

## Choosing a Social Media Platform: Genre and Social Ties in Urban Malaysia

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As mediated interactions using social media and messaging apps become integral to many people's lives, this article examines how urban Malaysians choose between different platforms when communicating with family, friends, and colleagues in everyday life. The concepts of "media switching" and "scalable socialities" offer explanations for platform selection based on social meaning and genre. We build on these using quantitative and qualitative data from an online survey ( $n = 279$ ) and in-depth interviews that showed a predominant use of WhatsApp, while Facebook was more significant for weak ties. In the workplace, an age gap showed over-30s preferring email whereas under-30s preferred WhatsApp, demonstrating processes of remediation. We discuss how different platforms are associated with particular communicative goals and genres relating to social groups. We extend scalable socialities, suggesting that in addition to continuums of privacy and publicness, users also move between different communication platforms based on strength of ties and genre practice.

*Keywords: social media, messaging, Malaysia, genre, social ties, scalable socialities, media switching*

Since the introduction of social network sites (SNS) in the mid-1990s, the relevance of computer-mediated communication to everyday life was recognized (Parks & Floyd, 1996), and the expansion of social media and messaging apps (SMMA) means that "sociability via social media has become a daily ritual" (Schroeder, 2018, p. 98) for large amounts of the world population, raising questions about the use of social media to maintain and develop social ties. In this media saturated "polymedia" environment (Madianou & Miller, 2013), these digital media have become integral parts of the everyday relationships that matter to

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Malaysian individuals and communities. The rapid increase of online mediated interaction has led to the translation and elaboration of genres as practice (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994) that become the forms of online social interaction which influence choices of SMMA (Lüders, Prøitz, & Rasmussen, 2010).

Drawing from a survey and in-depth interviews, this article discusses everyday uses of SMMA in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, twin cities in the most populated part of Malaysia, by focusing on how users make choices between different platforms, the relevance of the strength of social ties, and genre as practice. The widespread use of specific platforms in some national contexts may limit the practicality of choosing between different SMMA (Ling, 2017), and this emphasis on the sociality implicated in choices of SMMA is also reflected by Miller and colleagues (2016), who emphasize how social media are used to extend existing genres of interaction online and over different platforms. Gershon's (2010b) discussion of media switching places greater emphasis on the structures of a medium, arguing that choices are made based on "media ideologies" that develop from interpretations of a medium's structural components and comparisons with other available media (p. 49). This article adds to this ongoing sociotechnological debate with a consideration of how the strength of social ties can be incorporated into a discussion of scalable socialities and looks at the role of the functional limitations of SMMA that users need to navigate around. We highlight the use of the phone number, as both a functional and symbolic component, that influences uses and perceptions of WhatsApp as compared with Facebook.

### **Everyday Life and Social Media in Malaysia**

Parks and Floyd (1996) argue that the social impact of new media usage does not come from its "exotic capabilities" but from its "ordinary, even mundane, social use" (p. 95). Later, Licoppe (2004) discusses how mobile phones were integrated into relationships, particularly through the increased frequency of shorter telephone calls, and asynchronous SMS were also used as a means of maintaining "connected presence." Bakardjieva (2005) uses Schutz and Luckmann to argue that "everyday" uses of technology "alters the structure of users' everyday lifeworlds, including their horizon for action" (p. 38). Schroeder and Ling (2014) look to Weber to emphasize the importance of routines in establishing daily sociality (p. 801), and how these are becoming intertwined with digital media. Thus, the expectations and practices that emerge from everyday uses of social and mobile media have a level of "social facticity [meaning that], at some level, we are coerced to use them" (Ling, 2012, p. 7, emphasis added).

In national contexts, there is often a dominant messaging app where different factors such as early adopters, socioeconomic imperatives, or regulation, may encourage a collective focus on the use of one SMMA (Ling, 2017, pp. 243–244; Ling & Lai, 2016, p. 838). When 20%–30% early users adopt the app, and as they persuade friends, families, and colleagues to join them, the "network effect" (Vaidhyanathan, 2011, p. 19) occurs, whereby the incentive to join a platform increases as more peers or relevant others join. Attaining this level of use "indicates that [it] has a core of users, is technically sound, economically accessible, and that it can support communicative needs" (Markus, 1987, as cited in Ling, 2017, p. 254). When it reaches a critical mass of more than 80%, it becomes a dominant messaging platform, the use of which becomes necessary to participate in "the flow of social interaction" (Ling, 2017, p. 245) that flows through it.

In some circumstances, legislative decisions based on national priorities explain the predominant use of particular platforms, such as WeChat in China which has flourished in the absence of prohibited American SNS. Discussions of the early adoption of SMS in the Philippines show the importance of cost and the practicality of asynchronous communication in a poor infrastructure context (Rafael, 2003), and the introduction of the “Free Basics” service that provides Facebook access—including Messenger as well as selected websites—for free, likely explains the predominant use of Facebook Messenger there (Hootsuite, 2019). Cultural/aesthetic factors can also play a role, and Ohashi, Kato, and Hjorth (2017) have argued that the “stamp function . . . an advanced form of *emoji*” (p. 5, emphasis in original) have been key to the success of LINE, the dominant messaging app in Japan. Yoon (2016) argues that Western concepts of selfhood and an emphasis on individualism tend to shape debates on the uses of social media and social network sites, and contrasts this with the concept and practice of *jeong*—a Korean form of sociality that conceptualizes relations in terms of affective closeness and family ties and finds expression in uses of SMMA. Miller and associates (2016) see social media use developing along both national–cultural axes, as well as localized social groups. Thus, in England, Twitter is used by secondary school children for banter, and by adults for professional reasons, to catch up on news, or other reasons (Miller, 2016, pp. 32–37).

