

Life Post-SSEAYP: Delving the Concept of “SSEAYP Sick” among Former Participating Youth from the Ship for Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Program

MOHD YUSOF ZULKEFLI
IREENA NASIHA IBNU*
Universiti Teknologi MARA

ABSTRACT

The Ship for Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Programme (SSEAYP) has been running for 46 years. The Cabinet Office of Japan organises it. This programme aims to foster friendship and mutual understanding between Japanese and Southeast Asian youths. After the Ship for Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Program (SSEAYP) programme ends, all the former Participating Youths (PYs) will experience a new life adjustment, which is famously known as "SSEAYP Sick". Therefore, this study explores the implications of "SSEAYP Sick" among Former Participating Youths who participated in this program. Additionally, it is crucial to investigate how the SSEAYP programme has affected the PYs. The phenomenological approach is used in this qualitative research technique to comprehend how the PYs feel about a specific phenomenon. Twenty-two informants from ASEAN and Japan were interviewed in-depth to get the data. Thematic transcription was done after a descriptive analysis of the interview material. The study discovered that the PYs viewed this programme as a "bonus" regarding the SSEAYP Sick phenomena. This study's implications have identified three critical causes for the life post-SSEAYP among PYs: culture shock, homesickness, and the intricate process of returning adaptation. In addition, every person possesses unique experiences, thoughts, and viewpoints that have aided their development and moulded them into the people they are today.

Keywords: *Japan, SSEAYP sick, phenomenology, Southeast Asian, youth.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, Japan has used soft power to change and reinforce how people in ASEAN perceive the country that was formerly a colonial power that ruled most of the area during World War II (Heng, 2013). One of the first Japan-ASEAN Youth development and exchange programmes was the yearly Ship for Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Program (SSEAYP). Japan's longstanding and extensive youth exchange initiative with ASEAN youth represents a program of enduring commitment, characterised by substantial investments over the years (Center for International Youth Exchange, 2020). The Japanese Cabinet Office has supported the Ship for Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Program (SSEAYP) since its inception in 1974. This initiative is designed with the overarching objectives of expanding the global perspectives of young individuals, nurturing mutual understanding and friendship among Japanese and foreign youth, promoting the principles of international cooperation, and cultivating leadership abilities among young participants in various spheres of international society (Ship for World Youth, 2012; Cabinet Office of Japan, 2022).

Annually (until 2019, before the COVID-19 Pandemic), approximately 350 young individuals engage in this program, and a substantial number have formed distinct alum networks. As Zulkifli et al. (2021) noted, these high-achieving individuals may occupy noteworthy positions within the public and corporate sectors. The program spans either 52

or 53 days, necessitating participants to embark on a journey that includes travel to Japan, a voyage to selected ASEAN nations aboard the Nippon Maru, and a return to Japan upon its conclusion. Within this framework, each year, twenty-eight participatory youths (PYs) and over 30 Japanese participants are selected to represent their respective nations alongside one national leader (NL). PYs from diverse countries undergo intricate selection processes, creative training, and meticulous planning under the guidance of their leaders. Communication is essential in the development of any connection through the SSEAYP programme.

Developing practical interpersonal communication skills involves comprehensively exploring ideas, addressing misunderstandings, and recognising the barriers that hinder successful interpersonal relationships (Ibnu & Ahmad, 2017). Furthermore, Zulkefli et al. (2021a) assert that friendships have gained a level of importance comparable to romantic relationships in contemporary society. Furthermore, many people are interested in a variety of interpersonal interactions. Everyone will meet many individuals, but only a few will create face-to-face ties, which everyone refers to as friendship (FairsandFestivals.net, 2020). If a group of friends enjoys their friendship, a friendship connection will develop gracefully.

