

## Social Media and ‘*Silaturrahim*’

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### Abstract

This research identifies the ‘*silaturrahim*’ relationships in social media engagement among Diaspora communities. Particular focus is given to Malaysians overseas, and their ways of communication with their families, community/society, and friends or acquaintances, in the country they are currently residing as well as their country of origin. Moreover, the research looked at the relationships of Malaysians overseas with other Malaysians who are staying abroad, while continuing the tradition of ‘*silaturrahim*’ relationships in forming a positive culture online. In addition, this research seeks to create a deeper understanding of ‘*silaturrahim*’, and how ‘*silaturrahim*’ has become a good online culture among Malaysians, particularly the Malays. Apart from that, it investigates how the actions of ‘*silaturrahim*’ relationships, which are practised physically, can be translated as part of online communication activities and identifies other elements that show closeness in the ‘*silaturrahim*’ culture. The research is carried out using a qualitative research approach, combining two methods, namely; in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. It involves a wide range of respondents’ who possess Malaysians background and live abroad, to obtain their insights on the ‘*silaturrahim*’ culture in social media, as well as their primary purpose of using social media. This study is expected to contribute in the cultural studies, communication and the social media fields, especially in understanding the ‘*silaturrahim*’ culture, not only limited to physical involvement, but also its ability to enhance a positive non-physical communication culture. These findings are useful for increasing these of social media as a platform of maintaining or improving a ‘*silaturrahim*’ culture and for establishing a positive communication culture among the Diaspora community.

**Keywords:** Social media, culture, relationships, communication, Diaspora society

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## **Introduction**

Communication is an essential human need and therefore, people are continuously discovering methods for addressing this need. New Media has turned into a necessary mode for communication around the globe. In this regard, latest types of individual media, discussion and movements have the advantage of being anything but as their usage is difficult, therefore complex innovation should not be done (Oh et al., 2013).

With the presence of new communication technology, Internet has become the most popular means of communication around the world (Hvass & Munar, 2012). Because of migration, communication technologies have influenced the way immigrants communicate with their family in their country of origin. Social media is seen as a crucial medium of communication and plays a huge role in strengthening the '*silaturrahim*'. Hence, modern technology helps people to maintain a more timely and efficient communication (Siapera 2014; Espinosa 2016). Research has shown that social media can increase human well-being when living in a different country (Ko et al., 2015).

It is important to notice that the main objective of this study is to understand how the use of social media affects the '*silaturrahim*' or bond among Malaysians all over the world.

## **Literature review**

As suggested by Kaur Kapoor et al. (2017), social media is a convergence culture which translates into a participatory culture, media convergence and collective intelligence. Under all these parameters, social media was developed.

In addition to that, social media indicates all sorts of media through which users can be involved virtually by means of Internet sources. Among the popular social media in the years of 2000 are YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, and the Messenger (YM, IM, AOL, and Meebo). From a different view, Fuchs (2017) added that social media should not only be seen as a platform that shows users' profiles, friends, comments and offers private messaging since social network sites vary greatly in their features and user interface. Some have photo-sharing or video-sharing capabilities; while others have built-in blogging and instant messaging technology (Fuchs, 2017).

With the development of technology and in response to people's needs, networks are primarily used on mobile nowadays (e.g. WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter), while there are also some web-based social network sites that support limited mobile interaction (e.g. Facebook, Blogs).

As social network sites are often designed to be widely accessible, people who share the same interest tend to make connections through these platforms. For example, typically people of the same nationality, age, or education level tend to group themselves together, creating a segmented society, which is not what the original intention of the designers was (Lindsay & Krysik, 2012; Junco, 2012).

## ***Social network for socialization***

Among many of the social scholars, the online and offline connection relations have been a key debate. Dunbar (2016), showed that personal connection formed offline are sturdier than those made online. This is what we also support: offline connections are not seen by social media user as a take-over for real connections and companionships. Karapanos et al. (2016) demonstrate that social media in the US are utilized to create social connections and maybe a constructive power of the individuals who generally have weak ties with other individuals on the social media platforms they use.

