

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE 'SATU SENYUM' WHATSAPP COMMUNITY AMONG PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH CLEFT LIP AND PALATE

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Abstract

Cleft lip and palate (CLP) is a congenital condition that not only affects children physically but also creates emotional challenges for parents. In dealing with this situation, parents require both informational and emotional support from their social environment. One form of support emerges through digital communities such as the WhatsApp group "Satu Senyum," which serves as a platform for parents of children with CLP to share experiences. This study aims to analyze interpersonal communication within the WhatsApp community "Satu Senyum." The research employs a qualitative approach using content analysis of conversations among community members. The findings indicate that interpersonal communication in the community is characterized by openness in sharing experiences, empathy toward other members, supportive interactions through information exchange, positive attitudes in providing encouragement, and equality in communication among members. These findings suggest that the WhatsApp community functions as a communication space that fosters social support and strengthens relationships among parents of children with CLP.

Keywords: cleft lip and palate, digital community, interpersonal communication, social support, WhatsApp

INTRODUCTION

Cleft lip and palate (CLP), or medically known as cleft lip and cleft palate (CLCP), is a congenital condition in infants characterised by a cleft or gap in the lip, the roof of the mouth, or both. Cleft lip and palate (CLP) remains a significant issue in Indonesia. Data from the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, via the website lms.kemkes.go.id, states that cases of cleft lip without cleft palate occur in approximately 1 in 600 births, whilst cases of cleft palate alone occur in approximately 1 in 1,000 births. In 2012, the International Cleft Lip and Palate Training Centre recorded approximately 7,500 patients per year in Indonesia. In 2014, new data indicated that 8 out of every 1,000 births involved cleft lip and palate abnormalities (Fitrie, Hidayat, & Dahliana, 2022).

This condition causes problems for patients, including functional, aesthetic and psychological issues. Parents, particularly mothers, are no exception; they are particularly vulnerable to experiencing psychological problems that differ from those of mothers of children without the condition (Choirurizqoh, Rochmah, & Sugiarto, 2020). This is supported by an international study conducted by Heijsters et al (2024), which found that parents of children with CBL experience emotional distress, confusion, and a need for information regarding the care and medical interventions required. In addition to psychological stress, parents of children with CBL also face barriers in the form of limited knowledge (33%) and accommodation challenges (37%) in caring for their children with CBL. Social media bridges the gap arising from the high number of cases and the limitations of facilities and specialised healthcare personnel (Bangun, Tania, Kreshanti, & Halim, 2025). The media can influence emotions and decision-making because the media and information have a symbiotic relationship (mutually beneficial), meaning that information can be conveyed easily and quickly through media intervention (Faizal, Nurhaida, Suharti, & Zaimasuri, 2023).

Consequently, there is a need for support resources for parents of children with CBL. One such form of support is provided by the Satu Senyum (KiSS) community, a forum for sharing information and experiences regarding CBL care and related matters. Parents require psychological support throughout the parenting journey (Heijsters, et al., 2025). Consequently, it is hoped that parents of children born with CBL will gain a comprehensive understanding of the various stages of CBL care. Furthermore, the community can provide support to parents and individuals born with CBL. Support from ‘peers’ as well as CBL specialists—including surgeons, dentists, ENT specialists, speech therapists, and psychologists—is crucial for addressing CBL-related issues within their families (Satu Senyum, n.d).

One form of support is via social media, which many researchers believe can effectively raise public awareness, change attitudes and influence healthy behaviour (Wenas & Arsastha, 2025). One social media platform that can be utilised is WhatsApp, a user-friendly platform accessible to all regardless of age, profession, or social status, enabling users to send files, messages, images, videos, locations, and engage in online chats. WhatsApp is capable of supporting a community forum for mutual communication and the exchange of ideas, particularly regarding health issues (Fathon & Prasetyawan, 2021).

The Satu Senyum (KiSS) social support community, operating via a WhatsApp group, is unique in that its communication takes place without face-to-face interaction, involving parents of children with CBL from across Indonesia—from Sabang to Merauke—who are divided into various groups due to the user limit on WhatsApp groups. This community fosters an emotional bond characterised by the texts and emojis featured in WhatsApp messages. However, there has been little scientific

research into how digital communication can provide meaningful social support and health information.

Interactions in the exchange of information reflect interpersonal communication processes that enable empathy, care and a sense of mutual understanding. The level of a community's effectiveness is determined by its success in achieving its objectives, as reflected in the synergy between individuals and the group within that organization (Wardani & Kartika, 2020). Within the CBL community, interpersonal communication enables members to share experiences, offer encouragement, and exchange information regarding the process of child care. Consequently, this communication fosters social support that strengthens relationships among community members.

