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Research paper

Receiving and Responding to WhatsApp Official Group Messages Among Employees: An Early Interpretation Analysis

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide an initial analysis of the study related to the process of receiving and responding to the WhatsApp official group messages at work. Many previous studies have focused on the usage factors, advantages and disadvantages, as well as the implications of using WhatsApp. But this paper will reveal the interpretation of a small group of employees at Universiti Utara Malaysia of their roles and actions related to WhatsApp official group messages. A total number of five administrative and academic staffs had been involved in this initial study. The results of this initial study will be used to strengthen the interview questions for the next phases of this study - focus groups and in-depth interviews, as well as the development of a questionnaire instrument. This initial study revealed that all Informants have joined at least one WhatsApp official group and have a number of other WhatsApp groups. Three dominant themes emerged and had been interpreted from the data as related to reception and feedback to the WhatsApp messages, namely the reception and message development; the use of appropriate grammar and manners; and the awareness of time value, respect differences, and message impacts to the organization. This study contributes to an understanding of the real situation of the usage of WhatsApp group in an organization where the selected employees are aware that every message they want to share with others may affect their organization.

Keywords: *WhatsApp Group, In-Depth Interview, Delivery Messages, Responding Messages.*

1. Introduction

The domination of technology in the process of disseminating and responding to information in daily activities and work could make all the information is easy to be acquired. Yet, due to this phenomenon, it is also an essential for everyone to maintain the information to be trusted or elude any manipulation of the information to recipient's mind. Indirectly and undoubtedly, the impact of technology on the process of carrying messages, information, and data have also changed the working styles and routines of organizations close to the globe. For instance, nowadays, WhatsApp among the latest new technologies applications has been accepted to become one of the communication channels of receiving and disseminating information of the official and unofficial business information of many organizations. Hence, in order to know how the trend of using WhatsApp as a medium of communication at work can be extremely effective despite all possible problems,

the understanding of the interpretation of the reception and feedback processes among employees towards the WhatsApp usage should be explored.

2. Whatsapp

Many studies have outlined the meanings of WhatsApp applications (i.e. [3], [4], [5]). In short, WhatsApp is a smartphone application that simplifies the process of sending messages in writing, voice messages and voice calls, or video calls. At the same time, various forms of information can be sent to recipients such as pictures, videos, or documents. Dissemination of the information is only permissible if the sender and receiver able to connect and access the Internet from anywhere. Through WhatsApp app, each and every person in the world can communicate either in a form of interpersonal communication or group-based with their social networks or new people in their business environments [8].

Most surveys and discussions related to the WhatsApp usage are widely done among youth, school students, and university students. The scholars have found that the senders and the recipients of the WhatsApp messages can be connected on a real-time basis, and the use of time is more synchronous [1, 14], the information to be sent can be accessed anywhere [7], decision-making process can be executed regardless of distance [6], the roles of an individual as knowledge givers and knowledge takers can be expandable [6], appropriate vocabulary and grammar in writing on social media become an issue if there is no proper training [7], lack of verifying information before share with others [17], and a sense of belonging and community can be created [4, 8, 9].

The studies that were done in the context of organizations found some other effects on the usage of WhatsApp compared to research findings at the schools or university context. The pressures and conflicts occurred over time to employees [9], disruption to employees balance life [10], wasted time during office hours when employees spent more time using WhatsApp [10], and rumors and gossip of WhatsApp groups can cause harassment, slander, and manipulation of information [16] were among of the findings related to the WhatsApp usage in the organizational context.

WhatsApp is seen as a good communication medium in work affairs in Malaysia even though there were "complaints by a group of public servants claiming that the use of the social applications (WhatsApp) has affected the quality of their time with families

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and works time break" [2]. In addition, the Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC) has issued a statement that the organization's actions that provide after-hours work instructions can cause pressure on workers [11]. While in France, their government has made an announcement that employees can ignore any work orders received through any technological applications from employers after office hours [12].

However, it is undeniable that the WhatsApp usage as a means of communication at work has improved collaboration between colleagues and management [1, 14], and strengthening internal communications and assisting the creation of organizational image [14]. It is a trend that brings drastic changes to work styles and communication styles at work worldwide [1]. Many benefits are identified when technologies like WhatsApp are accepted in management, but we are still lack of exposure to understand on how workers interpret the process of delivering and disseminating their messages via WhatsApp.

In order to understand employees actions in leveraging the use of information from WhatsApp, two factors should be emphasized which are the credibility and quality of information and information resources. The source of information that consistently delivers the accurate information gives impact to the acceptance and trust of many people to them and their messages [18, 19]. When a person is consistently disseminating accurate information, the source of information will be able to maintain a good reputation and the information from the sources of information will be recommended to others. In the context of this study, employees should always provide and share accurate information in order to ensure they can be reliable to others and the organization.