### ***Social media and migrants***

The advancement in the latest technology has resulted in convenient communication with different space and time zones. For instance, new technology enables migrants to remain associated with their family and companions at home. They utilize Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google+, YouTube, WeChat (Weixin), WhatsApp and Line on cell phones, tablets and computers (Jia et al., 2015).

By the examination of photographs and interviews conducted in the study of Jia et al. (2015), it was found that a group of Chinese immigrants in Australia has created online social media groups, with the help of most prevalent Chinese visiting applications WeChat or Weixin. It began with the members from China who made a group and started sharing knowledge with other Chinese inside the groups. The common information was mostly regarding their lives in Australia and exclusive updates, along with everyday knowledge and experience (Jia et al. 2015).

### ***Social media and 'silaturrahim.'***

According to a study carried out by Hussain et al. (2015) the term '*silaturrahim*' (fortified bonding by the Muslims), used by the Malays, is not only referred to as their culture, but it has huge importance among them as it is claimed by their Islamic religion. The Malay community and the '*silaturrahim*' relationships are inseparable, because it is a very close connection, and it does not distinguish groups and levels on the basis of age or rank. This '*silaturrahim*' bond is actually the one that can enhance the strength of a relationship. '*Silaturrahim*' in family relations of Malay community is very important because it brings about significant outcomes, not only in the preservation of religion but also in the enhancement of political, economic and educational systems (Ahmad et al. 2014; Hussein et al. 2015).

The '*silaturrahim*' Malay society is often associated with the culture that has been practised through generations. Some of the essence of the '*silaturrahim*' relationship is not only understood by the Malays, but also by other different racial communities in Malaysia, who are also practicing this kind of relationship, especially in the rural areas and the villages (Omar et al. 2014; Pratiwi 2014; Sheau Shi & Baharudin 2015).

Looking at it from the Malaysian context, social media can be described as the main platform to strengthen the '*silaturrahim*'. For instance, in planning important events such as weddings or big feasts, social media such as WhatsApp is used as an important means of communication (Salman et al. 2013). Distance and time difference are no longer a constraint for effective discussions (Mohamed & Saodah Wok, 2015).

Malaysians tend to use social media as a means of social engagement, and they want to be known as part of the new media literate by their peers or other citizens 'groups. Warren et al. (2014) mentioned that participating in the social media is a way of how people can enhance their skills and knowledge, by becoming Internet savvy. Socializing would not be exempt from the concept of '*silaturrahim*'. Presently, '*silaturrahim*' can be inculcated in several ways. These ways might include visiting, messaging, associating by means of phone, writing a letter, sending an email and many more. Moreover, it facilitates people making new companions or looking for old friends who they might not have seen for quite a while (Bruns, 2015).

### **Theoretical framework**

This qualitative research combines two methods, namely in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. It was designed according to the theories proposed by Ormston et al. (2014), Silverman (2016), Jafari and Scott (2014), as well as Krueger and Casey (2014). More precisely, as proposed by Steward and Shamdasani (2015), the use of focus group offers a number of benefits, which include the ability to animate new thoughts and inventive ideas; determine the potential for issues with respect to a new term, item, administration or project and create impressions of items or different objects of intrigue. In this regard, the research of Liamputtong (2011) provides that the purpose of the focus group is to identify the details of the frequency and purpose of usage of social media among Malaysians who live abroad.