All ex-participating Youths are familiar with the phrase "SSEAYP Sick" following the SSEAYP programme. The PYs saw this programme as a "benefit" based on this tendency. This reward notion has altered their attitude and personality in some way. As a result, what exactly is "SSEAYP Sick"? Why don't all ex-PYs leave the programme, although they have been there for years? What is the most beneficial aspect of this programme? As a result, the goals of this study are first to analyse and then formally conceptualise the "SSEAYP Sick" nomenclature. The researchers thought the meaning of "SSEAYP Sick" may be interpreted differently. Exploring the significance of "SSEAYP Sick" and the specific events or circumstances that contributed to "SSEAYP Sick" is therefore critical. Furthermore, it is critical to investigate how the SSEAYP programme has influenced the PYs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

a) History of SSEAYP

The Ship for Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Program (SSEAYP), as elucidated by Aliyah and Rani (2017), finds its origins in the Joint Statements jointly issued by Japan and the Republic of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Republic of the Philippines, the Republic of Singapore, and the Kingdom of Thailand in January 1974. Additionally, Brunei Darussalam became a participant in the program in 1985, followed by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1996. Subsequently, in 1998, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and the Republic of the Union of Myanmar joined, while the Kingdom of Cambodia joined in 2000. Consequently, this initiative is overseen by the Japanese government, with the Cabinet Office's Director-General for International Youth Exchange at the helm, and enjoys active involvement and support from these ten Southeast Asian nations.

Furthermore, as highlighted by Zulkefli et al. (2021b), the program's core objectives encompass the cultivation of friendship and mutual understanding among Japanese youths, the broadening of their global perspectives, the reinforcement of their commitment to international cooperation, and the enhancement of their practical skills for engaging in international collaborations. Consequently, it is envisaged that this program will contribute to developing young individuals capable of exercising leadership across diverse sectors within an increasingly globalised society. Moreover, Zulkifli et al. (2021) posit that participatory

youths (PYs) are tasked with contributing to their communities by promoting positive youth development. It can be achieved by sharing their experiences aboard the ship, introducing their respective countries to fellow participants, engaging in debates and exchange activities onboard, and participating in homestay programs. Language, conventions, habits, attitudes, and other cultural variations can be causes of issues and misunderstandings (Ibnu & Ahmad, 2017). Thus, intercultural communication skills are vital in an international workplace. Intercultural communication happens when individuals of one culture communicate with members of another culture (Piller, 2017). Intercultural communication is distinct from communication because it entails interaction between people's perceptions of culture and symbolic systems. Interpersonal contact between communicators is an essential part of intercultural communication. As a result, the way the PYs interact must be investigated as part of the SSEAYP programme. Without engagement or communication, the word "SSEAYP Sick" would not exist. According to Zulkefli et al. (2021a), the PYs would wish to join the programme if given another chance. PYs have a difficult time letting go of their memories on board.

b) Intercultural Communication

Intercultural dialogue is integral to the SSEAYP curriculum and manifests throughout the journey. Participants accumulate numerous sentimental memories, and given their roles as future leaders, they must exhibit proactive problem-solving abilities when disagreements arise. Intercultural communication delves into interaction and communication dynamics between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Arasaratnam-Smith (2017) articulated that some scholars define intercultural communication as the outcomes of communication behaviours when cultures intersect. Thus, one way to conceptualise intercultural communication is through communication within symbolic intercultural realms (DeVito, 2016). Ibnu and Ahmad (2017) have identified that certain cultural values are unique to specific ethnic groups in Malaysia, while others are shared among multiple groups. Consequently, intercultural communication can be characterised as a form of contact in which diverse cultures converge, collide, or coalesce within symbolic spaces, fostering mutual comprehension.

Moreover, as Piller (2017) emphasised, intercultural communication seeks to unravel how individuals from different nations and cultures interact and interpret their worldviews. Kei and Yazdanifard (2015) posit that cultural competence entails memorising every market's cultural nuance but, more importantly, understanding when to listen, seek assistance, and communicate. Hence, a comprehensive grasp of intercultural communication demands knowledge encompassing diverse cultures, organisations, institutions, histories, and general ways of life across various communities and nations. It also entails a deep understanding of one's and other's perspectives and values and a willingness to acknowledge instances of potential discord.

