



The role of social groups in enhancing the sense of social cohesion among rural youth virtual communities

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ABSTRACT

Promoting unity among Malaysia's diverse communities relies heavily on social cohesion, an ongoing challenge that requires continuous nurturing and adaptation. One initiative in Malaysia aimed at using social media to bridge cultural divides is the 1Malaysia Wireless Village Project. This project enhances social cohesion and digital unity by enabling locals to engage in conversations and voice concerns about their communities. Hence, this study explores the dynamics of social cohesion, with a particular focus on the moderating effect of social groups, specifically in-groups and out-groups, on Facebook functionality usage among rural youths. The in-group comprises individuals with shared cultural backgrounds residing in the same demographic, while the out-group encompasses those with whom the person has no affiliation or identification. A quantitative approach was employed in this study, involving 300 rural youths aged 15 to 40 from six 1Malaysia Wireless Villages. The study investigates how in-group and out-group dynamics affect the use of Facebook functionality and its impact on social cohesion. The results reveal a strong relationship between the use of sharing and reputation features in Facebook social groups and the perception of social cohesion among rural youths. Notably, the study highlights that young people must actively engage in sharing and building favourable reputations within their groups to enhance social cohesion. Conversely, there was no discernible effect of out-group interactions on social cohesion. The research culminates in the creation of a model intended to improve rural youths' feeling of social cohesiveness. The approach offers useful information for community development programmes by highlighting the significance of constructive relationships within in-group social circles. The findings also highlight the critical role that social media sites like Facebook play in promoting social cohesiveness and offer a sophisticated understanding of the moderating influence of social group dynamics on the formation of collective unity among heterogeneous populations.

Keywords: *Facebook functionality usage, social group, social cohesion, virtual community, social identity, sense of belonging*

INTRODUCTION

Since gaining independence in 1957, Malaysia has made substantial efforts to foster ethnic tolerance and unity within its diverse and multicultural society. Former Prime Minister YAB Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's "Vision 2020" emphasised embracing diversity while promoting social cohesiveness and acceptance of differences (Prime Minister's Office, 1991). Despite these efforts, Malaysia faces increasing polarisation exacerbated by political and extremist rhetoric, which undermines societal harmony. The aftermath of the 15th General Election in December 2022 exposed the negative effects of this polarisation, including rising intolerance and societal fragmentation. Persistent systemic discrimination against minorities highlights the urgent need for inclusive, non-discriminatory policies to ensure a unified and harmonious Malaysia.

In response to these challenges, the Malaysian government is encouraged to cultivate an environment that upholds freedom of expression and equality, in line with international human rights standards. This includes the implementation of comprehensive anti-discrimination laws. Historian Professor Datuk Dr. Ramlah Adam underscores the progress Malaysia has made in improving racial relations through initiatives such as the National Operations Council (NOC), the National Cultural Policy, the New Economic Policy (NEP), and the Rukun Negara (Mohamed Radhi & Nizam, 2023). The NEP aims to eradicate poverty across all races and restructure society to eliminate racial economic disparities. The Mid-Term Review of the Twelfth Malaysia Plan also reflects the government's commitment to reform and the Malaysia MADANI vision, focuses on economic, social, and political development to promote justice, diversity, and progress (Ministry of Economy, 2023).

In the context of advancing digitalisation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, Malaysia has effectively harnessed social media as a tool to strengthen social bonds and enhance social cohesion. The Malaysia MADANI vision underscores the importance of digital economy growth, promoting widespread digitalisation, and preparing the nation for emerging technologies. Social media platforms, in alignment with this vision, play a pivotal role in connecting individuals, facilitating social interactions, and fostering virtual communities among youth. The widespread use of social media by Malaysian youths not only helps maintain existing relationships but also facilitates the creation of new connections, contributing to the vision's goal of a digitally unified society (Abu Samah et al., 2013; Bolong, 2011; Datareportal, 2021; Ibrahim & Ainin, 2009; Razak, 2009; Sharifah Sofiah et al., 2011; We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2018).