### **Methodology**

This research is based on a number of focus group discussions that were held to gain insights into the respondents pertaining to the subject under examination (Krueger & Casey, 2014). These discussions were carried out to identify the impact that social media has on the connection between native Malaysians, residing in the United Kingdom. A total number of six sessions by four to five respondents were held, led by the researcher as a moderator. Each session lasted approximately ninety minutes and took place at convenient for the respondents venues. The research included respondents from different age groups, ranging from 17 to 60 years old and above. These respondents were students, professionals, and community leaders, with temporary and permanent residence in the United Kingdom. The selection of respondents was made with the help of 'purposeful sampling'. A focus group is an immensely useful tool in carrying out qualitative research (Silverman, 2016). It helped the researcher meeting the research objectives, pertaining to the understanding regarding the role of social media in the development and enhancement of bonding among residents of Malaysia and those who are residing abroad (Ormston et al., 2014).

This paper is based on a discussion involving four female respondents and five male respondents. Opportunity sampling was utilized to identify respondents through the researcher's networks. At first, only three female respondents were willing to become part of the discussion. However, one of the female respondents (respondent D) invited her friend just to become a listener but later she managed to convince her friend (respondent C) to participate in the discussion. This increased the number of female respondents from three to four. The other five male respondents were easy to gather at one location the same time. This gave the opportunity to the researcher (as an interviewer) and moderator to have the discussion without hesitation. All nine respondents were unknown to the researcher. Female respondents were grouped as four in which Respondent A was 23 years old and was an undergraduate student from Queen Mary University, while Respondent B was a 28-year-old law postgraduate student from the University of Cambridge; Respondent C was a 25-year-old pharmacist from Derby, and Respondent D was a 30 years old optometrist residing in Bournemouth. The average age of the participants was 26.5 years. On the other hand, male respondents were grouped as five in which Respondent A was 29 years old from London; Respondent B was 32 years old from Cardiff; Respondent C was 30 years old from St. Andrew, Scotland; Respondent D was 35 years old from Hull; and Respondent E was 35 years old from Newcastle. The summary of their demographic data is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic data of the respondents

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Place of residence in the UK</b>	<b>Ethnic group and state of origin in Malaysia</b>	<b>Social Media Platform</b>
A	25	Female	Queen Mary	Bumiputra (Sarawak)	Facebook WhatsApp YouTube
B	28	Female	Cambridge	Malay (Kelantan)	Facebook
C	23	Female	Derby	Malay (Kedah)	Facebook Instagram Snapchat Twitter Blogs YouTube
D	30	Female	Bournemouth	Malay (Johore)	Facebook WhatsApp Snapchat Instagram Twitter

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Place of residence in the UK</b>	<b>Ethnic group and state of origin in Malaysia</b>	<b>Social Media Platform</b>
A	29	Male	London	Malay (Penang Island)	Facebook WhatsApp YouTube
B	32	Male	Cardiff	Malay (Penang Island)	Facebook PSN*
C	30	Male	St. Andrew, Scotland	Malay (Kedah)	Facebook WhatsApp Instagram
D	35	Male	Hull	Malay (Terengganu)	Facebook WhatsApp Instagram PSN*
E	35	Male	Newcastle	Malay (Selangor)	WhatsApp Instagram Twitter

\* PSN = Play Station Networking

*Procedure*

The discussion was conducted at a placereferred by the respondents. The purpose of interviewing the respondents on their preferred location was to make them comfortable while answering the questions (Jafari & Scott, 2014). Before the discussion, the researcher explained to all the respondents the research purpose. After obtaining the respondents’ written consent, the researcher began the discussion with the first question. The direction of the discussion depended on the respondents’ answer regarding their involvement in the social media while living abroad, and the way their communication enhanced the ‘*silaturrahim*’. The researcher maintained her role as a facilitator and did not propose prompt answers to the respondents. The discussion lasted seventy-two minutes and was video/audio-recorded in order to facilitate the transcription as well as the analysis of data. The questions that were used to guide the discussion were organized into two broad sections:

- i. Attitude towards the involvement in social media
- ii. Attitudes towards maintaining ‘*silaturrahim*.’