Outside of situations like in China, it is difficult to pinpoint why a specific messaging or social media app becomes established, and historical contingency means that once it becomes predominant, later users have little choice in the matter. The early take-up of SMS in Malaysia and the continued popularity of “over the top” (OTT) messaging services are likely to reflect similar dynamics to those in the Philippines. In this regard, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2018) cites the popularity of OTT messaging in Malaysia as being the result of “easy accessibility, customization and control, as well as low cost to access” (p. 27). Of Malaysian Internet users, 97.3% have a Facebook account, and 98.1% use WhatsApp (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2018, p. 15). Earlier research has demonstrated the everyday significance of new media (Baboo, Pandian, Prasad, & Rao, 2013; Leong, 2014), and Yusop and Sumari (2013) note the embedding of social media in young Malaysians’ lives. Hanchard (2014) found social media to be integral to “everyday information seeking,” and that Malaysian users value social media information from strong ties (friends and/or family) over racial and religious connections. The longstanding dominance of mainstream media by the Barisan National party, before the elections in 2018, has also meant that both social and mobile media are central to activists and oppositional politics (J. B. Y. Lim, 2014; M. Lim, 2016; Tapsell, 2018), with a survey showing 54% of respondents using WhatsApp as a news source (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018, p. 9). Overall, the Malaysian situation reflects expectations of a dominant messaging app, and the pattern of use tends to reflect similar countries in Southeast Asia, although the specific apps reflect more contingent circumstances.

### **Media Switching and Scalable Socialities**

This prevalence of SMMA demonstrates the potential of a “polymedia” environment in Malaysia, where the choice of media used to communicate is not predicated on financial ability or access to technology, but depend on social, emotional, and affective choices (Madianou, 2016; Madianou & Miller, 2013). Expanding this explanation of how people choose between platforms, Miller and cohorts (2016) propose *scalable socialities* that explain how—depending on communicative goals that scale along continuums of privacy and publicness—users choose platforms “associated with specific genres of communication” (p. 5).

Although polymedia occurs in an “environment of affordances” (Madianou & Miller, 2013, p. 170), for Miller and associates “technological affordances” (p. 210) are perhaps the least important factor in influencing choices of SMMA, deferring to the primary role of “local genres of social interaction or cultural significance” (p. 210). Nonetheless, they note how technical affordances can influence choices when these align with preexisting “cultural preferences” (p. 212).

A similar approach has been offered by Gershon (2010a), who argues that *media switching* involves “switching between different technologies’ affordances, and in particular, between how technologies structure participation” (p. 393), and is framed by *media ideologies*, which are “what people believe about how the medium affects or should affect the message” (p. 391). Media ideologies develop through interactions with the structural components of the medium, and how that medium is understood in relation to other media. As with polymedia, SMMA are compared between each other, and *remediation*—whereby people’s use of one medium are related to their subjective understanding of older or different media (Gershon, 2010b, p. 92)—plays a role in the translation of existing genres into new media. Gershon’s (2010b) approach seems to allow for a greater role for the materiality of a platform, deploying the full use of affordances that considers the relational outcomes of technology use (Gibson, 1977; Hutchby, 2003) in a manner that emphasizes how the materiality of a platform, the agency of users, and collective negotiations of meaning combine to form the social significance of a medium.

### **Socialities and Social Ties**

Socialities are interpersonal, emplaced, and socially contextualized interactions (Pink, 2008), animated by communicative acts, that attend “to the *qualities* of social relationships rather than their being part of a ‘community’” (Postill & Pink, 2012, p. 127; emphasis in original). By directing the focus of the researcher to observable behavior, instead of the imagined “‘feel good’ social bonds” (Pink, 2008, pp. 165–166) in the concept of community, socialities allow an inductive and empirically based description of collective agential practices. Drawn from anthropology, this concept emphasizes the intersection of on- and off-line practices and has been applied in online contexts to describe “digital socialities” in Web forums, where the mediation of the “written word and computer interface” is central to the “quasi-orality” of Web forums and “hashtag sociality” in Twitter (Postill & Pink, 2012, p. 131) as a mediated practice. To explain scalable socialities, Miller and colleagues (2016) provide an example of how, in an English secondary school, social media usage expands from an intimate group who use Snapchat, through wider WhatsApp groups for the class, Twitter interaction for the school, to Facebook for family and neighborhood, and to Instagram pictures that are fashioned for the wider world. This example broadly shows scaling moving from strong to weak ties. Strong ties are typically associated with family members and kinship ties due to factors such as the duration of the association, reciprocal emotional, and practical support (although family ties’ strength may vary—e.g., close family versus extended family), alongside friendship and workplace ties, depending on levels of interaction and reciprocity (Gilbert & Karahalios, 2009; Granovetter, 1973; Haythornthwaite, 2002). Haythornthwaite (2002) argues that communicative networks of stronger ties are more likely to develop “coordinated definitions of genres” compared with networks of weaker ties, which are more likely to follow “norms established by others” (p. 389). This points to an intersecting scale based on different types of uses or genres associated with platforms and social groups.

