

# IMAGINED COMMUNITY IN DARMSTADT (GERMANY)- A CASE STUDY OF THE PAKISTANI STUDENT ASSOCIATION (PSA) WHATSAPP GROUP

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper looks into how the Pakistani Student Association (PSA) WhatsApp group helps Pakistani students in Darmstadt, Germany, create an imagined diasporic community. Through semi-structured interviews with three participants, this study uses Benedict Anderson's (1983) idea of imagined communities as a theoretical framework to investigate how the group's functions promote a sense of community, connectedness, and belonging. Key themes under study are; information sharing, cultural connection, and social interaction. The findings of this study demonstrate the significance of the WhatsApp group in building a network of support and in serving as a platform to stay connected socially and culturally with each other for the members of PSA in Darmstadt, Germany.

**Keywords:** Imagined Communities, Social Media, Diasporic Community, information sharing, cultural connection, and social interaction, Pakistani Student Association (PSA), WhatsApp group.

## INTRODUCTION

In his seminal work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson (1983) defines nations as socially constructed communities, imagined by individuals who perceive themselves as part of a larger collective. This concept offers a prism through which diasporic communities that emerge in foreign countries can be understood. Networks have been established by the Pakistani diaspora in Germany, especially among Darmstadt students, to promote cross-cultural understanding and assistance. A network like this is the Pakistani Student Association (hereafter PSA) WhatsApp

group, which provides Pakistani students with a virtual environment to interact, share materials, and preserve cultural connections.

Many studies have been conducted on the creation of diasporic groups in the context of migration and globalization. Scholars like Castles (2003) and Vertovec (2009) highlight how diasporic groups adapt to their host societies while maintaining ties to their origin, underscoring the dynamic nature of diaspora. In the case of Pakistani students in Darmstadt, the PSA WhatsApp group appears as an essential tool to navigate the problems of living abroad while maintaining cultural identity.

This research paper looks into how the PSA WhatsApp group helps Pakistani students in Darmstadt, Germany, create an imagined diasporic community. Through semi-structured interviews with three participants, this study uses Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined communities as a theoretical framework to investigate how the group's functions promote a sense of community, connectedness, and belonging. Key themes under study are; information sharing, cultural connection, and social interaction. Although these three themes are self-explanatory, however, by 'information sharing' we mean how have the PSA WhatsApp group been used by the participants/members for information sharing. And, the information may include topics such as study links, scholarship opportunities, job openings, host country affairs, native country's current affairs, and any other daily updates regarding Pakistani students in Darmstadt. By 'cultural connection' we mean how the PSA WhatsApp group has been used by its members to stay connected with their culture through mutual interactions. And, how do the members of PSA WhatsApp group use this platform to exchange and maintain their cultural ties and identity among themselves. Lastly, by 'social interaction' we mean how do the members have used this platform for the socialization purpose. How do the members use this platform for social mixing/interaction with each other and to learn the acceptable ways of living in the host society.

Keeping in view the research objectives, we have formulated following research questions;

### Research Questions

1. How does the PSA WhatsApp group facilitate a sense of community among its members?
2. What are the main functionalities of the group that contribute to resource sharing and social support?
3. How do members perceive the role of the group in maintaining their cultural identity?
4. What challenges or limitations do members face when using the WhatsApp group as a tool for community building?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research on digital diasporas, including studies by Brinkerhoff (2009) and Alencar (2018), emphasizes the value of digital communication platforms in preserving cultural identity and

promoting social cohesion among diaspora members. According to Georgiou (2010), media and communication technologies play a significant role in diaspora members' daily life by helping them feel connected to and at home in their new country.

Brinkerhoff (2009) investigates how digital platforms allow diasporas to assist one another, maintain their cultural identities, and participate in transnational activities. Alencar (2018) examines the function of social media in preserving cultural ties and reuniting migrants with their home countries. These studies serve as a basis for examining the effects of the PSA WhatsApp group on Darmstadt's Pakistani students.

