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Utilizing WhatsApp for Mutaba'ah during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Experiences of Ruquu Community Members in Bandung

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to describe the mutaba'ah Al-Quran program through WhatsApp group interactions provided by the Ruquu Community in Bandung. The study focuses on the perceptions and experiences of these community members' involvement in the mutaba'ah program by employing a phenomenological method that depends on indepth online and offline interviews with the community's founder as well as four purposefully selected community members. It can be argued that although it is something new, the mutaba'ah program through WhatsApp is a simple and voluntary process but has a positive impact on community members. This is due in part to the simplicity of the WhatsApp features. Furthermore, those who take part in the mutaba'ah program are highly motivated to study the Quran, despite the fact that some of them are still hindered by technological issues such as time availability and constraints related to limited internet connection at particular times.

Keywords: mutaba'ah; covid-19 pandemic; pengajian; Ruquu Community.

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INTRODUCTION

The internet has become an essential element of daily life in recent years, particularly in Indonesia (Jurriëns & Tapsell, 2017), especially in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been spreading since the end of December 2019 and has caused most individuals to carry out everyday activities from home in order to break the chain of transmission of this virus (Iswara, 2020). All of these behaviors then create a "new normal" in which people continue to engage in activities even in the pandemic situation.

These changes occur in almost every aspect of social life; education, economy, politics, culture, and even religious practices, which in the Indonesian context also arose the #prayfromhome campaign, which developed on social media following the previous campaign #workfromhome or #dirumahaja, which was also echoed in various social media and mainstream media throughout Indonesia and even globally. All types of public services should be delivered online, and some are delivered in a hybrid manner. Similarly, schools and formal educational institutions are being pushed to devise measures to deal with the crisis caused by the pandemic.

The similar thing can be seen in the activities of various communities of pengajian (recitation, Islamic study), which were originally held physically and centrally in one place but had to be done online with the support of various internet platforms, including social media, smartphone-based messaging apps like WhatsApp, online meeting platforms like Zoom Meeting, Google Meet, etc. In recent years, these numerous internet platforms have grown in popularity and have become an inseparable element of the pengajian process, as well as in the context of daily interaction and communication, making the relationship between religion and the media more obvious in people's life.

According to Asef Bayat (2007), actions that are produced in response to the media in pengajian activities or the like are called active piety, or Husein & Slama (2018) calls it online piety, namely actions that result from awareness of the importance of religious activities in the context of the abundance of information and communication media, especially internet and social media. The users of this platform realize that they cannot just wait and see without doing anything until the pandemic ends, but they are actively making use of the increasingly accessible and

popular media in their daily lives. In this situation, a number of internet and social media platforms can be a means to convey religious teachings effectively, so that the media not only a means of spreading religious teachings, however, it has become an inseparable part of the religious process itself (Campbell, 2005; Fakhruroji, 2019a; Rustandi, 2019; Muhaemin, 2017).

One of these activities is the use of the WhatsApp instant messaging platform for mutaba'ah activities in Ruquu Community in Bandung. Long before the epidemic, the community has been helping its members to learn, understand, and become accustomed to recite the Quran. The Ruquu Community is an abbreviation for the Rumah Quran Utrujah (Utrujah House of the Quran) located in the East Bandung area. Mutaba'ah, or recitation reports, are the principal activities of this community and are submitted on a regular basis, both daily and weekly. The major goal of this activity is to establish the habit of recite the Quran among its participants. In the era of the pandemic where mass gatherings were restricted, this community then employed online mutaba'ah by utilizing WhatsApp groups where all members provided regular reports on their recitation of the Quran.

Reciting and memorizing the Quran is one of the fundamental practices of worship for Muslims, which has ramifications for the notion that learning the Quran is obligatory. As a result, the Covid-19 pandemic situation, which restricts many types of public activities, did not reduce excitement for studying and recite the Quran. On the other side, the use of the internet has grown mainstream, heightening religious figures' awareness of the need of using the internet for religious purposes (see for example, Fakhruroji, 2019; Husein & Slama, 2018; Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020; Fakhruroji, Rustandi & Busro, 2020).