While scalable socialities use the scales of privacy and publicness to help explain how people use different platforms, this article proposes that the strength of ties adds another dimension that is worthy of further investigation. Strength of ties has been associated with increased online interaction and social activity (e.g., Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Vriens & van Ingen, 2017), Gilbert and Karahalios (2009) developed a model that predicted the strength of a tie based on the frequency and types of interaction on Facebook, and strong ties have been shown to be reinforced with the expansion of mobile phone text messaging (Palackal et al., 2011). In studies of migration polymedia conditions were shown to support migrants reaching out to new contacts and activating "latent ties" (Dekker, Engbersen, & Faber, 2016; Láštiová, 2014), and the reinforcement of existing ethnic ties for in-group solidarity and resistance to authority (Williams, 2015). It is also relevant to consider how the socialities that develop with and through mediated social interaction express themselves in regularized textual interactions, for which we will now turn to a discussion of genre.

### **Genre as Practice**

An early analysis of email exchanges within a group of IT professionals in the 1980s demonstrated processes of coordination and remediation via an increased use of the dialogue genre that leveraged email technology and replaced genres such as the memo and business letters. From this, Orlikowski and Yates (1994) argue that genres are "organizing structures" whose dynamic recursive relationship with communicative actions underlie communities' activities and changes over time (p. 573). The participatory nature of social media has meant that textual genres emerge spontaneously from user interaction and negotiations of meaning: in forums (Baym, 1995; Postill, 2008), personal blogs (Lüders et al., 2010), on Twitter (Postill & Pink, 2012), and in other contexts (Kelty, 2005). Their widespread everyday use means that they are embedded in the daily socialities of SMMA users, connecting "text and social organization" (Lüders et al., 2010, p. 948) in new ways and ensuring "coordination of specific practices involving many people . . . contributing to the reproduction of social institutions and sectors in society" (Lüders et al., 2010, p. 950).

The past decade has seen a rapid expansion of SMMA as well as a specialization of the genre practices they are associated with—for example, through key design functions Instagram foregrounds visual communication with a wide audience, whereas WhatsApp foregrounds written interactions with targeted recipients. Although these design features do not determine their uses, when everyday social interactions become routinized in genres associated with platforms, we need to consider the role of their technical structures in the adoption and elaboration of genres as practice. The concept of "communicative affordances" (Hutchby, 2003; Schrock, 2015) explains that users navigate the limitations and opportunities of media technologies, in a tripartite relationship between user agency, social goals, and structural gateways.

Understanding the role of genre as practice provides a framework that encompasses how media ideologies develop through regular textual interactions that arise from everyday social interactions framed by communicative goals and associated affordances. Media ideologies underlie scalable socialities decisions whereby users move between different platforms depending on how they perceive that the regularized genre practices will help them to achieve their communicative goals.

### Method

An online survey ( $n = 279$ ) was conducted in Malaysia's twin cities of Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya from November to December 2015. Random sampling using online surveys is very difficult, if not impossible (Fricker, 2016, p. 179), but to reduce dependence on smaller networks and to increase the age range, Facebook advertising and announcements in the largest Malaysian online forum, Lowyat.com, were used. Following the survey, 19 self-selected interviewees were sourced from an invitation in the survey and through snowballing. These were designed to probe the survey results and increase their explanatory power (Vehovar & Manfreda, 2016, p. 151).

The survey questionnaire compared the uses of different SMMA with five social groups: Close Family (CF), Extended Family (EF), Close Friends (CFR), Other Friends and Acquaintances (OF), and Work Colleagues (WC). Respondents were asked which social media, mobile, or Internet communication platform they were most likely to use for communicating each social group and why, using a 6-point scale to rank the relative importance of the different uses (see Table 1). Optional open comment boxes on each page, and at the end of the questionnaire, collected qualitative responses. The final page collected demographic data and invited respondents to an interview, as well as the opportunity to register for a lucky draw.

The responses about the uses of SMMA relative to social groups were analyzed using a descriptive quantitative analysis based on frequency counts. Following this, cross-tabulations were carried out within each social group to probe relations between the platform uses and the categorical data of age, gender, marital status, having children, ethnicity, and mother tongue. The only cross-tabulations returned as significant ( $p < .05$ ) using Pearson chi-squared asymptotic significance values were related to age and platform use. In addition, nonexclusive content coding was carried out on the 201 open comments in the survey, resulting in 16 categories and highlighting the extent of cross-platform use.

In preparation for the interview, interviewees were asked preparatory questions about their most used SMMA, and which one they would keep if others were unavailable. These were used to start the interviews, following which results from the survey were explained to them and their opinions sought. They were questioned about their most important SMMA, which ones they used to communicate with different social groups, a description of "A day in their life" in terms of SMMA use, and others. Following transcription, thematic coding was carried out, using NVivo, first according to descriptive categories related to social groups, then emergent themes, such as genre, technical function, or affect were identified and related to the questionnaire results.

Overall, the results suggested common uses of SMMA for different social ties and distinct age-related differences in the workplace. Although asking survey respondents to select only one platform per social group was revealed to be limiting in some respects, it also served to highlight broad preferences for WhatsApp and Facebook, aligned to different strengths of social ties.