Transnational networks are vital for the survival of diasporic communities, according to Levitt and Jaworsky (2007). According to them, these networks help diaspora members stay connected to their home country while assimilating into their new communities. For Pakistani students in Darmstadt, the PSA WhatsApp group serves as a contemporary transnational network that promotes social contact, information exchange, and cultural ties.

Gajjala (2013) and Karim (2003) provide additional details on how internet platforms help diaspora populations create and preserve their cultural identities. Gajjala (2013) investigates how online forums give diasporic people a platform to express and work through their identities. Digital media's function in maintaining cultural customs and creating a feeling of community among diaspora individuals is covered by Karim (2003).

Mankekar (1999) critically examines the depiction of woman and womanhood in the Ramayan, zooming in on both the original text and its televised adaptation using a feminist framework. His analysis underscores how the narrative upholds conventional gender roles, patriarchal norms, and shapes women's identities within the ideology of Hindu nationalism. A leading theme is the "otherness" of women, where they are marginalized and interpreted contrary to the dominant, superior, male ideal. This practice expands beyond gender to religious minorities, as the Ramayan encourages a monolithic Hindu identity to the exclusion of Sikh and Muslim audiences. The concept of Lakshman Rekha manifests both the physical and metaphorical limitations enforced on women, demonstrating their confinement to social expectations of modesty, self-control, and

domesticity. The consequences Sita faced for crossing this line highlight the weak social status of women and the harsh punishments for transgressing patriarchal norms.

Furthermore, Mankekar (1999) investigates that the Ramayan supports essentialized gender roles through contrasting female characters. Sita symbolizes an immaculate, ideal, virtuous, chaste, and self-sacrificing woman while Kiki embodies the "dangerous woman," whose ambition and decisiveness endanger the patriarchal order. Motherhood is portrayed as the nucleus of female identity, with women's worth rooted in their roles as mothers, predominantly of sons, amplifying the patriarchal dominance on lineage and family pride. The Ramayan also acts as a means for fabricating Hindu nationalism, fading the lines between cultural heritage of Hinduism and Indian national identity, consequently subjugating minority groups. With the help of its narrative and symbolism, the Ramayan not only reinforces limiting gender norms but also promotes exclusionary ideologies, framing societal perceptions of gender, identity, and connection in both national and religious contexts.

Mankekar (1999) identified that Ramayan unveiled its significant role in amplifying patriarchal norms and shaping limiting gender roles for women. Through symbolic representation such as Lakshman Rekha and the contrasting depiction of female characters such as Sita and Kaikeyi, the narrative highlights a binary view of women either as threats to societal structure or as an embodiment of virtue marked by submission and self-sacrifice. In addition, the Ramayan's impact stretches beyond gender, merging with nationalist ideologies to craft exclusionary narrative which marginalize both women and religious minorities. This feminist analysis points out the nuanced ways in which cultural works like the Ramayan frame societal perceptions of gender, identity, and belonging, sustaining dynamics of inequality beyond the both private and public spheres.

According to Anderson's theory of 'imagined community', nationalism gives rise to nations and symbols like national flags influence people to act in certain ways that uphold and maintain an 'imagined community' (Osayuwamen, 2021). According to the International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences (2015), an 'imagined community' can be defined as a group of

people or a closed, self governing, and independent community wherein people share a feeling of commonness and connection on the basis of shared history, culture, and identity despite the fact they rarely or never meet each other (Anderson, 1991; Vujačić, 2015). Such a community features characteristics such loyalty, emotional attachments instead of conventional attachments such as religion and kinship

According to Adeline Koh (2016) Benedict Anderson put forth an idea that the media and communication systems became political by creating 'explicit community'. The inception of newspaper as media and industry gave rise to a new kind of political community which would result in nationalism and revolution. Koh (2016) argues that the use of technology would help people imagining their interpersonal relationships. And, social media, being part of the networked public sphere, is creating new discourses and discussions around the 'imagined communities'.