Technically, studies on the Quran learning were conducted in a variety of contexts, one of which was demonstrated in Bakhruddin (2021) study on the application of learning to recite and write the Quran in pandemic era and the challenges that arose. He added that the pandemic problem, which is a worldwide concern, has had an impact on many sectors, including education, and that online learning has become a solution used by numerous educational institutions as one of the strategic steps to adapt to the pandemic scenario. Likewise, learning to recite and memorize the Quran. He discovered that the concept of distant learning has resulted in collaboration between schools and parents, but it also offers technical

obstacles.

Concerning the Covid-19 pandemic, Ghozali & Dewi (2021) reexamined several academic reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic by linking them to various passages of the Quran. This study finds that using verses to respond to the pandemic phenomenon employs a scientific approach of understanding and confirming miracles of the Quran. The search for connecting contexts to find the relationship between the context of the revelation of the verse and the current context cannot be found in the process of interpretation because they generally do not review the historical aspect, so the various verses used cannot show a close meaning to the meaning contained in historical studies. Nonetheless, some studies have succeeded in bolstering evidence that the miracles of the Quran in terms of language can be examined using scientific instruments and are demonstrated to be capable of restoring the immune system and mental health of COVID-19 patients.

Aside from these studies, this study is more concerned with the utilization of WhatsApp application in the *mutaba'ah* program organized by the *Ruquu* Community in Bandung. *Mutaba'ah*, as it is referred as in this context, is quite relevant as a part of regular religious practice. Operationally, the purpose of this article is to learn about the process of *mutaba'ah* via WhatsApp in the *Ruquu* Community, as well as to learn about the views and experiences of community members regarding the use of WhatsApp in the program.

It should be emphasized that earlier efforts to learn the Quran have resulted in studies. As a result, it is vital to re-examine some of these studies to assess how far they have evolved, particularly in terms of the use of technology, particularly during the epidemic. As is well known, long before the pandemic, the activity of learning and memorizing the Quran has became a new vogue in Indonesia, at least in the last decade (Hayati et al., 2018; Hidayah, 2016). This is evidenced by the growth of both formal and informal educational institutions, such as *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) focused on producing *hafidz* (the Quran memorizers). Along with the pandemic, various research on the learning and practice of memorizing the Quran in relation to the internet have arisen by concentrating on the Quran memorizing achievement variable, which is related to the duration and frequency of internet usage. There are people who regard the internet as a hindrance in the process of memorizing the Quran, and those who regard it as a possible ally in the process of memorizing the Quran.

Several studies that consider the internet as a distraction, for example, are indicated in a study by Dhahir (2018), which revealed that students obtain higher results when they are not allowed or limited from accessing the internet. Zahro (2016) did a study comparable to this, measuring the intensity of gadget use and its relation with discipline in memorizing the Quran.

However, other studies have revealed that a range of internet platforms have become key supporting aspects in the process of learning the Quran, particularly in the epidemic era. This viewpoint is supported by studies such as Fakhruroji (2020) evaluation of the @qurancall Instagram account maintained by the Pseantren Darul Quran of Yusuf Mansur, a famous Islamic figure in Indonesia. This platform has proven to be a solution for individuals who desire to learn and memorize the Quran even in the pandemic era.

Similarly, Hidayati & Khumaira (2020) analyzed the memorizing curriculum at the Pesantren Daarul Quran Takhasus II in Cikarang. At the start of the pandemic, this pesantren instituted a policy of repatriating its studdents in order to prevent the virus's spread and to do online learning. According to the findings of the study, online tahfiz learning is carried out with the allocation of learning time limited to two meetings using WhatsApp video chats. This study, however, demonstrates that direct tahfiz learning is still more effective than online one, as measured by the amount of memorization and student enthusiasm to learn, which is better whether learning tahfiz face-to-face.

Arman Syah Putra & Fatrilia Rasyi Radita (2020) conducted another study on the rise of the online Quran learning paradigm during the Covid-19 pandemic. Both noted that the pandemic had various ramifications, particularly in restricting activities outside the home and diverting all kinds of mass activities from the home; work at home, study at home, and worship at home. One of the activities they mentioned is the process of learning the Quran online in order to bring the Quran learning to the community. They explained that the process of studying the Quran is largely done online, and while the effectiveness of this online learning process has not been fully validated, the paradigm of learning the Quran online has been well constructed.

