived as a challenge in communication processes. Social media can make it possible to communicate and maintain relations among people from different cultural backgrounds. Social media assist people across the world in communication, sharing knowledge, learning different experiences, interacting with each other, and socializing. In addition, social media could support people who face diverse cultural experiences to increase their intercultural adaptation (Zaw, 2018). Social interaction through social media has become an increasingly developing phenomenon. People use social media for various purposes. Individuals and communities use social media to communicate, interact with each other, collect and share information, and, in certain cases, collaborate for projects (Boyd, 2009). Social media which can be used both on mobile phones and computers turns communication into an interactive dialogue (Baruah, 2012).

Nowadays, access to social media has become everyone's primary need. This is because every individual needs information, entertainment, education, connection with others, and access to knowledge from different parts of the world (Nasrullah, 2018). One of the social media applications that provide interaction facilities in a group is WhatsApp. WhatsApp is the world's leading social media application as it is used in 109 out of 187 countries based on the research by SimilarWeb or 55.6% of the world. Many countries in South America, Europe, Africa, Oceania, and Asia use WhatsApp, including Indonesia, other ASEAN countries, and Japan (Schwartz, 2016). Shahid stated that WhatsApp application has been successfully used by people around the world. WhatsApp

is found beneficial to ease communication in different groups and organizations, and it is cost-effective (Shahid, 2018). Currently, communication via smartphone messaging applications, such as Line, Instagram, and WhatsApp has gained increasing popularity among users in Asian countries. These social media applications have made new opportunities for communication among people from different countries with different cultural backgrounds. As a result, intercultural communication is unavoidable.

Intercultural communication is defined as communication between people from different cultures, races, ethnicity, and socio-economy (Tubbs & Moss, 2008). Culture is a fluid concept which always changes, it is part of life, it reflects our knowledge, tradition, and lifestyle that are socially acquired (Hybels & Weaver, 2009). In the process of intercultural communication, culture should not be seen merely as customs. Culture includes the exchange of perceptions about oneself and others, perceptions, and attitudes towards an object such as space, time, environment, people, or relationships with others (Liliweri, 2013). Hall stated that culture becomes part of communication behavior, and in turn, communication also determines, maintains, develops, or inherits culture (Mulyana, 2011). Communication and culture are two components that are inseparable because communication is a representation of culture itself, meanwhile, culture is what governs communication. Culture, however, is dependent on the area where it comes from. This means that every area has a different culture, causing different ways of communicating from one area to another.

Many studies on the use of social media in intercultural communication have been

carried out. Previous studies discussed the positive and negative effects of social media use on society. The positive effects of using social media include sharing knowledge, updating one's condition, socializing, and learning from various sources. The negative effects include cyber harassment, hacking, fraud, and scams. Social media, without much of a stretch, can destroy somebody's prestige and the social image just by making an untrue story and spreading it over online networking, prompting fixation. Spending endless hours on social purposes can occupy the concentration and consideration from a specific errand (Akram & Kumar, 2017).

People use WhatsApp not only for exchanging information, but also for entertainment, and staying in contact with friends and family (Malka, Ariel, & Avidar, 2015). WhatsApp maintains both one-on-one personal relations and memberships in social groups (Church & de Oliveira, 2013). However, some of the negative effects that WhatsApp users have recognized are the normative expectations for immediate replies, continuous connectivity, and the interruptions that this may create (Karapanos, Teixeira, & Gouveia, 2016). A person's motivation to join a particular group or community in WhatsApp Group can be seen from Abraham Maslow's motivational theory and Thibaut and Kelley's social exchange theory (1959). Motivation is a factor that drives individuals to do certain activities to achieve goals. In other words, every activity carried out by an individual has driving factors. The driving factor of someone to do a certain activity, in general, is because of the needs or desires of that person.

Maslow developed the theory of the need hierarchy to explain the human need levels. His need hierarchy theory stated that

people are motivated by five levels of need, namely: (1) Physiological need (2) Safety need (3) Love and belonging need (4) Esteem and prestige need (5) Self-actualization need. Two additional levels of need, namely (6) Understanding need and (7) Aesthetic need, were later included in Abraham Maslow's need hierarchy. Social groupings, associations, affiliations, and belongings which are based on love are needed to enhance harmonious human co-existence in various social settings (Aruma & Hanachor, 2017). Social grouping like WhatsApp Group could be one of the ways to maintain love and belonging need as a part of group members. This aspect involves emotional relationships such as friendship, intimacy, and family. Every individual needs a sense of belonging and a feeling of being accepted (a sense of acceptance). They also need feelings to be loved by other people.