Conversely, following Cutting (2019), interpersonal communication is defined as the shared exchange of messages crafted and interpreted as a means of social interaction to achieve social objectives. Given SSEAYP's aim of fostering mutual understanding and friendship among Japanese youths and their counterparts from the ten Southeast Asian countries, effective communication becomes paramount. It is achieved through discussions, activities, and sharing insights about their countries and cultures. Additionally, the program

allows participants to immerse themselves in the local culture during their daily activities, mainly through homestays in each port of call, where the ship docks for several days.

Understanding the differences in intercultural communication hinges on systematic factors, including the type of culture, societal structure, values, and other elements that influence communicative behaviour and give rise to culture-specific communication styles (Larina & Leontovich, 2015). It is vital to recognise that one of the critical objectives of intercultural communication is to prevent miscommunication and the misinterpretation of meanings during interactions. Furthermore, the intentions of foreign interlocutors can lead to stereotypes about the politeness or impoliteness of nations, potentially hindering mutual understanding and social harmony. Therefore, it is imperative to disseminate knowledge of intercultural communication, especially to frequent travellers, to mitigate negative stereotypes associated with different nations.

c) Exchange Program

According to Tanaka Toshie, the Director-General for International Youth Exchange, the Ship for Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Program (SSEAYP) is fundamentally dedicated to fostering friendship and mutual understanding among participating youths hailing from both Japan and the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Center for International Youth Exchange, 2020). In addition, the program's goals are achieved through diverse activities, including discussions, homestays, and interactions with local youth during their shared experiences onboard the ship and within the countries they visit. The program seeks to broaden participants' global perspectives, as they are expected to assume leadership roles across various sectors as globalisation advances.

The SSEAYP program originated in 1974 as a collaborative initiative between Japan and ASEAN member nations, and it has since been conducted 46 times annually. Notably, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the program was temporarily suspended in 2020 but continued through the virtual conference (Cabinet Office of Japan, 2022), with its activities essentially spanning from 2020 to 2022. The program has witnessed the participation of over 12,000 young individuals as of 2022, many of whom are currently playing pivotal roles within their respective communities, countries, and the globalising society. The most recent physical event in 2019 marked the 46th SSEAYP program, which spanned approximately 50 days from October to December. The program commenced with Japan's national program in Tokyo and other prefectures outside of Tokyo, followed by the ship's port visits to Vietnam, Singapore, Myanmar, and Malaysia.

The homestay program constitutes a pivotal component of the SSEAYP Program, designed to facilitate mutual understanding of different cultures among participants. This program, experienced at every Port-of-Call (POC), offers participants the unique opportunity to reside with local families and partake in their daily lives, facilitating profound intercultural learning (Salleh & Samad, 2018). According to Othman et al. (2017), tourists who engaged in homestay experiences with locals enjoyed learning about local cultural practices through organised activities. They also enhanced social cohesion among the local communities by sharing their knowledge of their cultural traditions. Beyond imparting insights into local traditions and daily routines, homestays allow hosts and visitors to cultivate enduring relationships through various forms of interaction.

Moreover, research by Kwon (2020) underscores the significance of varied cultures and languages in developing intercultural competency. Homestays serve as an informal educational avenue where individuals can indirectly gain valuable intercultural insights. Consequently, homestays play a vital role in aiding both host families and visitors to understand and appreciate diverse cultures, particularly among young participants. It, in turn, contributes to reducing future misconceptions and misunderstandings. Participating Youths (PYs) often perceive the homestay program as a bridge that facilitates their transition and cultural learning, as it allows them to delve deeper into a culture. Additionally, each PY is paired with another from a different country, fostering goodwill and deepening participant friendships.