Against this background, this study aims to analyse the content of communication within the 'Satu Senyum' WhatsApp community, specifically the Satu Senyum V group which has 376 members, using a qualitative content analysis approach. The study seeks to examine how interpersonal communication within the WhatsApp community fosters social support for parents of children with cleft lip and palate (CLP). Communication taking place in the digital sphere serves not only as a means of exchanging information about child care, but also as a space for sharing experiences, empathy and emotional support amongst community members. Through the communication interactions that are established, this community acts as a space for social support that helps parents cope with the psychological challenges during the process of caring for their children.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using content analysis to explore patterns of communication, forms of social support, and the exchange of health information within the WhatsApp digital community "Satu Senyum". This approach was chosen as it is capable of capturing the meaning and context of interactions that occur naturally within conversations amongst group members. The subject of this study is the content of conversations taking place within the WhatsApp group "Satu Senyum", a community of parents who have children with cleft lip and palate (CLP). During the data collection process, the researcher acted as a passive member to observe the conversations without disrupting the established communication dynamics within the group.

The data sources comprised documentation of conversations collected over a specific period, with permission from the group administrator and members, as well as text messages containing elements of emotional support, informational support, and medical information shared amongst members. Data collection techniques were carried out through non-participatory observation and digital documentation, namely

the collection and archiving of conversation content or chat logs, whilst maintaining confidentiality and research ethics.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of an analysis of conversations within the ‘Satu Senyum’ WhatsApp community, it was found that interactions between community members are active and dynamic. Community members not only exchange information regarding the condition and care of children with cleft lip and palate (CLP), but also share experiences, provide emotional support, and respond to other members’ questions and concerns. The interactions that took place indicate the formation of social relationships through communication between community members, even though this was conducted via digital media. The conversations within the group demonstrated reciprocity, attentiveness, and concern among members, reflecting the characteristics of interpersonal communication.

To understand the quality of interpersonal communication occurring within this community, this study utilises the interpersonal communication indicators proposed by (DeVito, 1997)), which include openness, empathy, supportive attitudes, positive attitudes, and equality.

Openness

Openness is one of the key aspects of interpersonal communication, enabling individuals to share information, experiences and feelings honestly with one another. According to DeVito (1997), openness in interpersonal communication encompasses an individual’s willingness to disclose information about themselves to others and to respond honestly to messages conveyed by others. This attitude of openness allows individuals to discuss various experiences and problems they face, thereby fostering more effective communication (Wahyuni, Sugandi, & Sabiruddin, 2022).

Based on an analysis of conversations within the WhatsApp community “Satu Senyum”, openness is evident in the interactions of members who actively share experiences regarding the condition of their children with Cleft Lip and Palate (CLP). Parents do not hesitate to share their personal experiences regarding the diagnosis process, surgical procedures, and the care of their children with other community members.

An example of a conversation demonstrating openness within the community can be seen in the following excerpt:

Member A:

“...Back when my little brother was born, the paediatrician suggested an operation when he was 10 weeks old, weighed 10 kg and had a haemoglobin level of 10...”

Member B:

“First, consult a surgeon who is willing to perform the CBL operation; if the operation is approved, there will be a pre-operative health check at that hospital”
(Source: Conversation data from the WhatsApp group “Satu Senyum”, 11 April 2026)

This conversation demonstrates openness in sharing personal experiences and exchanging information with other members. This openness enables community members to exchange experiences and useful information. This finding aligns with the concept of openness in interpersonal communication proposed by DeVito (1997), which states that openness can strengthen relationships between individuals and foster more effective communication.

Empathy

Empathy is an individual’s ability to understand the feelings and experiences of others from their perspective. According to DeVito (1997), empathy in interpersonal communication occurs when an individual is able to put themselves in another person’s shoes so that they can understand what that person is feeling (Fadilah, M, & Maulana, 2025).

Based on the analysis of conversations within the WhatsApp community “Satu Senyum”, empathy is evident in the responses of community members when one member expresses concerns regarding their child’s condition. Other members typically respond with words of encouragement, prayers, or by sharing similar experiences to provide emotional support.

An example of a conversation demonstrating empathy can be seen in the following excerpt:

Member A:

“Mum, my child is scheduled for an operation next week. I’m still really scared.”

Member B:

“Stay strong, may the operation go smoothly and the recovery be quick. May your little one be cheerful again soon 😊🙏.”

(Source: Conversation data from the WhatsApp group “Satu Senyum”, 19 January 2026)

This conversation demonstrates empathy from a community member who is trying to understand the anxiety experienced by another member. The response provided is not merely information but also emotional support that can bring comfort to the member facing this situation. This aligns with the concept of empathy in interpersonal communication as outlined by DeVito (1997), who states that empathy enables individuals to understand others’ feelings and strengthens interpersonal relationships.

Supportiveness

A supportive attitude is one aspect of interpersonal communication that demonstrates mutual support between individuals during the communication process.