Social exchange theory states that basically people view their relationships in an economic context and they calculate the sacrifice and compare it with the rewards obtained by continuing that relationship. Sacrifice (cost) is an element of a relationship that has a negative value for someone. For example, feeling depressed and tense. Rewards are elements in a relationship that have positive values. The social exchange perspective holds that people calculate the overall value of a relationship by subtracting its sacrifice from the reward received. Wood stated that the net outcome of relationship (O) is determined by subtracting costs (C) from rewards (R),  $O = R - C$  (Wood, 2004). Costs can be money, time, effort, etc. Rewards are the factors of a relationship that have positive values. Rewards can be in the sense of acceptance, support, and companionship, etc.). The Social Exchange Theory (SET)

argues that people calculate the overall Worth (Profit) of a particular relationship by subtracting its costs from the rewards it provides. If the worth is a positive number, it is a positive relationship. On the contrary, a negative number indicates a negative relationship. The worth of a relationship influences its outcome, or whether people will continue with a relationship or terminate it. Positive relationships are expected to endure, whereas negative relationships will probably terminate (Shahsavarani et al., 2016).

Alumni of the Ship for Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Program (SSEAYP) use WhatsApp Group as a means for communication. SSEAYP is one of the youth exchange programs carried out by the government of Japan with the active participation and cooperation of ten Southeast Asian countries including Indonesia. The program aims to promote friendship and mutual understanding among the youths of Japan and ten Southeast Asian countries, broaden their perspective on the world, and strengthen their spirit of international cooperation and practical skills for international collaboration (SII, 2016).

The alumni of SSEAYP went back to their countries upon completion of a 2.5-month program. It is not easy to have a face to face interpersonal communication. Before social media exist, the alumni used a mailing list on email for communication and maintain relations. Communication via email is no longer used since social media like Facebook was launched. The alumni use several social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Line, and WhatsApp. Among the social media applications, most alumni of SSEAYP choose WhatsApp Group as a medium of communication other than

Facebook and email. WhatsApp Groups were formed by every batch with members from all participating countries to facilitate communication.

The purpose of this research is to analyze the reason why the alumni joined the WhatsApp group as well as the advantages of joining the group based on their perspectives. Some alumni were however found to have left the group, the author attempts to find out their reason for leaving since there must be reasons behind one's wish to stay and to not stay in the group. In addition, the author attempts to find out things that are allowed to be posted and things that are not expected to be in the WhatsApp Group since every WA group usually has both written and unwritten rules that every member must comply with.

## Method

This research used a case study approach with observation, in-depth interviews, and qualitative analysis to gain insights from SSEAYP alumni's perspectives on the use of WhatsApp Group in maintaining intercultural friendship among them. The purpose of qualitative research is not to formulate general statements but explore specific social contexts to achieve a better understanding of specified social settings. That is why the qualitative sample is picked selected purposively (Mulyana, 2013).

Case studies are used as a comprehensive explanation relating to various aspects of a person, a group, an organization, a program, or a social situation studied, sought, and analyzed as deeply as possible. There are 80 SSEAYP alumni of batch '89 from ASEAN countries and Japan who joined the WhatsApp group (WAG). A semi-structured interview

was conducted to explore the topic more openly, allowing interviewees to express their opinion and ideas in their own sentences.

Yin's case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates phenomena in real life, where boundaries between phenomena and contexts do not appear explicitly so that multiple sources of data as evidence can be utilized (Yin, 2008). As an inquiry, case studies do not have to be done for a long time and do not have to depend on ethnographic data or participant observation. In fact, according to Yin, researchers can conduct valid and quality case studies without leaving the literature, depending on the topic observed (Yin, 2008). This research was carried out from March to August 2019. The data needed for this study were primary and secondary data. The primary data were collected by observing the WhatsApp Group contents and in-depth interviews with the subjects of the study. Meanwhile, the secondary data of this research were collected from literature study by looking for various references consisting of scientific journals, books, and the results of relevant previous researches.