METHODOLOGY

This crucial phenomenological research investigates the larger conceptualisation of "SSEAYP Sick" concerning the growth of friendship relationships among PYs from ASEAN and Japan. Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach to determine how individuals perceive a particular phenomenon. It is mainly based on personal perception and human awareness. Therefore, phenomenology enables researchers to gain insight into the viewpoints, perceptions, and understanding of persons who have witnessed specific occurrences (Alase, 2017). In addition, according to Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio (2019), phenomenological studies are appropriate for studying psychological and social phenomena.

Phenomenology studies are suited for this research to explain the notion of "SSEAYP Sick" to examine the larger conceptualisation of "SSEAYP Sick" about the growth of friendship connections among PYs from ASEAN and Japan. As a result, non-probability sampling is employed in this study. Nonetheless, the sort of sample used in this study was purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling refers to the researchers' propensity to seek out individuals who can provide limited and detailed information (Reddy & Ramasamy, 2016). 1) SSEAYP PYs, 2) Two representatives from each participating country, 3) Regardless of gender and race, 4) Agree to participate in this research. The ex-SSEAYP PYs were chosen for this study because they were the last batch to complete the programme before the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020.

Table 1: List of the Interviewee

No.	Participant Youth (PY)	Country
1	BPY01	Brunei
2	BPY02	Brunei
3	CPY01	Cambodia
4	CPY02	Cambodia
5	IPY01	Indonesia
6	IPY02	Indonesia
7	JPY01	Japan
8	JPY02	Japan
9	LPY01	Laos
10	LPY02	Laos
11	MaPY01	Malaysia
12	MaPY02	Malaysia
13	MyPY01	Myanmar
14	MyPY02	Myanmar
15	PPY01	Philippines

16	PPY02	Philippines
17	SPY01	Singapore
18	SPY02	Singapore
19	TPY01	Thailand
20	TPY02	Thailand
21	VPY01	Vietnam
22	VPY02	Vietnam

The data was gathered through in-depth and semi-structured interviews with the participants. This strategy enables researchers to obtain more specific information, develop a deeper understanding, and build a stronger relationship with participants (Jamshed, 2014). Because the research was done during the COVID-19 epidemic, the interview was conducted via Google Meet. The interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The material was transcribed and analysed using a thematic method following the discussion. As a result, many code categories will be divided into multiple themes, such as primary and secondary. The themes were drawn from the study's research questions (Belotto, 2018). A validity and reliability method were used to assess this study's correctness. In this study, validity and reliability refer to the amount to which the data is acceptable, justified, and valuable (Cypress, 2017). The transcription output was communicated to participants in this study for agreement reasons. If the participants are unhappy with the interpretation, the researcher must remark and re-interpret until they agree and are satisfied.

FINDINGS

1. *The Meaning of "SSEAYP Sick"*

Every informant provided a unique interpretation of "SSEAYP Sick." However, "SSEAYP Sick" can be broadly defined as the feeling of disorientation and unease stemming from the disruption of the familiar routine experienced by Participating Youths (PYs) during the program. JPY01, VPY02, SPY01, SPY02, MyPY01, MaPY01, MaPY02, BPY01, CPY01, IPY01, IPY02, LPY01, and PPY02 express their struggle in coping with the disappointment of missing out on what they consider one of the most memorable periods of their lives.

I felt shocked for about two months to revert towards their everyday life, partly due to the ship's environment where PY's could always meet and greet each other at a whim. (Informant: BPY02)

This 52-day journey gave me various valuable experiences and unforgettable memories in every part of the program, from living on a ship without having any form of internet access, sharing the same cabin with participating youth from different countries, exchanging or wearing each other's cultural attire for national presentations at nights, learning and embracing the beauty of Southeast Asian and Japanese cultures plus a way of living through homestay matchings, institutional visits, participating PYsth (PY) seminars and voluntary activities. Besides, I got the chance to equip myself with Southeast Asian and Japanese different perceptions or beliefs towards specific health and well-being aspects by being one of the members of Discussion Group 6, "Good Health & Well-being". Not to forget, the series of Solidarity Group (SG) activities on board consisting of exciting games were terrific and fun and

helped foster the relationship among the participating youths. (Informant: MaPY02)