Based on the Malaysia Digital Landscape 2018 report, as of January 2018, Facebook had 22 million active users in Malaysia, which accounted for approximately 67% of the total population (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2018). This highlights the significant impact of Facebook in Malaysia, especially among young people. A more recent Malaysia Digital Landscape report found that as of January 2021, there were 27.4 million social media users in Malaysia, which represented 83% of the total population (Datareportal, 2021). Among them, the highest percentage of users were between the ages of 18 and 34.

The government's focus on technology adoption and digitalisation aligns with promoting social cohesion by bridging gaps and reducing disparities within the society (Ahmad et al., 2019). Efforts to enhance internet accessibility and technological innovation aim to foster inclusivity and support the development of a cohesive digital society. In this context, the present research highlights the importance of social media in strengthening social clusters and enhancing social cohesion among Malaysian youths, underscoring its significance in the broader context of Malaysia's digital and social development.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In today's digital age, social media platforms significantly shape public discourse, enhance connectedness, and influence societal perspectives (Kim & Kim, 2022). The rapid advancement of digitalisation, Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies, and increasing internet connectivity have broadened the use of social media, which can play a pivotal role in promoting social cohesion. These platforms facilitate communication, enable the exchange of diverse ideas, and bridge geographical divides, fostering a sense of unity and shared experiences among users. For instance, initiatives like the 1Malaysia Wireless Village Projects and Pusat Ekonomi Digital empower individuals from marginalised areas by facilitating communication and digital inclusion (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission [MCMC], 2021). By providing internet access, these projects help integrate underdeveloped communities into the broader digital economy, thereby enhancing social cohesion.

Social cohesion is a multifaceted concept encompassing interpersonal relationships, community well-being, and adaptive responses in various contexts (Cooper et al., 2014; Higgins et al., 2021; Marian et al., 2022; Moustakas, 2022; Schiefer & Van der Noll, 2017; Veerman & Denessen, 2021). It involves positive interactions, a sense of belonging, trust, shared values, and mutual support within a community. Attributes such as psychological resilience, perceptions of social support, and community connectivity impact social cohesion (Silveira et al., 2022). Social cohesion is crucial for promoting community well-being, improving health outcomes, and aiding in coping with adversity. It is not a static concept but varies depending on the context and individuals involved.

Social media's role in enhancing social cohesion is well-documented. Platforms like Facebook have become integral to information dissemination, communication, and engagement (Kim & Len-Ríos, 2023; Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022; Waqas et al., 2021). In Malaysia, Facebook is particularly popular, used by 22.5 million users out of 32.7 million internet users (MCMC, 2021). Additionally, research by Pew Research Center in 2018 (Anderson & Jiang, 2018) highlighted the pervasive use of smartphones among youths, indicating the broad reach of social media. Studies suggest that social media can foster social cohesion by enhancing connectedness with family and peers and facilitating a sense of community (Stieglitz & Ross, 2022; Winstone et al., 2021). Further, Kim et al. (2023) demonstrated that self-connection and social connection drive information sharing, with self-efficacy and empathy playing key roles in mediating these effects.

Social group effect on Facebook functionality usage and enhancing the sense of social cohesion

This paper examines the role of social groups as a collective perception, wherein two or more individuals share a common social identification and perceive themselves as members of the same social category. In computer-mediated communication systems, the term "virtual community" is often used to refer to tightly knit social groups. Hence social groups, defined by shared social identification, can influence members' sense of belonging and cohesiveness in virtual communities. A study by Ellison et al. (2011) explored how Facebook users develop a sense of community, with group cohesion dependent on mutual liking and shared goals. Additionally, Tobin et al. (2018) also argued that Facebook use can create a sense of meaningful existence for its users.

According to Hogg (1987), when individuals identify themselves as part of a group (in-group) or not part of a group (out-group), it leads to intragroup attraction. Recent studies have examined whether rural youths feel greater cohesion with virtual community

members when perceiving similarities (Liu et al., 2018; Ye et al., 2020). Jetten et al. (2014) described group membership as fostering a sense of togetherness and belonging. Fischer and Reuber (2011), as well as Roslan et al. (2022) found that Twitter facilitates trust through enhanced information dissemination. However, intergroup interactions can sometimes lead to a focus on group representation, rather than individual connections (Kelley et al., 2003). Therefore, this study hypothesises that social groups can moderate the impact of Facebook functionality on social cohesion among rural youths, enhancing the sense of community in virtual settings (Lu & Zhang, 2020; Li et al., 2020).