The informants of this research are multilingual and multicultural. The researcher sent similar questions to all members of the WhatsApp Group. However, there were only 20 people responded to the questions, the members from the countries with fewer responses confirmed that their answers could represent their colleagues. The 20 informants are Indonesian (6), Bruneian (4), Singaporean (3), Malaysian (3), Philippines (2), and Japanese (2). All informants speak English, however, they speak their national language when they turn to their peers. Indonesian alumni use the Indonesian language in everyday communication;

Bruneian, Malaysian, and Malay Singaporeans speak Malay; the Filipinos speak Tagalog, and Japanese people speak Japanese. They also have different cultural backgrounds namely traditions, habits, values, norms, and religions. There are alumni who are Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and adherents to other faiths.

Table 1. List of Informants

Country	Number	Male	Female
Indonesia	6	2	4
Brunei	4		4
Singapore	3		3
Malaysia	3		3
Philippines	2		2
Japanese	2		2
Total	20	2	18

Resource: Researcher, 2019

An interview was done focusing on the experiences of SSEAYP alumni from Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Japan, Singapore, Philippines, in using the WhatsApp Group. Data validation techniques using source triangulation were utilized. The data analysis techniques adopted by the researchers went through 4 stages, namely starting from the stage of providing data, data reduction or selection, data display or presentation, and making conclusions. The data analysis is idiographic rather than nomothetic, whose results will not be quantified and will not be generalized (Mulyana, 2013). In the context of this study, the results were not generalized to all SSEAYP alumni spread throughout the world.

In this study, the researcher is a member of the SSEAYP alumni. The challenge as an insider-researcher is that sometimes the researcher is provoked into giving the researcher's personal opinion when



the informants present an explanation. The researcher tries to be a good listener and refrains from including the subjective opinion of the researcher when the informant expresses his/her opinion. To avoid misinterpretation, researchers confirm and validate the answers or explanations given by the informants.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Reasons to Join the WhatsApp Group**

The WhatsApp Group of the alumni of SSEAYP Batch '89 was formed in 2013 as a medium of communication. The purpose of creating the group is to maintain the friendship; share their and their family's conditions; congratulate birthdays and wedding anniversaries; share achievement in studies or works; send invitations of various events, and coordinate occasions/events such as big or small reunions. Small group reunions usually consist of at least five alumni coming from one to two countries. Big group reunions are annual gatherings attended by more alumni coming from more than two countries. The name of the group was changed several times to focus on big group reunions, for example, it was once named "Tokyo21-24Nov2019" to remind all members that they planned to hold a big reunion in Tokyo on those dates.

There are 80 people out of 245 alumni (30%) who joined the WhatsApp Group. Based on the conversation in the group, it was found that some alumni do not have a WhatsApp account, some others do but they choose not to join the group for some reasons, like being busy, the incompatible operating system of the mobile phones, and they have

had too many social media such as Facebook, Line, and Instagram.

Based on observations from March to August 2019, the WhatsApp Group was quite active. This is indicated by the messages sent to the group daily, there were always greetings and saying of good morning when starting the day. The greetings are usually in the form of posters added with quotations and motivational or encouraging words.

The greetings were usually replied to with the same forms of greetings and sometimes only with emoticons. The messages sent were usually to congratulate fellow members who have birthday, achievements, success, promotion, graduation, including the success of their family members. Other messages sent, and usually received lots of response, were old photos from the program they had involved and experienced during or after the SSEAYP program. Although the memories of the program are often discussed they still receive a great appreciation from the group members.

The alumni are familiar with the culture of the people from ASEAN countries and Japan resulted from their direct interaction during the youth exchange program (SSEAYP) and online communication through social media after the program. During the program, they interacted and communicated with each other in various activities. For example, they were divided into groups whose members came from various countries of ASEAN and Japan. They understand each other's religions, habits, norms, lifestyles, and traditions. Their experience in the SSEAYP gave them the knowledge and skills needed to build intercultural communication skills.