In fact, this paradigm is being encouraged by an increase in the usage of specialized software for studying the Quran. This is demonstrated by a number of specific studies on the development of smartphone-based applications. Firstly, Alia, Sukma, & Mandasari (2021) studie on one of the Quran learning applications called FunRecite, which is an Augmented Reality-based Quranic Learning app for Children. Since it is intended to be a suitable learning medium, this app was created with the goal of enhancing the ability to read *hijaiyah* (Quranic, which is Arabic) letters. It becomes one of the most significant method for children in the digital era by utilizing Augmented Reality technology, which is a technology that mixes two-dimensional and three-dimensional virtual entities into an environment and then projects them in real time.

Second, Gunawan (2019) presents the construction of Android-based applications for the introduction of *hijaiyah* letters, which is essentially identical to the study. This study describes a technique to presenting hijaiyah letters to increase children's familiarity with hijaiyah letters pleasantly. Learning apps based on the Android operating system, which is extensively used in smartphones, may be used anywhere and at any time, and can be supplied with multimedia features that can mix text, graphics, and sound in a single device. He states that he created an application to introduce hijaiyah letters and how to pronounce them, which is fascinating so that young children are interested in learning *hijaiyah* letters and is also accompanied by exercises.

Meanwhile, more specific studies on mutaba'ah practices and their relationship to digital platforms are equally significant. Mutaba'ah is defined in this text as a collectively progress report activity with the goal of evaluating the quality of learning or meeting targets. First, a study related to the *mutaba'ah* program in the framework of daily worship monitoring, with the goal of evaluating the development of religiosity. Wijaya (2021), among others, studied on this topic. She investigated the *mutaba'ah* amal *yaumiyah* (daily reports) method's effectiveness in increasing religious behavior among students at an Islamic school in Mojokerto. This study reveals that the *mutaba'ah* program is one of the initiatives to boost students' required and *sunnah* prayers, dhikr, and Quranic recitations.

Every Muslim is expected to always increase the quality of worship to Allah SWT by offering the best worship. One frequent strategy utilized in this habituation process is to record daily practices on paper for review. Because the data may be lost or invalid, this procedure is deemed unproductive and inefficient. Furthermore, as technology progresses, this recording procedure can be carried out using new technological instruments to make it more effective and efficient. The recording or

storing procedure can be readily and rapidly handled by using particular programs, so that the display of the practice reports required to determine how effectively the worship is done every day can be achieved fast, precisely, and efficiently. As a result, this application can assist every Muslim in the process of registering charity and creating assessment materials to improve the quality of worship, resulting in improved worship.

Some related studies looked into the usage of the Smart Moeslim app as an Android-based daily worship evaluation (*Mutaba'ah Yaumiah*) (Pebrianto, 2017; Safitri, 2020). According to these two studies, the use of this app seeks to examine the development of student worship as well as enhance the pattern of documenting daily charity, which is done manually using a checklist of daily acts that are deemed less successful. Users are directly connected with notifications and can provide a summary of the evaluation for each worship conducted by using this application. The application also includes other features designed to aid users in performing required and *sunnah* worship.

Several previous studies have described the practice of learning the Quran through the use of new media, which is seen as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic situation as well as a form of public enthusiasm for the practice of learning the Quran through the use of new media, ranging from the use of social media to Android-based apps. As a result, the focus of this study is largely on the practical features and experiences of the mutaba'ah program using the WhatsApp app.

WhatsApp's effectiveness as a platform for interaction and communication has been studied in a various contexts, including as a medium for individual and group expression (Waterloo et al., 2018); relatied to bullying (Aizenkot & Kashy-Rosenbaum, 2018); and even as a medium for expressing condolences (Fakhruroji, 2019c, 2021). As a result, study on the benefits of using WhatsApp to connect religious activities is another occurrence that is distinctive from previous studies.

As previously stated, the purpose of this study is to discover the *mutaba'ah* program via WhatsApp in *Ruquu* Community and to investigate the perspectives and experiences of community members and participants in this program. As a result, this article employs the phenomenological technique, which is based on data gathered through in-depth interviews, both in person and virtually via phone or chat, specifically addressing the thoughts and experiences of members of this community participating in the mutaba'ah program. One founder and four members of this community

will be asked for information pertaining to the research aims as informants in this study.