Social group and relational cohesion theory

The exploration of social media’s role in enhancing social cohesion aligns with both the social exchange theory and relational cohesion theory. The social exchange theory, as proposed by Homans (1958), provides a framework for understanding how interactions and exchanges within social groups can impact social cohesion. This theory posits that individuals make decisions about their group memberships based on the perceived costs and benefits of their interactions. In the context of social media, platforms like Facebook facilitate a range of exchanges that influence individuals’ sense of belonging and cohesion within their virtual communities. Further, the ease of communication and access to information through social media can enhance positive interactions and reduce perceived costs, thereby reinforcing group cohesion.

The relational cohesion theory extends this understanding by emphasising the role of emotions in forming and maintaining social bonds. According to Lawler et al. (2021), the relational cohesion theory predicts how emotional processes contribute to commitment within groups. Social media platforms, through their capability to foster self-connection and social connection, provide a medium for individuals to form affective ties and emotional bonds with others. This aligns with the theory’s assertion that positive emotions generated through frequent social interactions contribute to a stronger sense of cohesion and commitment (see Figure 1).

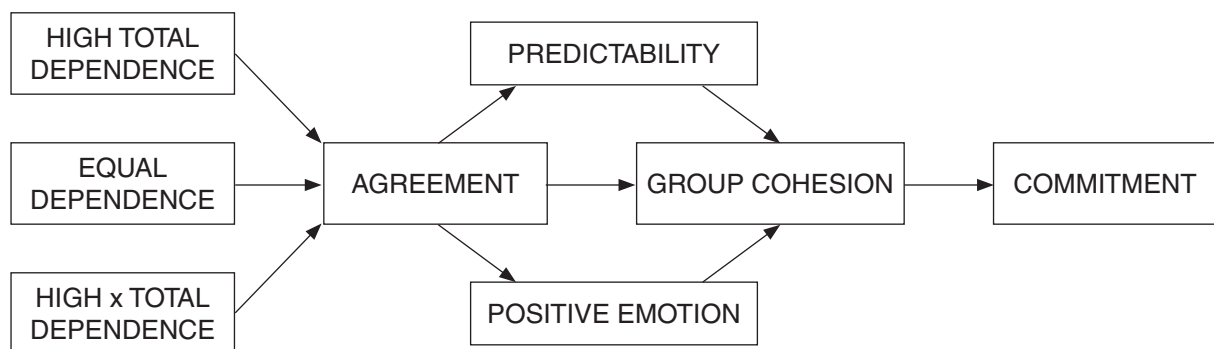


Figure 1. The revised theory of relational cohesion

The integration of social media into group dynamics reflects the evolution from early conceptualisations of social cohesion, which focus on social solidarity and group membership duration, to contemporary views that emphasise emotional and relational aspects. The increase in digital connectivity and the ability to maintain relationships through platforms like Facebook exemplify how social media can enhance affective and normative commitments to groups. As highlighted by Durkheim (2014) and Lawler et al. (2021), individuals develop a sense of belonging and emotional attachment, which is crucial for sustaining social cohesion.

Moreover, the application of the relational cohesion theory, as discussed by Thye et al. (2014), illuminates how structural interdependencies and repeated exchanges on social media foster affective ties. The theory's focus on the interplay between emotions and social bonds supports the observation that frequent, positive interactions on social media platforms contribute to a heightened sense of social cohesion.

Rural youths have a better sense of belonging

Previously, the author highlighted emotional processes as pivotal in forming and maintaining social bonds (Lawler et al., 2021). In rural areas, where ethnic diversity is limited compared to urban settings, the reduced variability in cultural and ethnic backgrounds likely leads to more cohesive social groups. This homogeneity allows for stronger emotional connections and fewer conflicts based on ethnic or cultural differences, as suggested by the findings of Liu et al. (2018), Raghavendra et al. (2018), and Timilsina et al. (2019).