The findings of the reviewed literature encourage the researchers to explore and analyze the use and impact of the PSA WhatsApp group as a social media platform in terms of information sharing, cultural connection, and social interaction among the Pakistani students.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities underpins this research. Anderson posits that a community is "imagined" because its members will never know most of their fellow members, yet they perceive a sense of shared identity and solidarity (Anderson, 1983). This idea is especially significant in diasporic settings, as people's geographical dispersion calls for other ways to communicate. Due to their ability to facilitate continuous communication and resource sharing across geographical boundaries, WhatsApp groups serve as contemporary tools for maintaining imagined communities.

Anderson (1983) claims that a nation is socially constructed community which is imagined by the members who consider themselves as part of that community. Benedict Anderson (1983; 1991; 2006; 2020) unpacks the ways used by media in creating the imagined communities by affecting and influencing individuals' social psyche. He elaborates on how the written word was used as a tool by authors, governments, churches, and media outlets 'to define a mass audience in the public

sphere through dominant images, ideologies, and language' (Anderson, 2020). In this research paper, we have attempted to explore how did the PSA WhatsApp group helped its members to create, uphold, and maintain an imagined community.

According to Anderson (1991);

"...the nation is an imagined community because most of its members will never know each other; it is imagined as a limited community because it is externally bounded by other nations; and it is seen sovereign because it is historically rooted in the idea of internal and external freedom (popular rule and national independence). Finally, the nation is imagined as a community, because it is 'always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship'" (Anderson, 1991: p. 7).

Hiller and Franz (2004) talk about how diasporic communities and identities are shaped via digital communication. They contend that ongoing interaction and the exchange of resources are made possible by digital platforms and are essential to preserving an impression of community. Georgiou (2010) expands on this topic by exploring the ways in which media and communication technologies affect diaspora members' daily life and help them feel a feeling of connection and belonging to their own homeland.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the current analysis the researchers have used a qualitative approach and collect data mainly through semi-structure interviews. Three Pakistani students, who are active in the PSA WhatsApp group, were interviewed for 45 minutes each. The interviews focused on their experiences, opinions, and interactions within the group. The question aimed to gather story about how the group creates a sense of community and supports its members. As for the selection of these three respondents, we sent a message in the group to seek volunteer participants in the research process. These three respondents agreed to give interviews.

### Data Collection

Interviews; The interviews were conducted in both Urdu and English and were recorded with the permission of participants. For the reason that the interviews were semi-structured they permissible for deeper discussion of the respondent experiences and opinion

Field Notes; During and after the interview, detailed notes were taken to capture important

themes, meaningful quotes, and non-verbal cues. These notes added context and developed the analysis. Apart from this, we recorded the interviews with the permission of the respondents. We took detailed notes throughout the interview, noted quotes, recorded non-verbal cues, and key points. And, immediately after the interview, we reviewed our notes for clarity and added any missing details from the recorded data and memory.

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to find common patterns in the interview data. The key themes identified were information sharing, culture connection and social support. The analysis process involved organizing the data, identifying main theme and interpreting the result based on the selected theoretical framework.

### Ethical Considerations

Strict ethical guidelines were followed through the research process:

- Participants were informed about the purposed of the study and their right to withdraw at any time.
- The respondents who are also students had no objection to enlightening their identities. The data was stored steadily and only the researcher had access to the raw data.
- Participation was completely voluntary, with no rewards given. Participants were guaranteed that their replies would be used only for research purposes.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Before conducting the interviews, we developed a set of questions that will guide the conversation and gather rich data from participants. Here are some questions for 45-minute interviews:

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself and how long you've been a member of the PSA WhatsApp group?
- Why did you join the PSA WhatsApp group?
- How often do you participate in the group discussions?
- How has the PSA WhatsApp group helped you feel connected to the Pakistani community in Darmstadt?
- Can you give some examples of how the group has helped you with practical issues like accommodation or finding a job?



- Do you participate in any social events organized through the group? How important are these events for you?
- How does the group help you maintain your cultural identity living abroad?
- Have you faced any challenges or limitations using the WhatsApp group to connect with the community?
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with the PSA WhatsApp group?
- What do you think is the future of the group in fostering the Pakistani community in Darmstadt?