Table 2 The semi-structured questions that guide the focus group discussion

Number	Questions
1	How many social media accounts do you have and what are they?
2	What is the main purpose of using these accounts?
3	What is your understanding of the term ‘ <i>silaturrahim</i> ’ or bond? What are your views regarding online ‘ <i>silaturrahim</i> ’ (could you elaborate that please? Do you think that ‘ <i>silaturrahim</i> ’ began with the emergence of social media?) (Has your bond with family members and friends improved because of social media, why/why not?) (Do you think that physical interaction is more important in maintaining ‘ <i>silaturrahim</i> ’?)
4	Do you find that social media helps in creating or maintaining relationships and social bonding with people back home? What is the situation of your relationship in your current country of residence? With other Malaysians who settled abroad?
5	How can physical activities such as <i>gotong-royong</i> , <i>ziarah</i> , <i>rewang</i> , <i>ngeteh</i> , and so on be practised with social media? (if they even can be practised)
6	In your view, what platform of social media are the most contributing to ‘ <i>silaturrahim</i> ’ or bond? Why?
7	How can Malaysians maintain the ‘ <i>silaturrahim</i> ’ culture by leveraging social media?

### Data analysis and discussion

In this research, a thematic analysis (TA) was used to extract key information from this focus group discussion that helped in the formation of key themes. The reason for using thematic analysis is that its hypothetical view considers a very adaptable methodology in blending show and idle parts of the collected information (Braun et al., 2019). At this point, it gives a far-reaching record of respondent’s viewpoints on the considered experience. TA of the data collected from the four respondents led to the identification of the key themes as outlined in table 3. Two main themes were identified together with a number of subthemes for each main theme.

A number of themes have emerged from the thematic analysis, and are presented with original extracts from the participants’ responses in order to ensure the transparency of the discussion. The key themes have been divided into two main categories. Each of the themes accounts for different research objectives accordingly.

Table 3 List of themes and subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequency of use</li> <li>• Purpose of use</li> </ul>
‘ <i>Silaturrahim</i> ’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining the term</li> <li>• Online ‘silaturrahim.’</li> <li>• Popular social media accounts</li> </ul>

#### i. Attitude towards involvement in the Social Media

##### *Frequency of use*

The frequency of social media use among Malaysians increases day by day. All the respondents shared their experience according to the number of times they logged in their social media accounts on a regular basis. In this regard, female respondents A and B shared the same opinion of using social media multiple times a day. Whereas, respondents C and D provided that they use social media when they feel the need of using it. On the other hand, there are two male respondents A and B who used to participate actively in online games (PSN) to connect with their family and friends in Malaysia while respondents C, D and E use other different social media platforms for communication:

Table 4 (i) Frequency of use (Female discussion group)

Subtheme	Female Respondents
Frequency of use	<p><i>"I log in to my social media account multiple times a day during the weekdays, but on the weekend I increase my involvement with social media,"</i> Respondent A</p> <p><i>"I agree with respondent A, but for me...I log in around four to five times daily even in the weekend,"</i> Respondent B</p> <p><i>"Most of the time I rely on direct conversations with my family through phone calls and I only log in to my Facebook page at least once or twice a week,"</i> Respondent C</p> <p><i>"I log in to my social media account during weekends only, and it takes me about three to five times to take a peek in my Instagram and my Facebook account on both Saturday and Sunday,"</i> Respondent D</p>

Table 4 (ii) Frequency of use (Male discussion group)

Subtheme	Male Respondents
Frequency of use	<p><i>"The most frequent social media that I've got connected is PSN,"</i> Respondent D</p> <p><i>"Same with me, I played PSN to get connected with my siblings and friends in Malaysia,"</i> Respondent B</p> <p><i>"Even though I have several other social media accounts but the most frequent social media platform through which I always connect myself is Instagram,"</i> Respondent C</p> <p><i>"Generally, my preference and frequency of use of WhatsApp is high,"</i> Respondent A</p> <p><i>"I use Twitter frequently more than other social media account,"</i> Respondent E</p>