According to DeVito (1997), a supportive attitude is demonstrated through non-judgemental behaviour, offering positive responses, and creating an open communication environment in which individuals feel comfortable sharing their opinions and experiences .

Based on the analysis of conversations within the ‘Satu Senyum’ WhatsApp community, a supportive attitude is evident in the various forms of assistance provided by community members to one another. This support takes the form not only of words of encouragement but also of information that can assist parents in caring for children with cleft lip and palate (CLP).

An example of a conversation demonstrating a supportive attitude can be seen in the following excerpt:

Member A:

“Hi, does anyone know of any speech therapists in the Karawaci or Gading Serpong area?”

Member B:

“I go to the therapy centre in Tangerang Moderland.”

(Source: WhatsApp group chat “Satu Senyum”, 11 February 2026).

In addition to this conversation, other members even provided contact details for therapists. This conversation demonstrates that community members strive to assist one another by providing the necessary information. This supportive attitude reflects a sense of care among community members in helping to resolve the problems faced by others. This finding aligns with the concept of supportive attitudes in interpersonal communication according to DeVito (1997), who emphasises the importance of support in fostering effective communication and building positive interpersonal relationships.

Positiveness

A positive attitude is one aspect of interpersonal communication that reflects a positive outlook towards oneself and towards others during the communication process. According to DeVito (1997), a positive attitude can create a more comfortable and conducive communication environment, thereby enabling interactions between individuals to take place more effectively (Fadilah, M, & Maulana, 2025).

Based on the analysis of conversations within the WhatsApp community “Satu Senyum”, a positive attitude is evident in the use of words that are constructive and encouraging towards other members. Community members frequently express appreciation for the progress of other members’ children and offer moral support when other members face concerns regarding their children’s well-being.

An example of a conversation demonstrating a positive attitude can be seen in the following excerpt:

Member A:

“Mums, please keep us in your prayers. Hopefully her haemoglobin levels will rise quickly; the operation is scheduled for Thursday, but her haemoglobin is low.”

Member B:

“Oh God, what a brave little one. Stay strong, dear. Hopefully her haemoglobin will rise quickly so the procedure can go ahead soon ☺”

(Source: WhatsApp group chat “Satu Senyum”, 20 January 2026)

This conversation demonstrates a positive attitude in interactions among community members. Community members offer constructive responses and provide encouragement to one another. This positive attitude helps create a warm atmosphere of communication and strengthens interpersonal relationships among community members. This aligns with the concept of positive attitudes in interpersonal communication according to DeVito (1997), who states that positive attitudes can enhance the quality of interpersonal relationships within an interaction.

Equality

Equality is a condition in which individuals involved in communication respect one another and acknowledge that every individual holds equal value within the interaction. According to DeVito (1997), effective interpersonal communication can be achieved when those communicating demonstrate mutual respect and recognise that each individual makes an important contribution to the communication (Kristanto & Maliki, 2022).

Based on the analysis of conversations within the WhatsApp community “Satu Senyum”, equality is evident in the interactions between members, which take place openly without any hierarchy amongst community members. Every member has an equal opportunity to ask questions, share experiences, or offer advice to other members. This demonstrates that the communication within the community takes place on an equal footing.

An example of a conversation demonstrating equality can be seen in the following excerpt:

Member A:

“I’ve lost confidence and feel afraid ever since my child was born. Has anyone else been in a similar situation? I hope to gain some insight from all of your experiences.”

Member B:

“I think all the parents in this group must be feeling the same way, mum.”

Member C:

“In my experience, I only found out about the cleft palate at birth, so I just took it slowly, sis. In the first month, only a few people knew, but eventually I started to come to terms with it...”

(Source: WhatsApp group chat “Satu Senyum”, 7 May 2025)

This conversation demonstrates that community members value each other's experiences regardless of their background or prior experiences. Every member of the community has an equal opportunity to share experiences and gain information from other members. This aligns with the concept of equality in interpersonal communication according to DeVito (1997), who emphasises that effective communication can be achieved when individuals involved in the communication respect one another and view each other as equals.

CONCLUSION

The conversation demonstrates that community members value each other's experiences regardless of their background or prior experiences. Every member of the community has an equal opportunity to share experiences and obtain information from other members. This is in line with the concept of equality in interpersonal communication according to DeVito (1997), who emphasises that effective communication can be created when individuals involved in communication respect one another and view each other as equals.

The research findings indicate that interpersonal communication within this community is characterised by members' openness in sharing experiences, empathy towards other members' circumstances, a supportive attitude in providing information and assistance, a positive attitude in offering encouragement, and equality in interactions among community members. These five aspects demonstrate that interpersonal communication within the "Satu Senyum" WhatsApp community is capable of fostering mutually supportive social relationships among parents who share similar experiences.

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