### **Facilitating an Imagined Community; Information Sharing and Resource Exchange**

The PSA WhatsApp group serves as an important platform for adherents to share information and resources. Subgroups like “Accommodation Help” and “Job Board” provide support to help members to manage life in Darmstadt. One participant stated; “When I first moved here, I found my accommodation through the PSA group. It saved me a lot of time and stress.” Another respondent stated that “I moved to Germany for my studies and have been part of the PSA WhatsApp group for quite some time now. Since arriving in Darmstadt, I’ve found this group to be one of the most valuable resources for Pakistani students and professionals. It’s not just an information hub but also a great way to connect with like-minded people”. Third participant responded as; “When I first arrived, I was looking for ways to settle in, and the PSA group immediately stood out as a welcoming space. Whether it’s finding accommodation, understanding local procedures, or just making friends, the group is always buzzing with helpful discussions. Joining felt like stepping into a ready-made support system”.

Third respondent also responded as; “When I initially came here, I did not have any accommodation and I was living in a hotel and one of my colleagues told me about PSA WhatsApp group that this group might help you finding an accommodation so at first place I did join the group to find an accommodation for me. And, the other reason to join the group was that I was not familiar with the German language and rules and regulations of this new world I need some seniors who can guide me on this. And, the third reason to join this as I came to know about registration at different offices so I joined the group to seek step

by step help from seniors so I don’t get messed up the things and complete my process smoothly. (He raised a finger at this point and raised his voice as this is the most important point). I became a friend with many like-minded people through this group and we spent time together and whenever there is an event we feel like we are in our home country as the surroundings gives the vibes of own local Pakistani culture”.

This shows that the PSA WhatsApp group makes it easier for new students by giving them one place to find consolidated sources of key information.

### **Social Interaction, Connectedness, and Support Networks**

The group also acts as a virtual social space where participants can connect and form relationships. Members shared that they chat casually and celebrate cultural happenings virtually. One participant responded; “We share Eid greetings and even organize small meetups through the group. It feels like having a family here”. We asked the respondents that how often do they participate in the group discussions? One respondent replied; “Quite often! I enjoy being part of the conversations, whether it’s guiding new members, discussing upcoming events, or sharing useful resources. There’s always something interesting happening in the group, and it’s great to be part of a community that actively engages with each other”. Another one responded; “I rarely participate in the group discussions because I think more seniors are already out there to help new comers so I think my suggestions and opinions has less value or there is a chance that I might not well aware of the system and language so I don’t want if I might gave some wrong information so mostly I tried to avoid myself to participate in the group but if someone seeks academic help I respond to them and try my best to satisfy the queries”.

I add to this that this is what you think but you are experienced to new comers so you can help new comers with initial information and registration processes and when these kinds of queries came you still don’t participate? And he answered; “Yes, I participate in such kind of general discussions but when there are some intense queries like visa related and rules and regulations. I mostly tried to avoid to participate but I do read the conversations for myself or for suggesting some friend in future”. Third respondent replied to the question as; “There are always active discussions in the group

and subgroups and you are being a member also well aware of those discussions, like accommodation ,genera stuff, buy/sell/giveaway forum , job search related topics and family reunion kind of stuff under designated sub groups of PSA main channel and also Dokda announcement which are always helpful to participants.it also has information about new rules and regulations in student related offices and language related classes. How to get PR or after PR steps are always the part of group discussions. It also has information about cultural events like Eid days, National days or any cultural related news which have some relevance with the Diasporic community in Darmstadt. And, these discussions are always helpful and ties our knots with our culture”.