*"I believe all members of the group have a good understanding of each other's culture. So, we have known how to communicate with each other." (J, Indonesian)*

*"Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia have quite a similar culture ... for me, it's just Malay (Melayu). I don't think we have a big problem with other cultures like Japanese culture, Thai culture...we interacted, learned, we understood, ..." (R, Bruneian).*

The mastery of the English language and cultural understanding of the group member is the key to successful intercultural communication. These conditions are consistent with Schram's statements about the field of experience and the frame of reference. According to Wilbur Schramm in (Ruben & Stewart, 2013) without similarities in the field of experience in common language, background similarity, cultural similarity, and so on, there is little opportunity for communicators to understand the message conveyed. Schramm added that the field of experience is an important factor in communication. If the communicator's experience field is the same as the communicant's experience field, the communication will take place smoothly. Conversely, if the communicant's experience field is not the same as the communicator's experience field, difficulties will arise to understand each other. In other words, the bigger the area of the shared knowledge (frame of reference) and experience (field of experience) among people, the more likely the information or messages be interpreted by them. Conversely, the narrower the area of similarity, the lower the accuracy of the messages being interpreted.

The members join the WhatsApp group with quite similar motivation or reasons. The alumni want to communicate with their fellows; know their updates; get new

knowledge; broaden their network; help to reconnect lost friends; give the feeling of talking to each other face to face in a borderless world; stay in touch with old SSEAYP buddies; share nostalgic memories of SSEAYP, and keep their SSEAYP spirit (through sharing old photos captured during the program); connect with SSEAYP buddies who share similar interests or those in the same professional areas; aware of the alumni's activities/projects in their countries. The WhatsApp Group is an effective tool for organizing reunions.

*"We can meet our SSEAYP friends that we don't meet for a long time in social media; a chat in WhatsApp Group is like we meet in person; support each other. (L, Indonesian)"*

The alumni stated that the friendship forged during that longship journey was allowed to keep going until now and hopefully in the years to come.

*"I don't think that cultural differences blocked that friendship, rather, the continued communication which was made possible by social media allowed the friendship to flourish. It as well allowed us to get to know and accepted each other as unique people. (IB, the Philippines)*

Through the WhatsApp Group, the alumni can share a lot of useful information such as greetings, wishing, encouraging each other, etc., some news is related to happiness and some are related to sadness. Referring to Maslow's needs hierarchy theory, the motivation of the WAG is related to love and belonging needs. They share a feeling of being accepted (a sense of acceptance and feelings to be cared for and loved by other people).

The social exchange theory is also implied. The WAG members felt that they get a positive relationship and promote an intercultural friendship.

## Disadvantages of Joining the WhatsApp Group

Joining a WhatsApp Group has many advantages. However, some alumni stated that sometimes they think they spend too much time responding to many chats because they are worried about missing out on news; sometimes they know what they should not need to know. If alumni cannot manage their time, joining a WhatsApp Group can be an inefficient use of time.

*"Social media including WhatsApp Group can take over our life. (E, Bruneian)*

Some informants stay in the group even though they sometimes feel bored or uncomfortable with the messages or the way of communication of the group members. Referring to the social exchange theory, the members of the WhatsApp Group of SSEAYP '89 join and stay in the group because they get value or rewards. In other words, the advantages are more than disadvantages, or the positives impacts are more than the negative impacts.

*"There are so many emoticons without words posted here and there sometimes... I feel like "stop it ... say something" but later on it just stops." (I, Indonesian)*

*"Once, there were so many messages from certain friends talking about something that I was not involved in it. Well, I just enjoyed reading their conversations and cleared the messages if I didn't want to read them. (E, Indonesian)*

## Topics not to be Posted or Discussed in the WhatsApp Group

There are some topics that the alumni avoid to post or discuss. Things related to religions and politics are the most avoided topics. However, the alumni keep sending greetings during the religious celebration days such as Idul Fitri for Muslims, Christmas

for Christians, Diwali for Hindus, etc.

*"Political issues and other concerns confronting a particular state. It may be perceived as playing safe, but to me, it's more of expressing respect for the nationals being affected or is facing the issue. Often, there are natty grittiest that only a national of that particular state could know the real dynamics. All I would wish however is for a peaceful resolution of the issue and for my friends to be always safe. (IB, Philippines)"*

*"Feel uncomfortable to see especially dirty jokes. Also, too frequent posting of so-called funny videos and news." (C, Japanese)*

Jokes, pornographic images and videos, and humiliating images and videos on women only to make unnecessary laughter by men should not be posted. The group members are plural with different beliefs, ethnicities, and religions, so it is expected to avoid sending sacred verses that have been framed by cynical sentences, cornering those with different religious beliefs. In this case, what is expected by the members is in line with what is conveyed in the Qur'an that one of the characteristics of a believer is being able to leave vain actions solely. These vain deeds are not blessed by Allah SWT. Allah SWT said "and those who distance themselves from (actions and words) are useless," (Al-Mu'minun [23]: 3).

