

FROM SERENDIPITY TO BUILDING COMMUNITIES

Three personalities share their stories about how managing a social media group has brought amazing opportunities that help others and change lives.

Social media platforms such as Facebook Groups have in the last decade, made their presence felt by bringing people with the same passions and interests together.

They offer opportunities for like-minded people to share information, personal experiences, and resources, as well as providing support to one another.

With their passions and interests, founders and administrators of social groups have created a culture that encourages participation and an environment where members feel comfortable sharing ideas and have a sense of belonging. The groups have become a place members identify with, online and physically.

We speak to three founders/co-founders of such groups to get their thoughts on what inspired them to form their group and how members in their group share ideas and turn them into reality.

ALL FOR A SUSTAINABLE AND WASTE-FREE LIFESTYLE

Khor Sue Yee
Zero Waste Malaysia

Zero Waste Malaysia, which was registered as a non-profit organisation (NGO), started as a Facebook Group back in 2016.

Khor Sue Yee, a graduate in Chemical & Environmental Engineering, stumbled upon a TED Talk by American environmental activist Lauren Singer, who has been living a zero-waste life since 2012. Singer's mission and her lifestyle struck a chord with Khor who was working in Beijing, China at that time. She was inspired to live a zero-waste lifestyle and shared her beliefs on social media, where she met another zero-waste advocate, Aurora Tin, who was also in Malaysia.

"We want to inspire people around us to start their own initiatives or to start their own community. By starting small, you will find your own tribe."

— Khor Sue Yee



Tin invited Khor to join the Zero Waste Malaysia group which had just started out and had less than 100 members. After Khor returned to Malaysia, she decided to team up with Tin to spread the zero-waste movement, and the community started growing.

"We are like-minded people who share our experiences and ideas," says Khor. Soon, a few of the core members met up during their community gatherings that happened in various forms, from night markets to picnics in the park.

"In 2018, we officially registered the group as a non-profit organisation. More people were aware of our zero-waste movement. We started receiving inquiries from corporations to help bring sustainability to their organisations. As we decided to facilitate such programmes, we felt it was appropriate to have a formal structure," says Khor.

In December 2017, the group held the first Zero-Waste Festival with 15 vendors and more than 1,000 participants to show how one can live a zero-waste lifestyle with mini exhibitions and talks. They received wide media coverage that helped them reach many new members.

Zero Waste Malaysia has continued to grow. Khor, who took on the role as a director full-time in 2020 has, with her team, continued to push and create social media content and videos and organise festivals, in which they help vendors with reusable solutions. Besides three full-timers and one part-timer, the group has also attracted many volunteers who help organise events, and update their social media

accounts and their website content.

After having their presence solely online for two years, Zero Waste Malaysia had their first physical event in late April this year in The School, Jaya One to launch a web platform called Trash Encyclopedia, a platform of resources where people can navigate and find answers relating to trash.

Zero Waste Malaysia has a strong social-media presence on various platforms to spread the movement through creative ways. They have been working with the media and organising educational talks for schools and corporations.

Today, Zero Waste Malaysia Facebook Group has 41.2K members. "There are frequent questions on what is recyclable, and also posts by people who share their own experiences of zero waste," says Khor, adding that the admins let the group run organically, where members comment freely.

Besides advocating individual actions, Zero Waste Malaysia also strives to be a resource platform. There are resource handbooks and education plans for students on waste issues that can be accessed and downloaded freely, available in English, Bahasa Melayu, Mandarin, and Tamil. The TrashPedia will also be available in all languages by October.

Khor says while members of Zero Waste Malaysia are very diverse, they want to engage local community groups across the country to start small and grow organically.

"40 per cent of all members on

Khor Sue Yee,
co-founder and
director of Zero
Waste Malaysia



Sue Yee (second right)
and her committee

our Facebook Group are from the Klang Valley, but now we've noticed communities in different states have been sharing ideas and initiatives among themselves," she says.

Zero Waste Malaysia often looks out for collaborations with other environmental groups in support of each other.

"We want to lead by example. We want to inspire people around us to start their own initiatives or to start their own community. By starting small, you will find your own tribe," she says.