Each employee represents their organizations either in terms of speech, writing, or self-presentation. Indirectly, employees should bring and maintain a positive organization's image of all time wherever they are. Therefore, with the existence of social networks accessible via WhatsApp, the framework of workers' understanding in maintaining the organizational image is needed to be monitored or controlled seriously. This is because, in the twinkling of eyes, the written words or speeches recorded by an employee via WhatsApp allow the messages to be spread from him/her to his/her personal social networks. Subsequently, the message may spread to larger groups beyond the reach of his/her social networks.

If the messages indirectly or directly impacted his/her organization, then it may cause trouble to the organization. In other words, third and fourth parties can widely spread or viral the messages that are communicated from the employee. The delivered message may be interpreted by the recipient as representing the organizational voice and it may give a diverse impact on the organization [15]. Therefore, in order to understand the issues discussed, this paper is written to reveal employees interpretations of their activities via WhatsApp that related to their work and organization.

3. Research method

This preliminary study was conducted to understand the process of receiving and responding to WhatsApp messages at work. In this phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with five staffs at Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia (Refer to Table 1.0). All of them are either administrative staffs or academic staffs and practices at least 8 to 19 years of employment. All informants were found to have WhatsApp application which comprises of official and unofficial groups. The official groups were created for obtaining the instructions of the superior and to facilitate the delivery of official information and instructions. Meanwhile, the formations of WhatsApp unofficial groups are for personal purposes involving virtual networks with families, school friends, university mates, and neighbors. The unofficial groups also involve co-workers in the same organization, but discussions are more relaxed - no communication about work affairs.

A total of 20 questions related to the interpretation of messages, information sources, and quality of information, and interpretation of the use of information towards the organization have been developed. Among the questions were, “How do you interpret the messages you received?”, “Do you trust all information you received?”, "What actions you do when responding to the received messages?", and “Have you received messages that were incorrect about your organization? If yes, what did you do?” Each session takes 1 hour 30 minutes to 2 hours 30 minutes. The results of the in-depth interviews were recorded and transcribed for initial analysis, namely familiarizing, coding, and producing dominant themes.

Table 1: The Informants’ Profile

Informant	Gender	Job Position	Years of Employment	Numbers of Formal WhatsApp Group	Numbers of Informal WhatsApp Group
Informant 1	Female	Lecturer	11 years	1	5
Informant 2	Female	Senior Lecturer/ Former Dean	17 years	5	More than 10
Informant 3	Female	Administrative Assistant	16 years	5	4
Informant 4	Male	Administrative Officer	8 years	4	4
Informant 5	Male	Senior Lecturer/ Former Head of Department	19 years	3	8

From the results of this preliminary study, the key questions were strengthened to be carried out in the Second Phase. In the Second Phase, focus-groups and in-depth interviews with larger groups were conducted. Second Phase findings were used for the development of instruments in the Third Phase study. Meanwhile, in the Fourth Phase, field studies will be conducted to establish the WhatsApp policy for the organization. However, for the purpose of this article, only the First Phase findings will be presented.

4. Research findings and discussion

Based on the in-depth interview data, three dominant themes have been identified and will be discussed in this article: a) the reception and message development, b) the use of appropriate grammar and manners, and c) the awareness of time value, respect differences, and message impacts to the organization.

4.1 The reception and message development

The finding of this study reveals that the most important theme emphasized by all Informants was an action when receiving and developing WhatsApp messages. From the interviews, all Informants pointed out that double check and verification of the sender and the source of the information provided are very important. This finding supported Krishan’s work [17]. Analysis has found that if the information obtained is from their management superiors, especially in relation to work instructions, action to assess validity is not necessary.

On the contrary, all other information needs to be confirmed. All Informants explained that double check and verification processes need to be made either through Google, the original website of information, television news, or the third parties. They have stated that the actions to ensure the authenticity of information and the source of information were part of integrity in works.

I need to make sure every information is authentic before sharing with others. We need to double check either with others, television news, or Google. Once we are sure (validity), then we can share the information - Informants 3
Many people do not double check the information they have received and they have shared the information with others without any doubt. Supposedly all general information needs to be verified of the original sources by reading from other official sources and asking others first - Informant 5
The second element in this theme is the content and the form of messages. Every person, especially employee should avoid any sedition and manipulated messages. Among the forms of manipulation are rumors and gossip [16].
All seditious elements cannot be in writing (messages) and cannot be shared. Manipulation may exist in the message if we are not careful - Informants 2

4.2. The use of appropriate grammar and manners

The second most important theme found in this study was the use of grammar and manners when responding or sending messages. The study by Alsaleem has proven that inaccuracies in language and grammatical styles can be trained and bad manners in writing can be reduced [7]. Four Informants explained that accurate interpretation should be made when reading received messages (word messages, videos or voice messages). They explained that manners in language and grammar are so important.
A study by Lim showed that the Malays are deeply concerned about appropriateness and politeness when communicating. Communicator translated their softness and wisdom through their budi bahasa that characterize their characters [20]. Hence, this study found that the senders who fail to highlights the politeness in their written should not happen. For example, Informant 1 described it as follows:

Some people have sent messages, but the language they use makes me misunderstood. The misunderstanding may be caused by grammatical factors. The selection of words and spellings are also not in the dictionary.