The sense of belonging and group identity in rural youth virtual communities aligns with the relational cohesion theory's assertion that positive emotional bonds and a shared sense of community contribute to higher social cohesion. Rural youths, with their shared ethnic and cultural backgrounds, experience less social polarisation and have a clearer social identity, which reinforces their sense of belonging and cohesion (Lu et al., 2018). This emotional and social alignment enhances their connectivity and cohesion within their virtual communities.

Therefore, the hypotheses of this study are:

H1: Frequent use of Facebook functionality can enhance the sense of social cohesion.

H2: Social group moderates the causal relationship between the frequency of Facebook functionality usage and enhanced social cohesion.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, a quantitative research method was employed, targeting a sample of rural youth users of 1Malaysia Wireless Village. A quantitative research method is utilised to evaluate the numerical evidence of social phenomena based on empirical observation as well as test theories and hypotheses (Creswell, 2013).

Location and sampling

For this study, six 1Malaysia Wireless Villages with functional Wi-Fi and a clear community structure were selected. According to MCMC (2015), each 1Malaysia Wireless Village location is categorised under a parliamentary area for each zone. The locations chosen for the study were 1Malaysia Wireless Villages in Johor, Penang, Sabah, Sarawak, Selangor, and Terengganu. To ensure that the sample for this study included a generation highly engaged with ICT, the target population consisted of youths aged between 15 and 40 years old. A multi-stage cluster sampling method was utilised to include a total of 300 rural youths in the study.

Facebook functionality measurement

To measure Facebook functionality usage, the study used the original seven Facebook functionalities (Relationship, Presence, Conversation, Identity, Sharing, Reputation, and

Group) by Kietzmann et al. (2011). For the first five elements of Facebook functionality, a 4-point Likert scale was used, with 1 indicating never using the Facebook functionality and 4 indicating high-frequency usage. For Reputation and Group functionalities, the 4-point Likert scale ranged from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree).

Social cohesion measurement

The concept of social cohesion was operationalised based on four domains: Sense of togetherness, Sense of belonging, Sense of social trust, and Social interaction. These four dimensions of social cohesion were adopted from Figueroa et al. (2002) and Bolong (2011). The items for the four dimensions of social cohesion were restructured from Bolong's (2011) study to fit the objective of this study, which was to examine the level of social cohesion within the Facebook virtual community. The four dimensions of social cohesion were measured using a 4-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree) (Zhu et al., 2018).

Sense of togetherness was measured by asking questions such as "I feel like this virtual community is mine", "Individuals in this virtual community always attempt to achieve a common goal", and "I feel I am a part of this virtual community". Social trust was measured through their level of trust with other members in their virtual community. Sample questions included, "I am comfortable in giving responsibility to others in this virtual community to carry out project assignments", "I can anticipate from others in this virtual community" and "Individuals in this virtual community have mutual beliefs" (Bolong & Mahmud, 2019). Social interaction was measured through the frequency of interaction and whether they used chat or private message functions. The respondents were asked about the frequency of their interactions, whether they discussed various topics, and advised each other.

Social group measurement

The conceptualisation of social groups in this study was based on the work of Tajfel and Turner (1979), as well as Green et al. (2009). These studies defined an in-group as a collection of individuals who share similar cultural characteristics and are from the same demographic, while an out-group comprises individuals who do not belong or identify with the in-group. In this study, the in-group was assigned a value of 1, while the out-group was assigned a value of 2. The in-group comprised respondents' friends from familiar backgrounds, including family, school, and village communities, while the out-group consisted of new acquaintances or friends from outside the respondents' village community who shared similar interests. Respondents were instructed to indicate only one group, the one they participated in more actively (adapted from Wijaya et al., 2021).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study utilised Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to examine the relationship between Facebook functionality usage and enhanced social cohesion among rural youth virtual communities. Specifically, regression analysis was employed to determine the direction and strength of this relationship. The study also conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), which revealed that only Conversation, Identity, Sharing, Reputation, and Group functionalities were significant in enhancing the sense of social cohesion, whereas the Relationship and Presence functionalities did not meet the discriminant validity. Hence, only these five Facebook functionalities were found to contribute to the sense of social

cohesion among rural youths. This finding is similar to a study in Indonesia by Jantan et al. (2021); the use of certain Facebook functionalities, including Conversation, Identity, Sharing, Reputation, and Group, has a significant positive effect on enhancing the sense of social cohesion among rural youth virtual communities. Table 1 illustrates the demography of respondents who participated in the survey.