Some limitations to the results are acknowledged and the results are not generalizable to the Malaysian population. Ethnic self-identification was mostly Chinese (54%); the rest were Malay (16%), Indian (7%), Other (3%), and 21% chose "It's not important to me." Although the ethnic composition of

peninsular Malaysia is predominantly Malay (63.1%), the imbalance in the sample reflects to some degree the greater urban proportions of ethnic Chinese and other ethnicities—thus, the proportion of non-*Bumiputera* in Kuala Lumpur is 52.6%, and they constitute 40.7% of Selangor (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2019a, 2019b). The most common mother tongue was English (37%),<sup>2</sup> followed closely by Chinese (Mandarin and/or Dialect—35%). The gender balance was 63% female and 37% male. The ages spread from 18 to over 60, but 57% were 30 or less. The categories used in Table 1 are not based on an approved scale, and therefore they are used as descriptive categories based on the similarity of the questions. The values within each of these categories are not aggregated and the comparisons made using the data from the specific questions.

### Social Ties and Uses of Social and Mobile Media

To understand how and why respondents use social and mobile media platforms with different strength of ties, they were asked to indicate on a scale of 1–6 the importance of using preferred platform for different communication activities with different social groups, and Table 1 indicates the average scores for each activity and group. (All platforms are combined, and the reasons are grouped into descriptive categories. The number is a mean of the answers selected using the 6-point scale.)

**Table 1. Relative Importance of Reasons for Preferring Platform to Communicate With Different Groups.**

		Close family	Extended family	Close friends	Other friends	Work colleagues
		<i>Strong tie</i>	<i>Weak tie</i>	<i>Strong tie</i>	<i>Weak tie</i>	<i>Varying ties</i>
Sharing content	I can share photos and/or videos	4.8	4.4	5.1	3.9	4.0
	I can share interesting news and/or websites	4.2	4.2	4.8	3.8	4.0
	I can share personal thoughts	4.4	3.9	4.8	3.4	3.4
Fun stuff	It is a fun way to communicate	4.4	4.1	4.9	3.8	3.3
	I can use fun emojis and/or stickers	3.9	3.7	4.6	3.5	3.2
Ease of contact	I can stay in contact without much effort	5.2	4.9	5.3	4.5	4.8
	It is important that we can easily contact each other at all times	5.3	4.5	5.2	4.0	4.8
	I want to choose when I can be contacted	4.3	4.5	4.7	4.4	4.4

<sup>2</sup> Although the national language is Malay, English use is widespread in Malaysia.

Logistics	It is good for communicating with people who are in another country and/or town	5.4	5.1	5.4	4.7	5.1
	It is good for organizing groups of people	5.0	4.6	5.1	4.2	4.7

The categories of “Sharing content,” “Fun stuff,” “Ease of contact,” and “Logistics” are descriptive categories based on the similarity of the questions. They show that the relative importance of reasons for using platforms tends to mirror the strength of ties—the closer the group is to the user, the more likely they are to see sharing content and ease of communication as important.

The closest similarities are within the indices for “ease of contact” and “logistics,” which are similar for the two stronger tie groups—close family and close friends. All indices bar one differ by at most 0.1, and the biggest difference in these two categories was in terms of choosing when to be contacted, where there is a difference of 0.4 in favor of close friends—this suggests that respondents are less open to being contacted by close friends at any time, compared to close family. When looking at the weak ties, there are larger differences throughout these two categories, ranging from 0.2 to 1.2. There is a greater preference for maintaining the ability to easily communicate and coordinate activities with stronger ties. Jane (23 years old) explained how she normally used WhatsApp with her close family:

Like “I’m not coming home for dinner.” [Laughs.] Or then like usually my parents will . . . my parents are the ones that will send the links lah. Like, “Don’t go to KL today, there might be terrorist attacks.” Errr . . . for me and my sis it’s gonna be like, “Oh yeah, we’re around for dinner today,” yeah.

This combination of logistical communication and family support was also noted by Jonathan (35 years old), showing how different uses overlap:

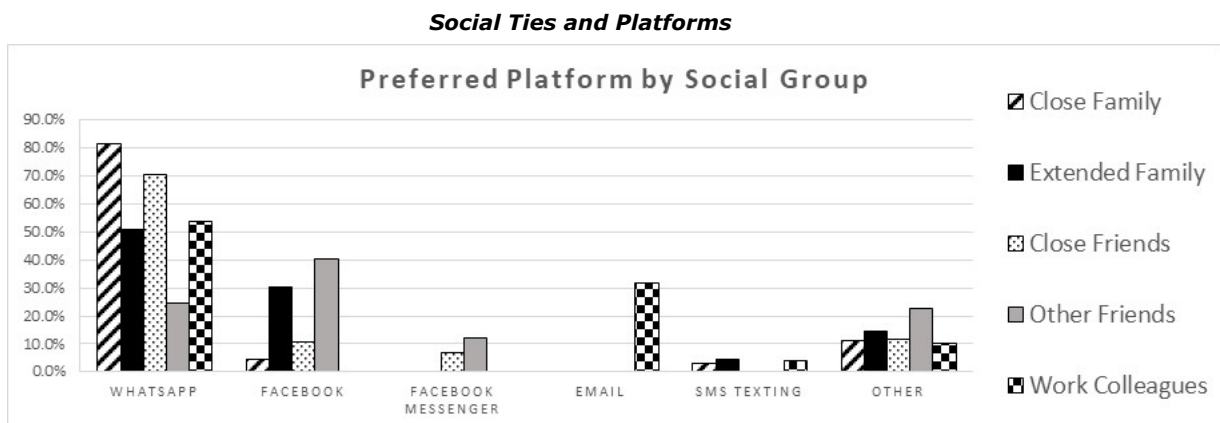
My mom would mostly be serious stuff. She shares . . . like motivational quotes . . . Buddhist sayings, things like that. . . . I don’t really, like, share pictures with her. But, more on coordinating. Cause I’ll be like, “Oh, I’ll be coming back this week, will you guys be around?” Things like that.