**Purpose of use**

Extracts from the focus group discussion revealed that the main purpose for using social media is for all the respondents to keep themselves well-informed with all the news about the family as well as other related issues back at home(Malaysia):



Table 5 (i) Purpose of use (Female discussion group)

Subtheme	Female Respondents
Purpose of use	<p data-bbox="411 322 1374 353">“I need to know the latest news about my family and my country,” Respondent A</p> <p data-bbox="411 400 1417 472">“I’d like my family to share about their day to day activities since I’m not around,” Respondent B</p> <p data-bbox="411 519 1417 629">“For me, I prefer to only communicate with my parents because they like to know about me here and share about the political situations with me as I am interested in politics of Malaysia,” Respondent C</p> <p data-bbox="411 676 1417 748">“News about family in Malaysia is most important for me since I am too far from them...I get to know what's happening in Malaysia,” Respondent D</p>

Table 5 (ii) Purpose of use (Male discussion group)

Subtheme	Male Respondents
Purpose of use	<p data-bbox="411 934 1417 1043">“The main reason I use social media is that this is the only way to get connected with my family, friends and other acquaintances in Malaysia. To know latest news about my country...right,” Respondent C</p> <p data-bbox="411 1090 1417 1162">“I actively participate in social media because my family need to know everything when I am here...they want to know that I am safe and sound,” Respondent A</p> <p data-bbox="411 1209 1417 1274">“Of course, the main purpose that I actively participate in social media is to get connected; share tips for travellers while travelling and many more,” Respondent E</p> <p data-bbox="411 1321 1417 1393">“My main purpose to get involved with social media is...I can google recipes, and from YouTube, especially Malaysian dishes” Respondent B</p> <p data-bbox="411 1440 1417 1512">“I use social media to connect with family, check with news at home (Malaysia), search and sharing new ideas of anything,” Respondent D.</p>

ii. Attitudes towards maintaining 'silaturrahim.'

**Defining the term**

At first, respondents A, B and D from the female group shared the same opinion and mentioned that 'silaturrahim' could be mainly described as close relationships among family members. Respondents A, B, D and E shared somewhat similar view according to which 'silaturrahim' is defined in Islam as the love between parents, children and other relatives within the same clan. Whereas respondents C of both male and female group shared the similar view for silaturrahim that focussed on relationship with family in addition with neighbours and doing any activities together.

Table 6 (i) Defining the term (Female discussion group)

Subtheme	Female Respondents
Defining the term	<i>"For me, this relationship means love between family members, especially parents, siblings, relatives. In Islam, 'silaturrahim' means brotherhood,"</i> Respondent A
	<i>"I agree with respondent A. However, since Malaysia consists of a multiracial society, it shows that all of us is bonded with this 'silaturrahim',"</i> Respondent B
	<i>"In my opinion, 'silaturrahim' is more about working together, basically 'silaturrahim' does mean as bonding, not only among family members but all the community,"</i> Respondent C
	<i>"Here in the United Kingdom, the only family members that we have now is the Malaysian community. So for living the moment, we only have each other to strengthen our 'silaturrahim'... we cannot deny that the special bonding within our actual family back home is a true 'silaturrahim',"</i> Respondent D

Table 6 (ii) Defining the term (Male discussion group)

Subtheme	Male Respondents
Defining the term	<i>"I believe in Islam, the word 'Silaturrahim' is about the family relationship in our own bloodline...yeah! That's what I can define about it,"</i> Respondent E
	<i>"I agree with what respondent E just said...it is all about family relationship,"</i> Respondent A
	<i>"In a broader context, 'Silaturrahim' is all about relationship no matter you are related towards each other or not, all Muslims are brothers and sisters in Islam',"</i> Respondent D
	<i>"Different people have a different context of defining the 'Silaturrahim' term...we are in modern society nowadays which believes that 'Silaturrahim' is more about muafakat (togetherness), the way we communicate within our community and the way we treat our community,"</i> Respondent B
	<i>"I just understand that the term is more about bonding between you and family,"</i>

*you and your close friends and you with your neighbours,” Respondent C*

**Online ‘silaturrahim.’**

Both female and male respondents gave a different point of view regarding online *silaturrahim* which generated understanding regarding the topic from different angles.