Table 1. Demography of respondents, N=300

Items	Mean/ Frequency	Standard Deviation/ Percentage
Age (years)		
15–40	21.40	4.26
Gender		
Male	99	33.0
Female	201	67.0
Marital status		
Married	34	11.3
Divorced/ Widowed	3	1.0
Single	263	87.8
Ethnic		
Malay	1	0.3
Bumiputera Sabah	4	1.3
Bumiputera Sarawak	16	5.3
Chinese	83	27.7
Indian	196	65.3
Job status		
Working (permanent/contract)	88	29.3
Unemployed	12	4.0
Student	200	66.7
Duration of residence (years)		
1–20	209	69.7
21–40	91	30.3
Years of social media usage		
2–25	8.39	3.62
Facebook usage pattern		
Usage per time/day *Max=100 times	4.72	8.23
Hours per usage/day *Max =6 hours	0.47	0.81
1–3 hours	298	99.3
3.01–6 hours	2	0.7
Minutes per usage/day *Max=60 min	12.49	14.75
Number of old friends *Max=5,000	391.62	799.68
Number of new friends *Max=3,000	115.89	268.28
To obtain the latest news	273	91.0
To chat with friends	259	86.33
To share information	239	79.67
Level of confidence when interacting with others from different cultures in a project		
Low (1–3)	33	11.0
Moderate (3.01–5)	165	55.0
High (5.01–7)	102	34.0

Based on Table 1, it can be inferred that on average, these rural youths have used social media for 8.39 years ($SD=3.62$) as a medium for social networking, expanding their social circles, developing interpersonal relationships, and maintaining existing relationships (Abu Samah et al., 2013; Bolong 2011; Datareportal, 2021; Ibrahim & Ainin, 2009; Razak, 2009; Sharifah Sofiah et al., 2011; We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2018). This study also found that a majority of respondents on Facebook had mainly connected with people from their school (95.5%), their village (65.4%), and their family (59.5%), indicating that Facebook is used primarily to maintain existing relationships between distant and close friends (Wan Norshira et al., 2018). According to Aabeid and Mustaffa (2020), Facebook helps build trust and maintain relationships in non-profit organisations, which aligns with the findings of this study on the importance of trust and social cohesion.

On the contrary, another social media platform study by Hassim et al. (2020) found that Instagram use among Malaysian youths is fuelled by social comparison, impacting self-esteem and life satisfaction. While Instagram promotes personal gratification and social mobility, Facebook serves as a platform for maintaining existing relationships and enhancing social cohesion. Meanwhile, Roslan et al. (2022) examined social media platform preferences among university students and found that Twitter is preferred for news consumption due to its simpler interface and ease of identifying fake news. Roslan et al. (2020) also highlighted the fact that students prefer using this platform due to the absence of family members, and wanting their own space. This contrasts with Facebook's role in maintaining social relationships and promoting social cohesion among youths, indicating that different social media platforms serve distinct purposes based on user preferences and needs.

Correlation between the frequency of Facebook functionality usage and sense of social cohesion

Table 2 reveals that there is a notable association between the frequency of Facebook functionality usage and the level of social cohesion, explaining 76.2% of the variation. The regression analysis results in Table 2 indicates a strong correlation ($R=.872$) between the rural youths' frequent use of Facebook functionality and their perceived sense of social cohesion, which means H1 is accepted.