The pictures in my storage recall the Friend-sick, Love-sick, Sea-sick, and SSEAYP-Sick in this beautiful Nippon Maru Ship. (Informant: SPY01)

In summary, "SSEAYP Sick" is a nostalgic ailment that envelops all past program participants (PYs). This sentiment is evoked when PYs reminisce about the delightful moments and unforgettable experiences they shared aboard the Nippon Maru. Even a fleeting glance at their photo albums or any souvenirs from the program triggers this sensation, affecting individuals across different program batches, including JPY01, JPY02, VPY01, VPY02, SPY01, SPY02, MyPY01, MyPY02, MaPY01, MaPY02, BPY01, BPY02, CPY01, CPY02, IPY01, IPY02, LPY01, LPY02, PPY01, PPY02, TPY01, and TPY02.

This condition often manifests with teary eyes and can be readily induced by listening to music from onboard activities, transporting them on a nostalgic journey. Some PYs, such as JPY01, VPY02, SPY01, SPY02, MyPY01, MyPY02, MaPY01, MaPY02, BPY01, IPY02, PPY02, and TPY02, have found solace and relief by reconnecting with fellow SSEAYP alums and relishing their cherished memories.

The primary catalyst for "SSEAYP Sick" is the accumulation of remarkable events and memories during the cruise. The second most significant triggers are the program's outdoor adventures, from sunrise to stargazing nights with cabin mates, Solidarity Group (SG) members, and romantic interests onboard. The SSEAYP setting boasts some of the Earth's most picturesque landscapes, and the exhilaration of ocean cruising is a predominant factor contributing to this malaise. Interviews with PYs indicate a yearning for the camaraderie, smiles, and laughter of familiar faces aboard the Nippon Maru and the unique cuisine offered during meals. They also lament the absence of organised onboard events that added colour to their collective experiences when all 317 participants were together. Some PYs express missing their homestay country programs due to the rich cultural diversity and warm hospitality offered by the host nations and their people.

"SSEAYP Sick" is a universal affliction affecting all program alumni, transcending specific program batches. This shared experience tends to resurface every October, with individual triggers and conditions varying. Nonetheless, nearly all PYs share a common element contributing to their "SSEAYP Sick" sentiment, often associated with any SSEAYP-related matters.

2. *Factors Contributing to "SSEAYP Sick"*

a) *Memory*

Each informant provided highly individualised responses due to their unique experiences. However, in summarising their reactions, a common thread emerges where they all share a similar favourite aspect, such as the profound tranquillity experienced when gazing out at sea (JPY01, JPY02, VPY01, VPY02, SPY01, SPY02, MyPY01, MyPY02, MaPY01, MaPY02, BPY01, BPY02, CPY01, CPY02, IPY01, IPY02, LPY01, LPY02, PPY01, PPY02, TPY01, and TPY02).

They all cherished their friendships and connections with PYs from other contingents, such as the Discussion Group (DG) and Solidarity Group (SG). A vivid memory for VPY02 was the collective gathering of all PYs at the New Otani Hotel to perform the Ground Cheer,

marking an introduction to SSEAYP. This event brought together all 317 participants from ASEAN and Japan for a joyous celebration.

Subsequently, the friendships that blossomed continued to flourish, with PYs sharing numerous cherished moments (BPY01, BPY02, JPY02, MyPY01, MyPY02, MaPY01, MaPY02, TPY01, TPY02, PPY01, PPY02, and IPY01). The most treasured moment, as emphasised by SPY01, IPY02, CPY01, CPY02, BPY01, JPY01, MaPY01, TPY01, TPY02, PPY02, and PPY02, was experiencing sunrises and sunsets together, stargazing with fellow participants, cabin mates, SG mates, DG mates, and romantic interests. Engaging in casual conversations and deeper discussions epitomised the true essence of SSEAYP, fostering mutual understanding among participants from member countries. Several PYs (IPY01, CPY02, MyPY01, BPY02, and VPY01) lamented that they missed every aspect of SSEAYP and the daily routines it offered. They had come to regard the Nippon Maru as their second home, and the familiar faces of fellow participants became an integral part of their SSEAYP experience.