Likewise, some members stated that the status uploaded or posted on the WhatsApp group shows his/her personality. Therefore, from the observation, it can be seen some members of the WAG appear to be careful in expressing their opinions. There are also members who sometimes only make comments on the group with polite words.

Other than those topics mentioned above, to some extent, posting and discussing football games is rather to be avoided because it can trigger fanaticism. People who are fanatical



about soccer, for example, sometimes don't see the true value around them, but they do instead of moving only in their own way.

*"I love football games but it's better not to discuss our preference or favorite team in the group. I still remember how one member defended his favorite players and after that the other member was getting quiet..." (J, Indonesian)*

### **Why Some Members Left the WhatsApp Group**

The alumni are from different countries, races, religions, and ethnicity meaning that all the alumni should respect each other. However, some not respectful cases occurred. For example, because of some alumni's habits and attitudes, videos, information, and pictures that are not related and connected to other alumni were posted in the group. These might build up negative feelings such as disagreement and sensitivity among members of the group. As a result, some members left the group.

Based on observation, 4 members left the group during the research period without stating any reasons in the group before leaving, they just left. When they were interviewed to find out the reasons, they revealed their reasons. One member left the group because once the group was very much focused on certain event coordination, namely reunion, those who did not join the event felt like outsiders. Another member left the group because he had had many groups already and he felt the group was not that urgent to be joined. The third member stated that she left the group temporarily because she had to focus on other things. The fourth member left the group because she felt ignored, no one responded to her when she asked for information. Those honest reasons were never mentioned in the group to avoid

arguments. Eventually, the members rejoined the group.

Peers from the same country play an important role to make the members stay in the group.

*"When I left the group, my friend asked me to join it again. She told me no hard feeling just enjoy the friendship and remember our nostalgic moment when we were in the program" (J, Indonesian)*

The members of the group agreed that the members discuss good things with ethics and mutual respect. It is expected that all the members of the group have respect for each other's availability to respond to messages, as at times people may be busy and unable to respond immediately for being engaged at work or family.

### **Limitations**

Like all other studies, this research has some limitations that might affect the findings' perception. The ratio of female to male informant sample is 5:1. It could skew the results by showing more variance in female compared to the male. Perhaps, the sample quota for females and males should be equal to ensure that we don't get gender differences as a result of an uneven number. Researchers could benefit from the findings of this research as a basis to develop or improve tools for capturing the complexity of social media use. Finally, the fact that the data collected for this study of WhatsApp Group was limited to SSEAYP alumni '89, should be taken into consideration. Investigating only SSEAYP alumni's WhatsApp Group usage might not wholly explain the electronic social networking behavior in general. Future researchers are strongly encouraged to attempt to replicate these results by analyzing users of different social media platforms

(e.g. Facebook, Instagram, etc.) separately to account for the various features they offer.

## CONCLUSION

From the analysis above, it can be concluded that WhatsApp Group has an important role in maintaining intercultural communication and friendship. The members which are the alumni of The Ship for Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Program Batch '89 have their own motivation to join the WhatsApp Group. Their motivation was driven by the advantages they get from the group. Principally, the alumni want to maintain intercultural friendship among the members of the group by sharing knowledge, experiences, and happy moments. However, some members left the group mostly because they felt uncomfortable, being ignored, and already had too many groups. The topics should not be posted or discussed in the WhatsApp Group are pornographic images or videos, religious issues, politics, and football game. It is recommended that if they want to discuss something exclusively, a personal message or exclusive group should be made. The WhatsApp Group of SSEAYP should respect, be tolerant, be open-minded, and be empathetic to the uniqueness of group members.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was supported by the Faculty of Business and Social Science, the University of Amikom Purwokerto. Also, I appreciate the members of the WhatsApp Group of SSEAYP alumni for all their support and information for this research.

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