Table 2. Results of SEM on the effect of frequency of Facebook functionality usage on social cohesion ($\alpha = 0.05$)

Construct	β	SE	Beta	CR	ρ
Conversation	0.318	0.063	0.415	5.019	0.000
Sharing	-0.128	0.046	-0.182	-2.780	0.005
Identity	0.138	0.048	0.201	2.883	0.004
Reputation	0.116	0.040	0.167	2.858	0.004
Group	0.252	0.049	0.348	5.168	0.000

*Note: β = unstandardised beta, SE = scalar estimates, Beta = standardised estimates, CR = regression weight, ρ = critical ratio

R = .872

R² = .762

Social group membership

Facebook membership-wise, the rural youths have joined either two or more social groups. About 59.7% joined an in-group, while 40.3% joined an out-group (refer to Table 3). The respondents were given a detailed explanation of the concepts of in-group and out-group.

The in-group was described as individuals who were familiar to the respondents and who they interacted with in their daily lives, such as family members, schoolmates, and members of their community. On the other hand, the out-group was defined as individuals who shared similar interests with the respondents but were either new acquaintances or anonymous individuals. These social group memberships were crucial to the study's main objective, which was to test the moderating effect of social group membership on the usage of Facebook functionality and the enhancement of social cohesion (Lee & Lee, 2018).

The study found that the four main domains of social cohesion were moderate, with only 40% of rural youth reporting a high level of cohesiveness within their Facebook virtual community. The majority (53.3%) reported feeling moderately cohesive. These results indicate that rural youth recognise the importance of their social group identity on Facebook. Similarly, Azhar et al. (2019) also found that there is a significant positive correlation between social cohesion and Facebook functionality usage.

Table 3. The distribution of respondents by social group

Types of social group	Frequency	%
In-group	239	59.7
Out-group	161	40.3

Social group as a moderator

In this study, the social group membership of the respondents, namely, the in-group and the out-group, was examined to determine if it moderates the causal relationship between the frequency of Facebook functionality usage and enhanced social cohesion. Social group membership is viewed as a psychological state that fosters a sense of togetherness and belonging among its members. Favouritism towards an in-group involves interpersonal interaction, whereas a purely intergroup interaction requires members to relate to each other as representatives of their respective groups (Kelley et al., 2003; Turner et al., 2019). By comparing the unconstrained model against the measurement model in Table 4, both models appear to be significant ($p < .05$).

Table 4. Model fit summary

Model	NPAR	CMIN	DF	P	CMIN/DF
Unconstrained	126	715.791	474	.000	1.510
Measurement residuals	63	845.306	537	.000	1.574

The comparison of the two models in Table 5 shows that $X^2 = 129.51$; $df = 63$; $p (.000)$. The two models under comparison differ in a statistically meaningful way. The hypothesis, which states that there is a difference between the two groups, is accepted since the two models are statistically significant.

Table 5. Significant difference in the moderating effect of social group on the overall model

Model	DF	CMIN	P	NFI Delta-1	IFI Delta-2	RFI rho-1	TLI rho2
Measurement residuals	63	129.514	.000	.021	.023	.006	.006

A form of moderating effect on the overall model exists if the difference is significant ($p < 0.05$) (Aiken & West, 1991). As a result, H2 is supported, indicating that social group membership can moderate the relationship between Facebook functionality usage and the

enhancement of social cohesion within the virtual community of rural youth (Azhar et al., 2019; Goh et al. 2020).

Following the confirmation that social group membership serves as a moderator, the subsequent discussions would elaborate on its moderating effect on individual paths in the study. As per Hair et al. (2019), a moderated path can be tested by examining whether the Beta coefficient for Group 1 is significant, while the beta coefficient for Group 2 is not, or whether the Beta coefficients for both groups are significant, but one is positive while the other is not, which suggests that the path is moderated.

Based on Table 6, the beta coefficients and significance levels of the two social groups indicate that the presence of social group moderates only two Facebook functionality usages, namely sharing and reputation, in enhancing the level of social cohesion.