We asked the respondents that how has the PSA WhatsApp group helped you feel connected to the Pakistani community in Darmstadt? One respondent replied as “It has played a huge role! Living abroad can sometimes feel isolating, but this group makes sure no one has to go through it alone. From casual chit-chat to serious discussions, it creates a strong sense of belonging. It’s amazing how people, even if they haven’t met in person, are always ready to help and support each other”. Another participant stated that; “PSA organizes events like Eid events, In Ramadhan Iftaar events, Birthdays Parties and Walima events as I remember last year Eid ul Adha was near and I was feeling home sickness as this was my first ever Eid away from my family and I was missing the home routine and preparation which we do for that Eid but a week ago from Eid we got news that PSA is organizing an Eid Milan Party and Eid day gathering after Special Eid Namaz. This event somehow made me realized now I at least will be among my own community on that day and I will have an opportunity to celebrate it like we do in Pakistan not with the full extent but to somehow it was relieving. Dokda again is a part of PSA created by PSA has some special gathering on the other side as well where events help us feel like we are together here enjoying their events as we do in Pakistan. One special thing for PSA community center is that they always invite Pakistani community and sometimes to Indian and Bengali students as well on lunch and dinners where members play indoor games and enjoy traditional food as well and this is a routine of every Sunday and I anxiously waiting for Sundays here”.

The participants’ interactions through the PSA WhatsApp group help them in creating emotional ties with each other and in mitigating the sense of loneliness in the foreign country. This feeling is mutual among all Pakistani student diaspora in Germany. The group allows members to share experiences, ask advice, and back each other in the time of need.

### **Maintaining Cultural Connection**

The participants highlighted how the group helps them maintain their culture identity by sharing traditions, news and cultural practices, and how it keeps them in a bond to their roots. One participant stated; “We often share poetry, songs, and even recipes in the group. It’s a way to keep our culture alive while living abroad.”

We asked the respondents that how does the group help you maintain your cultural identity living abroad? First respondent replied as “It’s a constant reminder of home. Whether it’s discussing cricket, arranging Eid get-togethers, or even sharing jokes in Urdu, the group keeps our culture alive in a foreign land. The way people come together for religious events like Ramadan and community prayers makes me appreciate our culture even more”. Another respondent stated “There is no second thought except this that the sole purpose of this group to create is to connect and gather Diasporic Pakistani community in one place so they cannot feel alone in a new unknown world and share their thoughts, experiences and information and knowledge to new comers and helps boost the presentation of a community in a new society. This group always shapes and foster our identity in a positive way. These get to gathers and events organized by PSA help feel community to get the vibe of living in a closed cultural community. if I say the main purpose of making this group is to provide Diasporic community a platform where they can relate themselves with their own culture values and ethnicity is not wrong. Even, one hour gathering on Friday prayer where all people get connected to each other offer prayer and greet each other is somehow enough to recall their sense of belonging. Indeed, Friday is the day when we spare some time from the German busy life to enjoy moments of togetherness”.

The third participant sated; “Yes as I mentioned religious events like Eid days, Independence Day special gathering with green flags in city center and other events like wedding ceremonies and birthday

parties under PSA forum helps maintaining our cultural identity here”.

To sharing the culture content can support members feel bonded to their heritage and sense of belonging. The group also helps its members to organize and celebrate various culture events which ultimately help them strengthening their community connections.

### Challenges and Limitations

Despite its benefits, the PSA WhatsApp group faces certain limitations. Such issues highlight the need for better moderation and subgroup management to enhance the group’s effectiveness. Participants suggested implementing guidelines for posting and organizing information to address these challenges.

Although the PSA WhatsApp group has much utility, it also has some boundaries. These challenges show the need for enhanced moderation and sub-group management to make more operative. Participants suggested setting guideline for posting and organizing information to improve the group.

Following are the challenges and limitations shared by all of the three participants in the current study; One participant articulated frustration with overcrowded sub-group, particularly those for accommodation and job posting. The huge number of messages often caused significant announcement to get lost in dissimilar discussions. He stated; “Sometimes, important announcements get buried under unrelated messages. It can be overwhelming to sift through all the messages to find relevant information.”

The member emphasized the need for superior moderation and organization in the sub-group to keep key information easy to find.

Similarly, the other member clarified that misinformation is the major issue in the WhatsApp group of PSA. Sometime, unverified or incorrect information is shared, causing confusion and possible problems for participants. He stated; “There have been times when someone shared incorrect information about visa regulations or university procedures. This misinformation can cause unnecessary stress and problems for members.”