Our Malays are actually very polite. But it's different when we write in WhatsApp messages. Where are our manners? Where is our courtesy? We seem do not care about courtesy and manners anymore. For me, I'm very concerned about courtesy and manners in giving messages or responding to others…In addition to proper grammar usage, emoji use is also important. When we choose emoji wrongly, it may cause others to misinterpret the meaning of the emoji. Therefore, we need to make sure emoji is used properly. Emoji is also a language symbol, especially when we use any social media channels - Informant 1

4.3. The awareness of time value, respect differences, and messages impacts to the organization

The third theme that has been gained through the in-depth interviews was the awareness of value and culture aspect. This theme will be divided into three important elements: time awareness, respect differences, sensitive to the messages and its effects to others and the organization.
All Informants have pointed out that awareness of the time was very important. All Informants have also informed that they were getting messages related to work instructions after office hours.
This finding found similar issues with Church and de Oliveira's finding related to interruption of time after office hours [4]. Therefore, they are so hopeful that the organization and their leaders are more concerned about each employee's time and space before they send messages or give messages regarding any work instructions after office hours. For example, Informant 2 described the following,

If I get messages from my office after office hours, I will not answer. It was a problem for me to respond because of the limited Internet data at home. I also have family stuff to take care of. Additionally, information related to the work has always been left in the office; I did not bring work stuff back home. So, when I get into the office, then I respond to those messages - Informants 3

The second element in this theme is awareness to respect the differences between each individual. When each staff respects others and others' differences via WhatsApp conversations, it can encourage the sense of belonging and harmonious working environment [8, 9]. All Informants said this. For example, Informant 2 said as follows,

To maintain a relationship between us, we have to respect the differences of ideology and character of every member in our WhatsApp group. If you felt dissatisfy with someone, so you don't have to send messages and arguments to the group openly. Instead, send personal messages and meet face-to-face. If there is a message in the group that we do not enjoy reading, then we do not need to reply.
We must maintain the spirit of the group and continue to create a sense of belonging - Informants 2

The third element in this theme that has been identified was sensitive to the message and its effect on other parties and also the organizations. All Informants explained that they were aware that they always representing their organization. Therefore, before sending messages to others, they always think about their messages and its effect to their organization.

Do we think before writing? Are our words touching others' feelings? Is our message in line with other people's time? Are we aware of the effect of the messages we write? - Informant 2

Everyone should be aware of it when writing or share information. Whatever is written affects the organization image - Informant 4

I always think prior uploading information and writing office-related matters. I will start writing with thinking "does what is written will affect my organization?". However, many people do not even think of the effects of their writing - Informants 5

Based on the findings of this study, it was found that this small group of employees had their own interpretation of their actions in the use of WhatsApp official group. The credibility of information sources is an important factor for them to believe the messages received [17, 18, 19]. Thus, in order for their message to be trusted, they are also cautious as a source of information.
In addition, this study also found that the correct use of language and sentences is important issues in managing information within the WhatsApp group. Embracing appropriate languages is so important to show the values of politeness of Malays or Malaysians in speaking [20]. At the same time, this study can interpret that the elements of maintaining the harmony and cohesion of the work-groups are so important [4, 8, 9] even though in virtual groups.
This study has found that although in a phase towards the Industrial Revolution 4.0 (IR 4.0), employees still want to maintain social values, especially when using WhatsApp. Therefore, this study provides the basis for future researchers to explore social values that need to be maintained in any professional communication in cyberspace, particularly in the use of technology applications for the organizational tasks.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study have provided a real picture of the interpretation of a small group of employees in the WhatsApp usage in the office, in particular regarding WhatsApp official group.

The results of this study have supported the findings of previous studies which reveal the importance of reviewing received information before sharing it with others. Additionally, unhealthy information such as defamation, manipulation, and harassing others are among the important aspects that need to be evaluated when employees planning to send and reply messages.
Obviously, every employee's action has a direct and indirect impact on their organization. Without constant awareness, education, and training regarding the usage of WhatsApp, organizational staffs may be unaware of damaging the organization's name and image. Therefore, each organization should be willing to create various communication activities related to the WhatsApp usage continuously to all employees or get ready to develop a WhatsApp policy in their respective organizations.

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