For “sharing content” and “fun stuff,” the closer relationship between strong ties is repeated, but the difference between close friends and other friends (ranging from 1.0 to 1.4) is more than the difference between close family and extended family (ranging from 0 to 0.4). This probably reflects the stronger ties that exist within families, including extended family, than between acquaintances. However, it is also relevant to note that the importance of all reasons in these two categories was rated higher for close friends than for close family. This reflects intersecting axes of family and friendship ties and strong to weak ties—friendship and family relationships have different qualities whereby respondents are more likely to exchange jokes and entertaining images with their close friends and may also have stronger ties with them compared



with extended family, who nonetheless are strongly tied in other contexts and with whom regular mediated communication occurs.

Addressing scalable socialities also requires us to look at different platforms and consider how they correspond to different social and interpersonal motivations. Figure 1 shows the top three platforms used for each group and a fourth “other” category. The most used platforms were WhatsApp, Facebook, Facebook Messenger, email, and also SMS, to a small degree.



**Figure 1. Preferred platform for communication with social groups.**

Apart from other friends, WhatsApp was the most used platform for all groups, reflecting the centrality of OTT messaging platforms for Malaysians seen in national-level findings reported above. The pattern contrasting strong and weak tie groups that was noted above is repeated here: close family and close friends had a much higher preference for WhatsApp (81.4% and 70.6%, respectively), with the second favorite—Facebook—being much lower (4.3% and 10.8%, respectively). As Kate Chong (24 years old) said:

I would say that Facebook messenger is a communication tool for those that you are not close with. Your acquaintance or your friends, the people you . . . haven't gotten a chance to give your number or the people that you don't want them to have your number. But you need to talk to them immediately. Yeah.

Similarly, Annabelle (30 years old) explained:

For example, let's say I have friends whom I haven't seen for a long time but, uh, . . . but like, we still keep in touch, and that's really tied to Facebook, for example, old high school friends who are not necessarily on . . . y'know, on daily talking terms? Then generally we don't use WhatsApp, because WhatsApp something a bit like . . . y'know, you use it a bit more daily, whereas Facebook, at least it's . . . it feels a bit further?

And Chloe (20 years old) said:

Even, like, I just stumble upon something that is related to my friends, like, I found it funny and then I can just share that on WhatsApp. Yeah. But I won't share that on Facebook because, um, for Facebook, it's just a random post, but in WhatsApp, we know that it's target to one person or few people, something like that.

Nurul's (42 years old) explanation of her use of Facebook and WhatsApp showed a similar differentiation, and emphasized the relationship of the genre to specific forms of communication:

Facebook is more like . . . in terms of sharing information. But in terms of communicating and updating each other, I would still use WhatsApp. . . . Facebook is more like "Oh, you know I was reading that." . . . you don't send them the links using WhatsApp. You just tag them on Facebook . . . and you read the stuff they have and they read the stuff you have. So, it's more like sharing information? But not communicating communicating [*sic*].

. . . and then if you want to further it [i.e., follow up in more depth] . . . that's where you use WhatsApp.

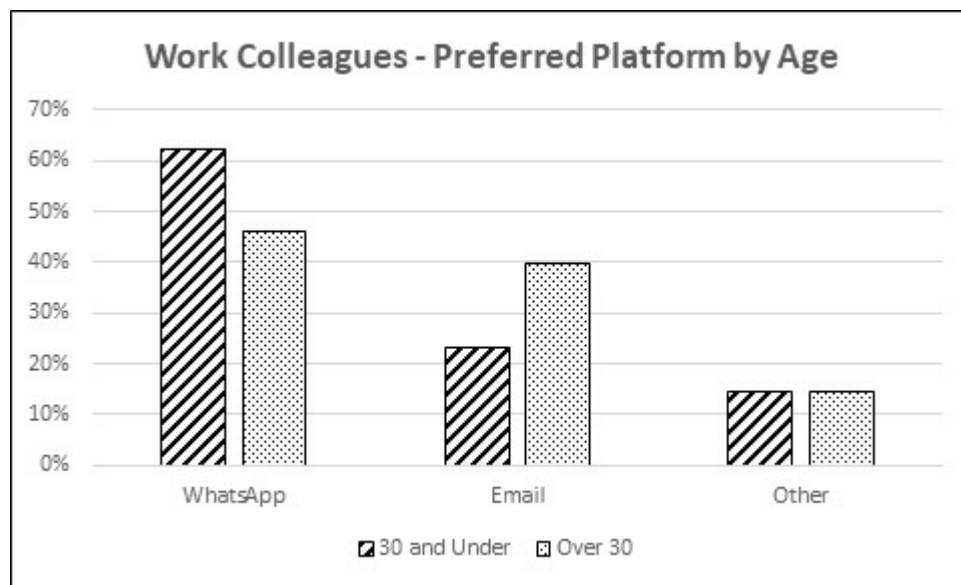
In the weak tie groups, extended family still showed a preference for WhatsApp at 50.9%, but second favorite—Facebook—was much closer at 30.1%, whereas respondents preferred to communicate with other friends on Facebook (40.5%) more than with WhatsApp (24.7%). These patterns of communication with social groups was also seen in national-level data that showed a greater preference for using social media to communicate with "friends" and "family/relatives" as opposed to "coworkers" and "other acquaintances" (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2016, pp. 35–36). Overall, the quantitative data and the interviewees showed broad similarities in genre practices regarding the use of Facebook and WhatsApp, and that these tended to align along the strength of social ties. The comments also reflect how the strength of ties reinforce the use of WhatsApp as a de facto communication tool for the coordination of everyday life—reflecting Ling's (2017) arguments regarding dominant app use (above) but also highlighting how social contexts such as work or leisure relate to choices.