Table 6. Moderation test results of social group on Facebook functionality usage and level of social cohesion based on the criteria set by Hair (2010)

Construct	β	Beta	ρ	CR for Difference
Conversation – not moderated by social group				
In-group	0.347	0.480	0.000	-0.668
Out-group	0.256	0.338	0.05	
Sharing – moderated by social group				
In-group	0.131	0.221	0.006	0.103
Out-group	0.119	0.145	0.277	
Identity – not moderated by social group				
In-group	0.098	0.149	0.081	0.732
Out-group	0.175	0.244	0.05	
Reputation – moderated by social group				
In-group	0.160	0.233	0.009	-0.725
Out-group	0.099	0.144	0.08	
Group – not moderated by social group				
In-group	0.231	0.322	0.001	0.236
Out-group	0.255	0.360	0.000	

The results of the multi-group test have demonstrated that there is a significant difference in the levels of social cohesion between the two social groups at a significance level of 0.05, with $\rho (0.000) < \alpha (0.05)$. This suggests that having a social group membership with a known group of people could enhance social cohesion. Within the in-group, respondents agreed that their sense of social cohesion would increase from .762 to .813 (as indicated in Table 7) when they frequently share inputs and have a positive reputation compared to the structural model.

Table 7. The moderation effect of social in-group on Facebook functionality usage and the level of social cohesion (following Hair's criteria, 2010)

Construct	β	SE	Beta	CR	ρ
Sharing	-0.131	0.047	-0.221	-2.773	0.006
Reputation	0.16	0.061	0.233	2.608	0.009

*Note: β = unstandardised beta, SE = scalar estimates, Beta = standardised estimates, CR = regression weight, ρ = critical ratio

R = .901

R² = .813

The valence of self-disclosure on social media platforms has a significant impact on how individuals form first impressions of others and their trustworthiness. Qin et al. (2021) discovered that self-disclosure valence influences perceived trustworthiness and likability, with trustworthiness mediating the effect on likability, especially when individuals feel distinct or slightly similar to strangers. This process is also influenced by the degree of apparent homophily. According to Haji et al. (2021), online private self-disclosure can result in the co-creation of experiencing value, such as self-affirmation, affective belief, and emotional connection. In conclusion, self-disclosure on social media platforms can have a substantial impact on trust, initial impressions, and the production of experiential value, with elements such as perceived resemblance and trust disposition playing a role. These findings highlight the importance of understanding self-disclosure dynamics in virtual communities.

Trust is a vital factor in relationships within and between social groups, such as families, friends, communities, organisations, and nations. According to Sharif et al. (2021), self-disclosure on social networking sites such as Facebook leads to the creation of social capital, with perceived usefulness and trust mediating the relationship between personal information sharing and privacy concerns. Similarly, Herrera and Kydd (2022) discovered that trust may be formed between identity groups by individuals taking risks in engaging with others, with positive interaction and credible communication bridging gaps and developing trust. These studies highlight the complex roles that trust and self-disclosure play.

Compared to the in-group, the frequency of content sharing and reputation building among out-group members was found to decrease their sense of social cohesion from .762 to .710 (refer to Table 8).

Table 8. The impact of Facebook functionality usage and the level of social cohesion in relation to social out-group moderation (using Hair’s (2010) criteria)

Construct	β	SE	Beta	CR	ρ
Sharing	-.119	.109	-.145	-1.087	.277
Reputation	.099	.057	0.144	1.749	.080

*Note: β = unstandardised beta, SE = scalar estimates, Beta = standardised estimates, CR = regression weight, ρ = critical ratio

R = .842
 R² = .710

The social in-group showed a higher level of social cohesion (R²=.81) than the social out-group (R²=.71), indicating that the in-group is more cohesive. Previous research by Green et al. (2009) contended that social cohesion is more likely to occur in ethnically homogenous communities that share binding and cultural similarities. Turner et al. (1987) also found that common category membership and attitudinal similarities can increase interpersonal attraction and liking among individuals. However, the current study found that the respondents were willing to befriend people from different ethnic backgrounds as long as they lived in the same neighbourhood, indicating a sense of community (Tanaka, 2018).

Accordingly, Zhao et al. (2008) claimed that familiarity has a significant impact on trust and perceived similarity. However, familiarity only has an indirect effect on the intention to acquire knowledge, which is mediated by the sense of belonging. While perceived similarity is important, emotional attachment to a virtual community may be more critical than trust alone. In the past, Turner et al. (1987) argued that individuals tend to self-categorise based on their similarities to those in their identified groups and their differences from those in other groups.