Table 7 (i) Online ‘Silaturrahim’ (Female discussion group)

Subtheme	Female Respondents
Online ‘Silaturrahim’	<i>“The social media nowadays do help in increasing the bonding between me and my family,” Respondent C</i>
	<i>“so for the online ‘silaturrahim’, I think it is good if we only share with those people who are close with us,” Respondent D</i>
	<i>“With this new technology, I see that social media really helps in maintaining family bonding. I never ever felt left out,” Respondent B</i>
	<i>“It is not limited to the connection with our family back home, but here also in the United Kingdom,” Respondent A</i>

Table 7 (ii) Online ‘Silaturrahim’ (Male discussion group)

Subtheme	Male Respondents
Online ‘Silaturrahim’	<i>“communication through social media where we can have the information in no time,” Respondent C</i>
	<i>“Nowadays, ‘silaturrahim’ is not only shaped face-to-face, with the existence of social media, this culture can also be shaped and maintained successfully,” Respondent E</i>
	<i>“I actively use WhatsApp, and I’m sure you’re the other. This is one of the ways we can maintain that relationship, and this reinforces the online ‘Silaturrahim’ as you said,” Respondent D</i>
	<i>“Since the emergence of social media, all relationship or bonding through online we can classify it as online ‘silaturrahim’,” Respondent B</i>
<i>“Yes that is true, and I agree with you (referring to Respondent B), any event or communication discussion through social media can be classified as an online ‘silaturrahim’,” Respondent A</i>	

**Popular Social Media Accounts**

By the collective analysis of the responses given from all respondents, it was observed that female respondents mostly use WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram for maintaining ‘*silaturrahim*’ whereas in male respondents YouTube, PSN, Flickr and twitter are also popular along with above mentioned social media platforms.

Table 8 (i) Popular Social Media Accounts (Female discussion group)

Subtheme	Female Respondents
<i>Popular Social Media Accounts</i>	“I like to use Facebook and WhatsApp the most,” Respondent A
	“I use WhatsApp, Facebook and the Instagram because of their convenience, with these three accounts I can upload pictures and status too,” Respondent C
	“I prefer to use Facebook and Instagram,” Respondent D
	“I only use WhatsApp,” Respondent B

Table 8 (ii) Popular Social Media Accounts (Male discussion group)

Subtheme	Male Respondents
<i>Popular Social Media Accounts</i>	“Most Malaysians actively use Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram,” Respondent A
	“I like online games, so I pick PSN as it is the most popular social media for gamers,” Respondent B
	“Previously, I use Flickr to upload as many pictures as we can, but now, I use Instagram to share pictures and video,” Respondent C
	“I like Twitter and Instagram...well to have long conversation, I use WhatsApp,” Respondent E
	“I like games too, so I actively use my PSN to communicate with other players,” Respondent D

## Conclusion

By the above discussion and as per the definition and interpretation of '*silaturrahim*', provided by the respondents, it is concluded that '*silaturrahim*' is not limited to the relationship among family members but it also includes relationships among different races, as Malaysia is a multiracial country. Acknowledging the existence of online '*silaturrahim*', it has been concluded by the discussion that WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram are the most popular social media platforms. Participants in this study believe that social media has become a platform for enhancing the '*silaturrahim*'. Few limitations have also been identified in this study as the majority of the focus groups respondents are divided based on the same gender. This effect resulted in similar answers and opinions to most of the discussion questions, as respondents agreed with each other most of the times. It was also a challenge to bring them together due to the fact that they were working or studying, with a time constraint. The researcher suggests the involvement of both the genders (mix-genders) in future research. Response from the female participants is usually very much driven by emotions whereas male respondents generally provide more facts.

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