A UNIQUE LONG-RUNNING LITERARY GATHERING

Sharon Bakar
Readings@Seksan

Readings is a group that has been sharing creativity over the last 17 years in a weekly session where writers are invited to read their works to an audience.

It was the brainchild of Malaysian author and poet, Bernice Chauly, and the group is now helmed by Sharon Bakar, writing coach, editor, and publisher who read at the very first session of Readings.

"The aim of Readings@Seksan, the venue which is held, is to encourage writers by giving them a platform for them to read their work and socialise," says Sharon.

"As writing is a very solitary occupation, it's helpful for writers to have the chance to test works in progress on a live audience. The events help generate a wider interest in local writing and give newly published authors an opportunity to sell copies of their books, and for everyone to network," she says.

Sharon says the group had become a less strictly literary event over the years.

"I want it to have more

variety. There is always a mixture of the established and newbie, fiction and non-fiction, poetry and prose, published and not yet published, in Malay and in English. We also like to throw in some music and performances when we can for variety," she says.

Sharon thinks there is a real sense of community created by these gatherings, and everyone is so supportive of the work of others.

Each session is by invitation; preference is given in any particular month to those with a book to promote.

"We want to encourage keen new and unpublished writers but we also need to be convinced that they can hold the audience's attention when they read," she says, adding that everyone gets the same billing and same amount of time.

"The gathering is for anyone. You don't have to be a writer to join us. Many who have been to our events regularly aren't writers but they enjoy meetings and support people there."

She says Readings is all about

sharing creativity and ideas. It is about self-expression. Participants are able to share all kinds of ideas from social-political to even supposedly sensitive topics such as race and religions. Then there are things that make you laugh or readings about personal experiences.

"What's most important is having the diversity of people," says Sharon. The group consists of people from all races and backgrounds, as well as people from overseas or Malaysians living overseas.

Readings has more than 2,000 members on their Facebook group, but its average attendance is about 40. There is a core of people she can count on to be there every time, although there are also first-timers.

"We don't want to be seen as cliquish. And at the end of the session, it became a social occasion when people adjourn to have a drink and chat," she says.

During the pandemic, Readings has adapted to new ways of sharing, by making videos on Readings@Home over YouTube.



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— Sharon Bakar

Sharon Bakar, founder of Readings@Seksan

The videos have been programmed to come out at the same time—the last Saturday of the month.

"With this new platform we found that we could do things that we could not during live sessions, such as sharing illustrations and having all kinds of visual effects. We are also able to have Malaysians overseas participate and read," she says.

Sharon intends to keep the videos going even though they've resumed meeting up physically, which started in May. And she is thinking of expanding the video sessions to include more writers from Southeast Asia.

HOW TO FORM YOUR OWN GROUP

Ready to commune with others? You may consider starting a social media group. There are several steps to initiating groups, whether they be writing groups, art support groups, financial empowerment groups, investment clubs or whatever tribe you need to move forward in life. Here are the steps:

1 FIGURE OUT WHAT YOU WANT.

Write down the characteristics of your ideal group. Include:

- regularity of meeting
- rules for members
- size of group
- group's focus
- qualities you want to see in the group members
- where you meet and how long the sessions are

Say you're planning to start a financial empowerment group. Your ideal vision of your group might look like this:

"My Financial Success group meets once a month at a cafe. Once a year we go out for happy hour to celebrate our successes. Members in this group are pro-active, have a lot to contribute, and are willing to share information. They are also kind and supportive and listen to each other. Our focus is personal and

professional finance. We talk about: saving, investing, retirement accounts, managing our finances, how we bill for our time, best business practices, insurance, and anything that relates to financial empowerment.

"We meet for 1-2 hours and stay focused on the money. Each person has 15-30 minutes to share his or her successes and challenges. Each member has homework that he or she assigns to herself. This helps the members make progress—knowing that the group is holding them accountable."

2 ONCE YOU HAVE YOUR VISION OF YOUR GROUP, START SEEKING MEMBERS.

Make a list of people you know who may want to join. When you contact them, you'll be able to describe exactly what you want to create. They'll be able to tell if this is something they want to join or not.