Table 1 shows how genres—"generalized circulations of texts or relatively stable patterns of practices" (Lüders et al., 2010, p. 951)—correlate to different social relationships, such as when sharing photos, news, personal thoughts, and fun content is more suitable to a close friend relationship than a family one. Figure 1, along with the qualitative comments, shows how platform use is also associated with social ties; taken together, these suggest that genre and social ties are ways to explain choices of SMMA, in which Facebook is best to stay in touch with weak ties and for the occasional, random conversations whereas WhatsApp is the go-to app used with strong ties for daily and mundane talk. These results support the assumptions of scalable socialities; however, they suggest that adding the dimension of social ties to the privacy and publicness scales could help to develop the concept further.

### Negotiating Genres in the Workplace

Gershon (2010b) noted that “e-mail is a medium in which media ideologies are most sharply differentiated along generational lines” (p. 27), and the following section adds to discussions of workplace communication (Nardi, Whittaker, & Bradner, 2000; Orlikowski & Yates, 1994), where there was a distinct age difference in the use of SMMA. Negotiations around genre are often more explicit in the workplace because of hierarchical power and the need to conform to formal standards.

The chi-square analysis revealed a significant result ( $p = .029$ ) within the category of work colleagues whereby there was a correlation between age and the use of email and WhatsApp at work. In the section above, Figure 1 showed a clear difference between work colleagues and the other groups, whereby Facebook was not in the top three, and the two most preferred platforms were WhatsApp (53.7%) and email (31.8%). Figure 2 shows how this use was further split by age, and that older respondents were more likely to use email.



**Figure 2. Work colleagues' preferred platform by age.**

The qualitative data provides more insight, and Batman (35 years old) commented on age differences saying that his younger junior colleagues preferred texting over phone calls, but he had to tell them to call him if it was urgent because he is not as “vigilant” as they are in checking text messages. However, 24-year-old Peter explained that WhatsApp use was the norm in his workplace (a news organization) and “somebody would have to tell me to check my email then I’ll look at it. I won’t usually look at it on my own initiative, unless I come into work or come back from lunch kinda thing.”

The switching between email and WhatsApp was quite common, with the expectation that WhatsApp (or occasionally a work-based instant messaging platform such as Slack) was used for rapid interaction and ongoing conversations, whereas email is used for final documents such as approved artwork or reports, and as such represented a formalization of the work product. Here, we see economic and technical factors coming into play, as WhatsApp would be easier to access for those who worry about data costs or do not have higher end smartphones. Thus, Annabelle (30 years old), who works in a marketing department, explained that most colleagues, suppliers, and agencies:

love to communicate through WhatsApp, because it's more instant. Emails is a bit slower, because not all of us access emails through the phone. . . . WhatsApp is very informal . . . if you keep sending email when we're doing artwork and stuff like that . . . it's just gonna get clogged up. . . . maybe the final draft then only we send an email.

James' (23 years old) comment reflected the age gap, saying,

Older people tend to be more formal. . . . In the emails, the older generation write really proper letters kind of way of the email . . . . the younger generation like me, we don't really write with that kind of letters. . . . The way we write is very different. Emails are more formal. WhatsApp informal.

This was echoed by Susan (51 years old), who preferred email for work and regretted the lack of formal writing skills among younger colleagues, saying:

I'm very particular about emails for work purpose . . . . I must have "Dear so-and-so," with a comma, and then, I expect proper sentences and then you must end with you know, the salutations, uh, "Best regards" or whatever, because you never know who will get this email when it is forwarded.

This overlap of textual practice and social context was also expressed by Daniel (29 years old)—a language teacher—who interpreted the suitability of the medium in terms of the language used, and explained that:

shorter language, SMS language. It just doesn't seem proper at all. . . . I mean, email is a very polite way. Of course, it's required by work, but in WhatsApp, people just want to get things very fast. "Hi can you do this for me please thanks"; it's not very polite.