My favourite pastime includes calling other PYs across the ship's hallway and spending time with their cabin mates upon the mandatory curfew every 11 pm when they are onboard. I have also used this time to call my contingent mates to ascertain the attires for the next day or inform their contingent friends of the same occasion. (Informant: CPY02)

Based on the interviews, it is evident that many Participating Youths (PYs) hold the National Presentation (NP) in high regard as one of the most significant highlights of their SSEAYP journey. This activity garners immense anticipation among all PYs, offering them the opportunity to witness captivating performances from other participating countries (JPY01, JPY02, VPY01, VPY02, SPY01, SPY02, MyPY01, MyPY02, MaPY01, MaPY02, BPY01, BPY02, CPY01, CPY02, IPY01, IPY02, LPY01, LPY02, PPY01, PPY02, TPY01, and TPY02).

The NP stands out due to its vibrant and extravagant costumes, accompanied by brilliant performances that leave a lasting impact. This ensures that every PY would want to attend the scheduled night when each country member performs. During these occasions, PYs take the opportunity to don the cultural attire of other countries as they attend this gala event. If they participate with a partner as their NP dates, they often coordinate their outfits to match one another. Some PYs also utilise this occasion to interact with fellow PYs beyond their designated Solidarity Groups (SGs) and Discussion Groups (DGs), as this presents one of the few platforms for such interactions. Nevertheless, the NP consistently ranks among the most cherished memories for PYs. There is an unparalleled thrill and excitement as the audience and the performing country come together to enjoy each other's finest performances and company throughout the night as the Nippon Maru sails across the vast sea.

Furthermore, for some PYs (JPY01, JPY02, VPY02, SPY02, MyPY01, MyPY01, MaPY01, MaPY02, BPY01, BPY02, CPY01, CPY02, IPY02, LPY01, LPY02, PPY01, PPY02, TPY01, and TPY02), another cherished aspect of their SSEAYP experience is the homestay program. These moments have had a profound and lasting impact, making the homestay program their most treasured expertise throughout the program. An additional advantage is realised when the country serves as the yearly Port of Call (POC). At this point, the Nippon Maru docks at the designated port as a stop. Here, each country hosts a welcoming reception for all Nippon

Maru inhabitants. As a reciprocal gesture, PYs perform a Flag Cheer in return, following the customs of their contingent, DG facilitator, and the program administrators.

Homestay is the most memorable moment of the SSEAYP journey as it was an honour for me, and it is forever grateful to be able to represent my country on such a large-scale event and to be able to carry out my duties as an International Ambassador, which she felt like a National Pride given only to a selected few. (Informant: MyPY01)

In addition to the stops at each selected country's Port of Call (POC), one of the PYs' favourite moments onboard the ship was when Captain Yamamoto Shigeki of the Nippon Maru made an unexpected stop at Mount Fuji a day before the scheduled program conclusion. This unplanned visit provided PYs with an unforgettable experience, as the breathtaking view and awe-inspiring sight of one of the world's most beautiful landscapes left them in awe. It serves as clear evidence that everyone who has participated in this program has forged indelible memories throughout their SSEAYP journey.

However, it is worth noting that their favourite moments are highly individualised and unique to their personal experiences. Even when they may share similar moments, the people they shared these experiences with played a pivotal role in differentiating their SSEAYP journey, rendering it even more memorable and meaningful for each participant.

b) Personal Growth

All informants have mostly stated that they have significantly benefited from the programme, especially towards personal growth. The training they received and the tasks they delivered contributed to their learning curve. Most PYs (VPY02, SPY01, SPY02, MyPY02, MaPY01, MaPY02, BPY01, BPY02, CPY01, CPY02, IPY01, IPY02, LPY01, LPY02, PPY01, PPY02, TPY01, and TPY02) stated that now they are more confident in voicing out their voice and opinions, whereas previously they used to appear as timid and shy. Introverted people admitted they are now more comfortable expressing themselves than their previous selves.