3 SET YOUR FIRST MEETING.

Use some of the meeting time to come to agreement on how you want to operate. Setting up your group will take a little time, but it is worth it.





UNITED WITH OUR COMMON ROOTS

Bert Tan

Malaysian Heritage and History Club

Malaysian Heritage and History Club (MHHC) is one of the most vibrant and lively Facebook groups that has more than 44,000 members sharing a common interest and exchanging ideas on history, heritage, and culture.

The group, founded by Malacca-hailed Bert Tan, aims to provide an objective, truthful, and balanced account of Malaysian history, promote inter-ethnic relations, and forge greater national unity.

"History has always been my interest since young, from my early exposure to war movies. My late dad was a policeman, and he was always called to screen movies at temple festivals and weekend screening of movies at the Malacca Club," says Tan.

He says in October 2012, the MHHC was created for family members and close friends as he felt there was

"I share about two to three posts per day. The sources are usually from history-based books, journals, my own experiences, and websites, both local and global media."

— Bert Tan

Bert Tan, founder of Malaysian Heritage and History Club

CONNECT WITH YOUR FAVOURITE SOCIAL MEDIA GROUP!

In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam laments a plight common to many people today: we're disconnected from others and we lack a sense of community. Connecting in groups can enhance our lives immeasurably. Here are some reasons why you should consider joining a social media group.

Share the journey: writers, artists, investors, entrepreneurs can learn and grow more with others.

Glean tips and ideas you would not find on your own.

Be inspired by others' boldness and successes.

Get support from your peers.

Have regular accountability.

a need for his younger relatives and friends to learn about family history, Malacca specifically, and Malaysia in general.

Tan is no doubt proud of the heritage of Malacca that he says is “rich in history, culture, traditions, and cuisines”. Through this group, he hopes to obtain more balanced stories of our forefathers’ contributions and stories of ordinary people, regardless of status, race, and religion.

“People who joined our Facebook group come from all walks of life—media stalkers, journalists, professionals, educators, historians, social critics, and political propagandists. Recruiting many members is not the club’s interest as we are keen on quality of postings and discussions,” he says.

“Topics discussed in the group are mostly Malaysian history, heritage, culture, wildlife, and natural heritage. But postings can also vary and we also discuss many other topics from food, wars, geography, architecture, fashion, transportations to languages and everything under the sun. The group is often used as source of information by students, researchers, individuals, online websites, and local dailies.

“Our group is very active. People like to share their experiences and offer information. There are also those who inquire about certain topics, and their questions are answered in comments by members of the group.

“I share about two to three posts per day. The sources are usually from history-based books,

journals, my own experiences, and websites, both local and global media,” he says.

Tan personally has learned a lot from all the postings in the group and jokes that the growth of the group was probably sparked by controversial discussions. Active members would invite their friends to join as well.

The club has organised many activities outside its Facebook platform, starting with Heritage Talks in Malacca since March 2013 and the Heritage Talk KL Series in September 2013.

“The speakers are sourced from the club members based on their own fields of expertise. Events are conducted in the spirit of sharing and collaboration. Most of the talks can be viewed on the club’s dedicated MHHC YouTube channel,” says Tan.

He says Daily Fix Cafe, which is located at Jonker Street (Jalan Hang Jebat), offered its

premises for the talks in March and April 2015. The last talk was on WG Shellabear and was held at Shellabear Hall, a former boarding house for Methodist Girls School in Tranquerah, Malacca.

MHHC also collaborated with the Portuguese Malacca community and Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum Melaka to revive the old Melaka Chinese New Year practices with The Serani Teng Teng, a group of buskers consisting of three Portuguese boys who went busking door-to-door around Malacca town during Chinese New Year.

Tan says the first publication from the Club, *Messing with Melaka*, was launched during the People’s Merdeka Exhibition in September 2015. It contains Malacca’s historical facts, and suggestions of places to eat and visit within 24 hours. Members could submit their reviews on a dedicated book review blog ‘Hooked on Books’. ©