Malaysian workplace values tend to emphasize working long hours and being accessible beyond formal work hours. More than a third of the open comments in the survey's "work colleagues" section related to being forced to use a platform in the workplace, referencing security issues, and workplace requirements. Daniel was also required to participate in a shared WhatsApp group and resented what he felt was an intrusion into his personal space. Not only would he sometimes have messages from his boss when he checked his WhatsApp on waking, but he also explained that "your personal time has been disrupted, . . .

people get into your personal space, and they also get your phone number because it's in the group." Similarly, a survey respondent said:

Work is work and does not mix with play. Email has a certain level of seriousness and officiate the communication. However, these days many bosses & colleagues prefer to use WhatsApp due to convenience. I see that as a breach of private time. (Survey qualitative comment, female, 26–30 years old)

Thus, in the workplace we see the negotiation of platform uses and interpretations of different genres associated with platforms, with senior staff having more influence on the outcome. For some, the platforms are associated with particular language usage, and the type of language used is associated with relationships, with the more formal email being associated with more professional relationships—often symbolically “sealing the deal” as the last step of a project or negotiation. These examples also demonstrate a process of remediation that is overlaid with a generational difference. Whereas older people are likely to have learnt to interact professionally with formal letters and subsequently adopted emails as a version of this, younger people are more likely to have developed patterns of online interaction through messaging first and emails are encountered as formal interactions when applying for jobs or interacting with lecturers. Additionally, we can see how the critical mass adoption of WhatsApp in daily life also led to some switching from email to WhatsApp in the workplace, despite uncertainty about its suitability. In particular, younger users consider WhatsApp to be an effective communicative medium for rapid contact and conversational turn-taking thanks to its accessibility and low-cost features.

A factor that emerged from the discussions of WhatsApp in the workplace was the significance of the phone number as a key vector of convergence between personal and professional spaces because of the smartphone being typically used for both personal and professional communication—reflecting a loss of agency related to the position of the phone number as a central node in both the communication network and social obligations. This was most strongly felt in the context of the workplace, but as we shall see below, it also plays a strong role in delimiting stages of development of personal relationships.

### **Media Switching and Telephone Numbers**

The above analyses show recognizable patterns of scalable socialities related to social ties as well as generational differences and remediation in the workplace. The design of the survey revealed broad platform preferences, but the largest proportion (21%) of qualitative comments related to respondents using platforms interchangeably, and it was clear that many felt constrained by the survey design that forced them to choose one single platform, pointing to widespread media switching practices that relate to genres. For example, a male in his early 30s said:

I think that most people employ multiple and different platforms to communicate and not only on one preferred medium with a certain person or a social circle, especially when there can be overlaps, such as when colleagues can be friends too. One may use Facebook to update both overseas/out-of-town friends AND family members at the same time, while

perhaps proceeding to another medium, WhatsApp or LINE to communicate more directly with them after receiving comments or personal messages.

Scalable socialities emphasize the selection of platform according to communicative goals and social context; however, we also consider the influence of the coded features that afford social interaction. For example, Instagram allows a user to have a more public stream compared with Snapchat, where users need to know the specific username to be able to follow someone, and a female in her late teens/early 20s said:

when sharing pictures with close friends, I would prefer using Snapchat instead of Instagram because Snapchat is designed in a way for us to share moments personally, whereas Instagram is more of a way for us to share picture publicly. So, I basically need to use all these social medias, depending on different occasions.

The genres that emerge from interactions between users and media technologies become frameworks that users need to adapt to if they want to socialize effectively with that platform. Chloe (21 years old) was reticent to share personal content, but when comparing Snapchat and Facebook, she expressed feeling pressurized to share certain types of content:

For Facebook, um, you won't get to share your daily life, so I will feel safer on Facebook instead of sharing it to Snapchat, because Snapchat is like an app that will, like, . . . see through your daily life, and I'm not that open to the public.

Her reference to the *platform* as "seeing through" her daily life, rather than expressing it in terms of the expectations of other users, revealed through the practice of the Snapchat genre, is revelatory. Not engaging with Snapchat would likely mean some exclusion from social life important to her, but she managed this expectation of particular forms of textual interaction mostly by posting Snaps of animals—content more personal to her than she would share on Facebook where she would mostly share "articles and videos or pictures from other pages."

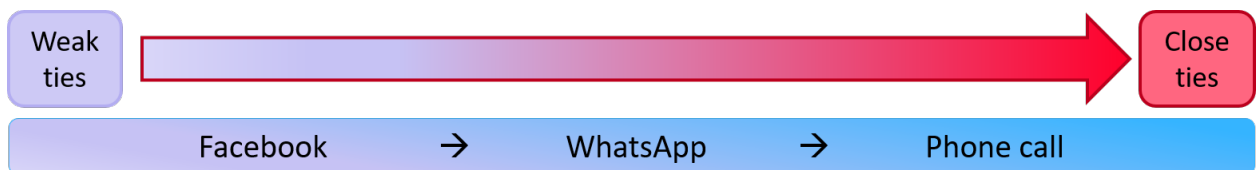
Features such as the signature auto-deletion of shared images and messages in Snapchat do not force a particular genre, but they strongly suggest particular practices; as users interpret their meaning, they share practices that embed the genre within the platform. The practical simplicity of one less icon to press or one less screen to swipe should also not be underestimated, and interviewees frequently commented on the simplicity of using WhatsApp compared with other apps—especially Facebook Messenger, which requires an extra app to be installed on the phone, uses pop up notifications, and has a less user friendly contact list. Jacqueline's explanation shows how affective and emotional matters overlap with these design-based limitations, and again highlights the significance of the phone number:

Okay, closest friends, uh . . . it's always WhatsApp first, and then it's always a phone call. Yeah, uh . . . things like, y'know, wanting to pour out your soul and your feelings and all that, WhatsApp isn't really uh, gonna convey exactly, so you just pick up the phone and call, but "hey, wanna meet up for lunch?" . . . Because if you are close enough with this person, you would have . . . their number on your phone, and WhatsApp is just so much

easier, because it's just there. Facebook Messenger . . . you need to scroll the names, and sometimes the names that they put on Facebook isn't exactly the names that you know them by or you know, some change their surname and I'll be like, who's this? Pictures of their kids instead of themselves, you know? . . . WhatsApp is the easiest way, yeah.

