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# Empowering Refugees in Malaysia: WhatsApp as a dominant tool

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## **Abstract**

The use of information and communication technologies and social media was crucial for migrants who crossed the Mediterranean Sea seeking safety and shelter in Europe in the last few years. However, the use of ICTs and social networks remain essential for refugees communities after settlement too. In a country like Malaysia which has seen a steady rise in number of refugees since 2010, individuals and NGOs are using social media; mainly WhatsApp as a tool for communication and empowerment. This workshop paper investigates the use of WhatsApp among refugees and NGOs personnel in Malaysia. Social networks are used as a reach-out tool to refugees with an efforts to empower them to become self-sufficient through direct services and educational programs

## **Author Keywords**

Refugees; Social Media; WhatsApp.

## **ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5.3 Group and Organization Interfaces

## **Introduction**

Malaysia is a Southeast Asian country occupying parts of the Malay Peninsula and the island of Borneo. There



Figure 1 Invitation to attend a meeting with Singaporean delegation



Figure 2 A reminder message to attend leadership training

are approximately 31 million people living in Malaysia with almost 4 million non-citizens. According to UNHCR, there are 149,500 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with the agency in Malaysia. The majority of refugees are Rohingyas from Myanmar. The rest are from different countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan and Palestine. Malaysia is not a signatory to 1951 Refugee Convention but still allows UNHCR to register refugees and asylum seekers. There are no refugee camps in Malaysia and refugees mostly live in urban areas mainly in the capital Kuala Lumpur and the state of Selangor. The Malaysian government and the civil society are doing their best to help refugees. Upon arrival, refugees rely on social media networks to contact relatives and friends. Social support and assistance are more likely to be extended to individuals with kinship ties and who come from the same village and/or region [2]. Renowned social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp remain as dominant networks attracting more subscribers on second's basis. Currently, there are more than 1.6 billion social network users worldwide with more than 64 percent of internet users accessing social media services online. As of end of 2016, Facebook had 1.86 billion monthly active users and WhatsApp had more than 1.2 billion monthly active users, up from over 700 million in January 2015 [1,8]. Specifically, WhatsApp is widely used in Malaysia and not only among refugee communities. All people's work can be done using WhatsApp. NGOs in Malaysia are using WhatsApp and other social networks to reach out to refugees' communities.

## Current Work

In this workshop paper, we share insights on our work analyzing WhatsApp usages among refugees in Malaysia. If you are a refugee residing in Malaysia, most likely you will be getting invitations to be added to many WhatsApp and Facebook groups. These groups are used by entrepreneurs, NGO personally or individuals for several purposes. These groups are also utilized by members to promote business and products. Refugees in Malaysia are required to obtain a work permit before they are able to join the job market; however most of refugees operate from their homes and rely on social media to promote their businesses. Arab refugees are well known to be good cooks. Daily advertisements are sent on WhatsApp groups promoting food items and products. On the other hand; WhatsApp groups are used as a tool to reach out and empower refugees. Malaysian NGOs are playing a major roles in offering services and educational programs. Ampang is one of the regions with high density of refugees for its low to medium cost of accommodation and it is where friends and relatives reside. Several NGOs are operating and in this area offering variety of educational services to children and adults. One particular NGO called Love & Respect decided to jump in and help refugees with languages. The organization has attracted volunteers to help run its programs. English and Bahasa Malaysia language classes are held on weekends to allow a bigger participation from refugees communities. WhatsApp is playing major role in reaching out to refugees and to share updates on classes timing and other activities. Below are examples of WhatsApp messages shared two WhatsApp groups. Our dataset consists of 50 snapshots of WhatsApp groups used to share information about language classes and other activities. For example,

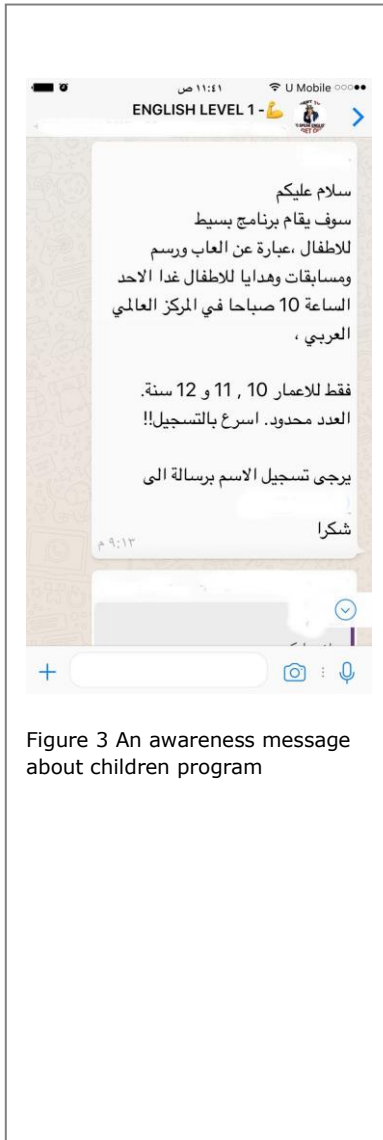


Figure 3 An awareness message about children program

contain information about a leadership workshop to be held on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2017. Figure 2 is an invitation by Love & Respect organization to attend a workshop run by Singaporean trainers, Figure 3 is to inform member about a visit of one local TV channel in Malaysian to cover the center's activities.

### Conclusion:

Social media is widely used among refugees in Malaysia due to its affordability, ease of use and popularity. WhatsApp groups are spread as a tool to attract people of similar interests. Groups are classified based on type of information and services offered. There is a great potential for HCI designs and methods to be used to help and empower refugees communities in different parts of the world.

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