For the solve such problem, the member suggested creating a verification system or assigning knowledgeable participants to fact check and

conform significant information before it is spread in the group

The third participant mentioned that while the WhatsApp group is a helpful resource, not all participants actively participate. Some participants are passive and don’t engage in discussion or to the group. He further stated that “Not everyone participates actively. There are many passive members who don’t contribute to discussions or share their experiences. This limits the group’s potential to be a fully supportive community.”

This member suggested promoting more active participation by organizing virtual events or activities that encourage involvement, helping to create a more collaborating and supportive community. To tackle these issues, the PSA WhatsApp group can become more effective better support its members.

### CONCLUSION

At the outset of this research endeavor, we intended to find out the role of the Pakistani Student Association (PSA) WhatsApp group in inculcating a sense of community among its members, the major functionalities of the group that contribute to resource sharing and social support, the perception of the group members regarding the role of the group in maintaining their cultural identity, and the challenges or limitations faced by the group members when using the WhatsApp group as a tool for community building. Drawing on the concept of ‘imagined community’ proposed by Benedict Anderson (1983) in his seminal work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, we have attempted to conduct a thematic analysis of the interviews of three conveniently selected PSA WhatsApp group members. The interviewees were selected on volunteer basis and their responses were analysed within the context of three pre-conceived themes i.e. the role of PSA WhatsApp group in terms of ‘information sharing’, ‘cultural connection’, and ‘social interaction’.

After a cautious inference of the careful, scientific, and theme oriented thematic analysis of the interview data we can conclude that in terms of ‘information sharing and resource exchange’ the PSA WhatsApp group makes it easier and convenient for the new students arriving from Pakistan in Germany by giving them one place to find consolidated sources of key information. In terms of ‘maintaining cultural connection’ and

maintaining cultural identity, the PSA WhatsApp group serves as a platform where the members i.e. Pakistani students studying in Germany can share their cultural contents which ultimately make them feel connected with their native cultural identity. They feel a sense of belonging with their culture and heritage through this platform. The group also helps its members to organize and celebrate various culture events which ultimately help them strengthening their community connections. And, in terms of the 'social interaction', according to the respondents, the PSA WhatsApp group is the most integral and key platform for the members. Their interactions through the PSA WhatsApp group help them in creating emotional ties with each other and in mitigating the sense of loneliness in the foreign country. This feeling is mutual among all Pakistani student diaspora in Germany. The group allows members to share experiences, ask advice, and back each other in the time of need. According to Anderson (1991); a nation is an imagined community because majority of its members won't know or meet each other, the community is surrounded by other and different communities, it is independent and sovereign from the communities around it, and because it is based on a close companionship. Our research findings reflect the same kind of responses and feelings from the respondents of my study. Similarly, many other research studies on digital diasporas, including studies by Brinkerhoff (2009) and Alencar (2018), emphasizes the value of digital communication platforms in preserving cultural identity and promoting social cohesion among diaspora members. According to Georgiou (2010), media and communication technologies play a significant role in diaspora members' daily life by helping them feel connected to and at home in their new country. Our research findings endorse and support the same thesis that the PSA WhatsApp group of Pakistani students studying and living in Germany help them stay connected with each other socially, culturally, and personally. The platform helps them in creating emotional ties with each other and in mitigating the sense of loneliness in the foreign country. So, conclusively, it can be claimed that the WhatsApp group of PSA plays significant role in creating a sense of community amongst Pakistani students in Darmstadt. It helps participants share information, interact socially, and stay linked to their culture making it easier to adapt to life abroad

while staying connected to their heritage. However, issues like over-crowded sub-group and misinformation need to be addressed to enhance its effectiveness.

#### Implications for Future Research:

Future research could inspect how other digital platforms affect diaspora communities. The same kind of research could be conducted employing the same method on other set of students living in other parts of Germany. Future researchers could expand and include more themes within this concept of imagine community. Similarly, other methodological tools such as focus group, panel discussion, and participant observation can be applied to get more valid findings to test the concept of 'imagined community'.

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