Research conducted by Liu et al. (2019) found that personality traits such as extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability are positively associated with a sense of belonging. The study found that individuals with high levels of extraversion and agreeableness, due to their tendency towards positive social interactions, are more likely to report a higher sense of belonging in their communities. Similarly, individuals with high emotional stability were found to have a stronger sense of belonging, as they are more resilient to stress and better equipped to cope with challenging situations.

CONCLUSION

Asians are from a more collectivist culture, thus they are more likely to have more frequent interactions and form a close circle of Facebook friends as compared to those from an individualistic culture. The sense of belonging can be conveyed through the depth of interpersonal “Conversations” between virtual community members and through associations and frequent interactions, where users would communicate with each other.

This study found that rural youths in 1Malaysia Wireless Village were more likely to feel socially connected to their close friends on Facebook rather than their other Facebook friends. This sense of social connection was stronger within their social group than with people outside of their group. Thus, the researchers suggest that for a community to be sustainable, members should have personal knowledge of each other, be treated equally, have positive attitudes towards each other, and engage in rewarding interactions.

In rural communities where ethnic diversity is less of a factor, the perceived costs of social interactions are lower, and the benefits of maintaining close-knit, supportive relationships are higher, leading to a higher sense of social cohesion among rural youths. This benefit is further supported by the relational cohesion theory, which emphasises that stronger emotional bonds and clearer social identities are fostered in environments with relative ethnic homogeneity. Despite challenges in forming close bonds with all Facebook friends, having a strong social group can enhance social cohesion. Communities that maintain close personal relationships, social equality, and shared values see enhanced social connection and cohesion.

This is supported by the observation that individuals who frequently use Facebook and interact with close friends in real life often feel more connected. To improve social cohesion, a model was developed (Figure 2) suggesting that Facebook’s Sharing and Reputation functions can help maintain a positive image and strengthen social bonds within the in-group. By providing free internet access, rural youths can more frequently engage with Facebook, allowing them to stay connected with their community. Essentially, empowering these youths to regularly interact and share information on Facebook enhances their sense of social cohesion and commitment to their community.

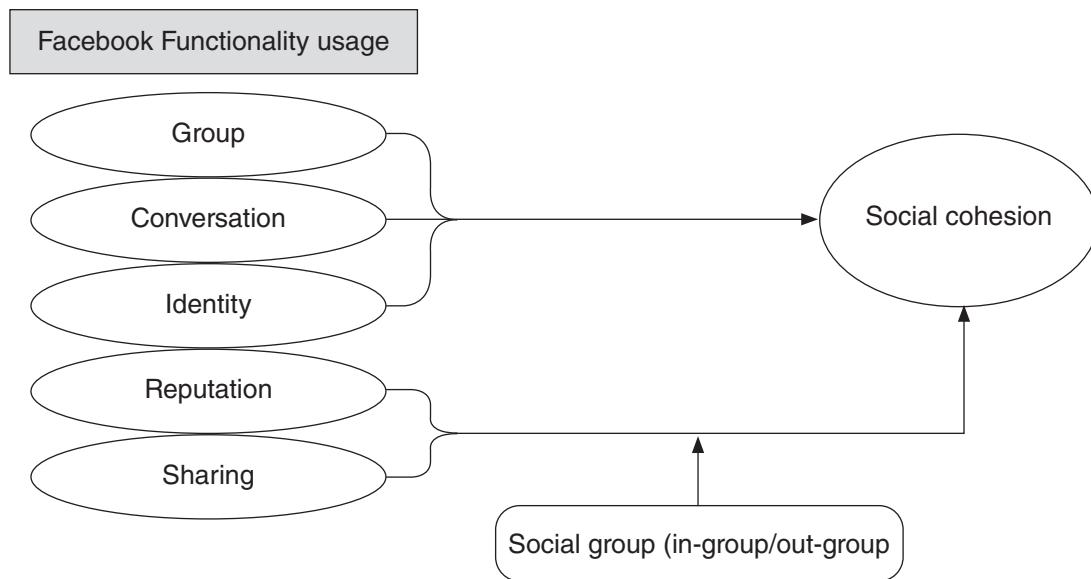


Figure 2. Enhancing social cohesion through social media functionality usage moderated by social group model

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