In addition to interviews, data were gathered through offline and online participant observation. Offline observations were carried out to gather information related to the description of the *Ruquu* Community as the subject of study, while online observations were carried out by observing the conversations and interactions that occurred in the *Ruquu* Community WhatsApp group, particularly those related to the mutaba'ah program. In addition, the findings of online observations are linked to a documentation research in which the author screenshots talks about the *mutaba'ah* process. This process was carried out with the approval of the management and members of the *Ruquu* Community to avoid ethical infractions.

Data were then evaluated using theory and source triangulation. The theoretical triangulation step involves re-examining a variety of theoretical assumptions related to the research objectives, particularly those concerning the use of new media for the benefit of socio-religious activities. Meanwhile, source triangulation is being carried out by implementing the verification step of preliminary conclusions by re-confirming the information provided by all informants participated in this study. Following this stage, the data and information are presented in the form of conclusions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Profile of Ruquu Community

The Ruquu Community is a Quranic study community in the Bandung, Indonesia. This community was formed in 2017 and now has more than 60 members, with 40 active members, which are all women. The name Ruquu is an acronym for Rumah Quran Utrujah (Urtujah House of the Quran). This name is based on the community's purpose of learning and deepening the Quran, according to the story of the founder, Sita Simpati. The name "utrujah" originated from a fruit name narrated by the Prophet Muhammad in a hadith when narrating a person who is consistent in studying the Quran as well as the utrujah, namely a sweet and fragrant fruit.

As an abbreviation, the term Ruquu itself sounds quite familiar to Muslims making it easy to recognize and remember because this term can also refer to one of the gestures in prayer, namely when the body is bent in a straight line facing the Qibla. As a result, another reason for picking the

name Ruquu is the expectation that this community will be a kind of goodwill and loyalty to Allah. This is explained further down,

"Although Ruquu is an acronym of the Rumah Quran Utrujah, it is also intended to include worship values such as prayer, and in that prayer there is a movement called ruquu when we bow our bodies as a form of submission and service to Allah..." (Interview with Informant 01, December 2021).

This community was created on the premise and motivation that to become the best human beings, humans must be able to benefit other humans. This is also backed by the founder, who has competence and education in the field of the Quran, as well as by the local community,

"Basically, this community was formed in order to benefit other humans, *khoirunnas anfu'uhum linnaas...* We are all *khalifah fil ardh* (leaders on earth—author)" (Interview with Informant 01, December 2021).

This statement demonstrates that the founding of this community has a deep philosophical background, with the founder believing that this community is an effort to become a human being who can provide benefits to other humans, with the expectations that this community can become a good deeds to become a human being who is beneficial to other humans. This is also owing to the concept that humans are *khalifah* those are reminding other humans.

The main objective of this community, as the name implies, is the study of the Quran through regular weekly sessions. This meeting was devoted to reciting the Quran, memorizing the verses and surah of the Quran, and *tadabbur* (reflecting the meaning) of the Quran, which entails studying the interpretation and stories that include teachings from the Quran. This is one of the endeavors to broaden and deepen people's appreciation for the Quran. Furthermore, there are monthly activities that usually discuss topics that are relevant to the current circumstances, with many key subjects including hadith, family communication, knowledge of sharia economics, parenting, and others. Not only that, this community also organizes activities for children through the *Ruquu* Kids program with a madrasa-like concept where children can learn the Quran.

The Ruquu Community, on the other hand, arranges social activities as well. This action is frequently done as a kind of social involvement in various events that are made possible by fundraising. These money are subsequently donated through other forms of social activities, such as

participating in the Jumat Berkah events, which consists of delivering food to the congregation of Friday prayers, especially prior to the pandemi situation. These activities were also objected to orphans, and also delivering aid for the construction of renovated mosques or Islamic boarding schools, and victims of natural disasters.

This is done on the basis of the notion of wishing to help others. As a result, the *Ruquu* Community's activities are not restricted to learning the Quran, but also include social activities as a type of *amaliah muamalah* (social engagement activities). This can indirectly provide value to the community by bringing people closer together through activities they participate in together.