Recalling the implications of the phone number in the workplace, the phone number stood out as a nonhuman node that plays an articulatory and agential role in interpreting the meaning of using WhatsApp with different ties. Interviewees frequently discussed how the exchange of phone number reflects the status of the relationship, and Figure 3 visualizes this scaling that incorporates the movement toward the phone call usually reserved for the closest ties or for professional situations. Susan Quah (early 50s) recounted how she had initially met a musician and kept in loose contact via Facebook, but when they met again, he invited her family back to his home and she felt the need to reciprocate symbolically by switching platform:

How do you keep in contact? The easiest way without sharing your number is by Facebook . . . the second meeting, I got his phone number . . . I used WhatsApp to thank him. A more personal message rather than on Facebook, that wouldn't have been appropriate, because it was something he did for us, very personally invited us the whole family back to his home



**Figure 3. Scaling along strength of friendship ties.**

This process was also expressed by Kevin (24 years old), where the exchange of phone numbers expresses stronger ties through a degree of expected reciprocity and continuation of the relationship:

WhatsApp is more for the intimate friends, I guess. Because you have to actually give out your phone number. . . . If I'm not comfortable with them yet, I give them the WeChat ID. . . . So, once they gone through a certain stage, I would give them the WhatsApp. Yeah. That's how I filter them, actually.

Throughout the analysis above, SMMA are used in ways that reflect social practices and human agency; however, users need to navigate and interpret what Miller and associates (2016) refer to as "technical affordances," and what Gershon (2010) refers to as "structures." Genre practices normalize interpretations of features' significance, but whereas certain design features such as those that determine degrees of publicness can, in the last instance, be bypassed by individuals choosing not to conform to the genre expectations—for example, Twitter or Instagram users choosing to restrict their tweets to a private group—the phone number stood out as a nonnegotiable component of a triangular relationship that draws together the user, the social goals, and the medium. In the above examples, the phone number often served to control access and symbolically represent the nature of the relationship, and this was reflected in the genre associated with WhatsApp, which was often seen as appropriate for closer ties because the phone number needs to be

exchanged, whereas on Facebook one can keep the other at a distance. However, in the workplace, the necessary exchange of phone numbers implicated in WhatsApp use meant that the correlation of WhatsApp with strong ties was weakened, leading to an overlap of personal and professional space.

### Conclusions

This article draws together the concepts of media switching, scalable socialities, and genre to discuss how people choose between different SMMA in polymedia environments such as urban Malaysia. We acknowledge the limitations of this article, as the conclusions drawn here are drawn from a convenience sample and may not represent broader practices, although the dominance of WhatsApp and Facebook (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2018), as well as the association of social media use with strong ties, was supported by national-level data (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2016, pp. 35–36). However, they provide insight into patterns of use related to different strength of ties and elaboration of genres as practice that can support further research in future. It shows that users associate platforms with genre practices that develop through the coordination of social interactions framed by communicative goals and associated affordances. The aggregate quantitative data suggested a general preference for WhatsApp for closer ties and Facebook for weaker ties, especially with regard to acquaintances. We argue that scalable socialities can be understood as moving not just along a continuum of privacy and publicness but also along intersecting axes of family and friendship ties, and strong to weak ties.

The quantitative data also revealed a distinct generational differentiation in the workplace where WhatsApp and email use were predominant, with older respondents preferring the latter. Their uses were discussed in relation to technical features, such as the ease of sharing images, as well as genre-based interpretations that revealed processes of remediation and centered on the formality and suitability of email for workplace interactions. As SMMA become ubiquitous in everyday life, people need to negotiate common meanings and practices for effective communication—in the discussion of the workplace, we see an example of this in a more restricted context.

The qualitative data gave more insight into the preferences provided in the quantitative results, revealed the widespread media switching according to genres, and highlighted the role of the phone number in influencing user media switching decisions. The enforced association of the phone number with WhatsApp communication contributes to the connection of WhatsApp with strong ties, and users discussed the sharing of phone numbers and moving to WhatsApp as symbolizing closer relationships. However, it also contributed to a blurring of boundaries between the personal and professional spheres, with users losing agency in controlling the dynamics of SMMA interactions, and thus provides an example of the reorientation of social practice around the materiality of the phone. This suggests that the exchange of phone numbers could be used in further research as an index of the strength of a tie in interpersonal relations but not necessarily in professional relations.

We also highlight the relevance of genre as an analytical tool that emphasizes textual practices and interactions. Genres become frameworks for effective interaction through media texts, as many social interactions are now mediated through media technologies. These interactions of genre with social relationships occurring in the context of platforms are examples of “texts as practice” (Lüders et al., 2010, p. 951) both reflecting and constituting the social ties in daily interactions that span the on- and off-line. It



is also important to note that as new SMMA develop and become incorporated into daily practice, we can expect both migrations and remediations of genres and practices across platforms.

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