As shown in the profile of the Ruquu Community (Figure 1.), it can be seen that the number of members of this community is 66 people. Regarding the decision of the WhatsApp application as a medium for gathering fellow members, the founder of the community expressed as follows,

"WhatsApp is one of the most popular applications, and nearly everyone who owns a smartphone should have it. Furthermore, this application allows us to establish particular groups and is simple to use. So, among all available programs, WhatsApp is the one that all of our members are most familiar with. Of course, the launch of this WhatsApp group was also approved by all of our members..." (Interview with Informant 01, December 2021).

The convenience and facilities of the WhatsApp are the main considerations for members of the *Ruquu* Community to make it a virtual medium of communication and interaction, as can be seen from the narrative above. This application's popularity is undeniable since it is recognizable to practically all smartphone users, both Android and iOS, allowing them to communicate almost indefinitely by time and place, as mentioned in the context of mobile communication.



Source: Observer, 2021

Figure 1. WhatsApp Group Profile "Ruquu Community"

This WhatsApp group serves as an information center for fellow community members by serving as a means for engagement and communication among members. Each activity is posted by the admin and then prompts interaction in the form of communication in the form of text, emoji, or stickers. As shown in Figure 2, one of the posts in this group tells about the study of the Quran with the theme *Tahsin Tilawah* (improvement of reciting the Quran) and *Tadabbur*, which focuses on Surah Az-Zumar verses 10-20. Several members then commented on this post. There are some who agree, and those who answer by indicating their willingness to follow the recommendations in the previous post.



Source: Observer, 2021

Figure 2. Example of interaction of "Ruquu Community"

The conversation in this group demonstrates the phenomena of virtual interactions as one of the characteristics of digital society, and it also

provides an overview of the Muslim community's digital literacy. This symptom has essentially existed prior to the epidemic, but it has become more prominent during the outbreak due to numerous limits for carrying out crowd activities.

Mutaba'ah through the WhatsApp Group of "Ruquu Community"

The *Mutaba'ah* program, as previously indicated, is one of the fundamental initiatives operated by the *Ruquu* Community. The *Mutaba'ah* program is a daily recitation report in which volunteers participate. Therefore, the *Ruquu* Community essentially does not charge all community members to make regular reports, but rather anyone who is willing to participate. Members can communicate the progress of their activities with one another through this program, and members can encourage one another to study the Quran on a regular basis. The following is the story of the founders,

"The Mutaba'ah program at the *Ruquu* Community is entirely volunteer; anyone is welcome to participate. It's not forced. So, in the beginning of each session, we agreed to monitor each member's progress in reciting the Quran to motivate them. *Alhamdulillah*, it is still consistent today, despite the fact that it represents less than half of all members..." (Interview with Informant 01, December 2021).

Based on this expression, it is clear that this *mutaba'ah* practices in the community are entirely voluntary. Participants who constantly update every day, on the other hand, are significant. Because not all community members are active participants in this mutaba'ah activity, the *Ruquu* Community's *mutaba'ah* program is carried out using the WhatsApp application by forming a special group. As a group admin, the manager inserts numerous names of people who agreed to be included to the group so that they can each report their progress.

All participants routinely record the progress of reciting the Quran by utilizing numerous emojis symbols on WhatsApp, which reflect the achievement of the daily targets. This makes it easy for each member to update their report because they only need to input their name and then fill in the blanks with multiple emoji images that represent the targets that they have met. It is intended that this simple technique would make it easier for each member to actively participate in reporting the progress of their recitations. Furthermore, because of the pandemic situation that limits the physical meetings that this community regularly holds, interactions through WhatsApp groups are becoming more consistent. This may be due to the

desire of each member to continue to interact with each other as described in the following interview excerpt,

"Since the pandemic arives, our *silaturahmi* (gathering) has been hampered and compelled to carry out various types of activities from our respective places, but it is precisely because of the pandemic that online *silaturahmi* through our (WhatsApp) groups have gotten more intense, *Alhamdulillah*..." (Interview with Informant 01, December 2021).

According to the narrative above, the processes implemented in the *Mutaba'ah* program via WhatsApp in the *Ruquu* Community are fairly simple and aimed to make it easier for members to continue interacting with fellow community members so that the pandemic situation does not pose a significant barrier. Furthermore, participants generally have a favourable impression of the *Mutaba'ah* program via WhatsApp because it is assumed to make it easier for them to update at any time. Some members even displayed more favorable responses, such as being more engaged in reporting their daily reading habits, as shown in the following statement,

"Alhamdulillah, perhaps because the more time we spend at home has caused the more active we become in updating the Mutaba'ah Group. Furthermore, we need to engage with our fellow members, especially during a pandemic that prevents us from going elsewhere. So it's best to remain home and read the Quran..." (Interview with Informant 02, December 2021).

The same expression was also conveyed by other members as shown in the following expression,

"Reading the Quran will result in a *pahala* (reward), thus this is the simplest exercise, especially given the amount of free time I have in a pandemic situation. All family members are at home, and all activities are conducted at home, so I have more time, and I am motivated to maintain reporting the status of recitations and *mutaba'ah...*" (Interview with Informant 03, December 2021).

The narratives presented above demonstrated not only the members' passion and experience in improving their reading, but it also describes their experience with new media technologies, in this case the WhatsApp app. It is expected in the framework of digital society that the community has a larger role in the environment of communication and interaction provided by digital media and technology.

Figure 3 depicts the interaction of members of Mutaba'ah group of

the *Ruquu* Community, with an emphasis on the growth of each member's report. This post contains information that leads to a conversation in which each member uses emojis assigned by the admin to refer to various acts linked to the topic of the mutaba'ah report.





Source: Observer, 2021

Figure 3. Interaction of Mutaba'ah Group of "Ruquu Community"

The interactions depicted in Figure 3 show more of the *Mutaba'ah* group's progress with their reports. Although not all of them were successful, the interactions that formed in this group demonstrated the dynamics as well as the overall objective of forming this group. It should be mentioned, however, that those who do not furnish reports frequently have their own reasons, both technical and non-technical. This is demonstrated in the following interview excerpts,

"I do not always meet my daily goals, but it doesn't stop me from trying. The aim that is not met is frequently due to the fact that I have so many other things to complete that I don't have time to attain the target. But *Alhamdulillah*, fellow members continue to keep inspire one another..." (Interview with Informant 04, December 2021).

Furthermore, each member's update or non-update can be due to other technical issues, such as not having enough time of internet access, so they do not report the progress of daily recitations. This was stated by one of the members,

"... I don't always have time to fill up my internet data quota, so I can't tell the group if I have met my goal. However, fellow members have understood this kind of situation because others have experienced it as well..." (Interview with Informant 05, December 2021).

As indicated in some of the interview excerpts above, it is clear that members in general have a favourable impression of the *Mutaba'ah* Program via WhatsApp, which is carried out in the *Ruquu* Community. Similarly, their degree of experience normally follows the same path as other members, but technically, they may meet problems in obtaining the desired aims or technological obstacles that prevent them from reporting in the *Mutaba'ah* group.

CONCLUSION

Several key points can be made based on the data that has been analyzed. Firstly, the Mutaba'ah Program in the Ruquu Community follows a fairly simple process and is a voluntary program, which means that not all members of the Ruquu Community become members of the Mutaba'ah Whatsapp group. The simplicity and features of the WhatsApp are the primary factors motivating members of the Ruquu Community to use it as a medium of virtual communication and interaction. WhatsApp is a well-known program among all smartphone users, including Android and iOS.

Second, the Mutaba'ah group members' perspectives and experiences demonstrate the members' eagerness to enhance their Quran reciting skills while also describing their encounters with new media technologies, in this case the WhatsApp app. Technically, it was also discovered that, while not all members were able to meet the goal, the interactions that occurred in this group demonstrated the dynamics as well as the overall goal of forming this group. Meanwhile, individuals who do not provide reports caused by various technical and non-technical reasons, such as difficulty in their time or a limited internet access.

However, the authors are quite well aware that this study has significant limitations, particularly in terms of the relatively small scope for a study of the phenomena of utilizing WhatsApp for *mutaba'ah* activities. As a result, a more comprehensive study is required to make this study more comprehensive, which can be carried out by other researchers. To complete this study, some aspects that can be investigated further include: the effectiveness of using the WhatsApp for other similar programs; a deeper exploration of the factors causing each member's non-achievement of their target; forms of interaction and communication relations among WhatsApp members for similar groups; etc.

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