The PYs are more independent and open-minded, having their views and perspectives broadened due to their exposure by mingling with other PYs. The opportunity to other countries has widened its horizon and way of thinking. They say that the whole of the SSEAYP journey has indeed matured them. Also, almost all displayed positive changes before and after the commencement of SSEAYP. In comparison, only one PY admitted that he still feels that he is the same guy and that there are no major or minor changes for the entirety of the programme. MaPY01 mentioned that he learned new knowledge, understood other cultures, and improved his communication skills through the core programmes offered by SSEAYP, such as the SG activities, the discussion groups, and institutional visits provided by every country's POCs.

I learned that great love and a positive mindset would enlighten the darkness for those seeking it. Encountering with diverse youth leaders of stars, brilliants, and confidants from nooks and crevices of ASEAN and Japan on a prestigious ship, Nippon Maru was and always will be the best experience life could offer to alter my old self. (Informant: MaPY01)

PYs have benefitted from shouldering the responsibilities as a leader either through the position entrusted to them as a Youth Leader or as the Head of the Committee or via their volunteering to be a part and member of the committee either for PY Seminar, SG or DG. Overall, PYs have also discovered more about themselves, especially by pushing forward and striving for excellence in everything they do. This experience has ripened them, and most believe the things they acquired throughout the programme will help them in terms of the career aspects of their lives.

PYs have also benefited from networking with PYs from other countries, especially if they share similar passions, interests, careers and beliefs. They are now able to work with PYs from different countries and get a better demographic view on how to achieve the best outcome from what they intend to do, as they now can work towards a joint effort in executing their task at hand and by working together, they believe that anything and everything is possible. They are open to endless possibilities (PPY01, PPY02, MaPY01, MaPY02, SPY01, SPY02, CPY01, CPY02, VPY01 and LPY01). In essence, almost all the PY had undergone growth upon joining this prestigious programme. This programme had much to offer those who wanted to explore their potential. They will surely soar above the clouds and will continue to attain greater heights in all parts of their lives.

c) Friendship Relationship Growth

The primary aim of SSEAYP is to foster friendship and mutual understanding among its participants from ASEAN countries and Japan. This objective is achieved by deliberately reorganising every contingent member into Solidarity Groups (SGs), with 11 groups corresponding to the participating countries. These SGs share cabins, whether onboard the ship or during their homestay country programs. This arrangement encourages PYs to coexist and live with each other, promoting acceptance and understanding of diverse beliefs, cultures, and ways of thinking. This experience broadens their perspectives and exposes them to a world beyond their own.

According to the PYs' shared beliefs (JPY01, JPY02, VPY01, VPY02, SPY01, SPY02, MyPY01, MyPY02, MaPY01, MaPY02, BPY01, BPY02, CPY01, CPY02, IPY01, IPY02, LPY01, LPY02, PPY01, PPY02, TPY01, and TPY02), SSEAYP has undeniably fulfilled its primary objectives in promoting these ideals among participants. They unanimously acknowledged that by the end of the program, they had formed numerous friendships with individuals from each participating country. This platform has made them feel connected to friends worldwide, with their bonds and friendships transcending geographical distances, time, and the invisible boundaries between nations. They consider themselves integral to the larger JASEAN (Japan and ASEAN) family and friends.

Through the program's various activities and daily routines, participants have gained a deeper understanding of one another, aligning with SSEAYP's secondary objective of promoting mutual understanding. Despite their differences in beliefs, ideals, backgrounds, religions, cultures, and languages, PYs have learned to respect and appreciate each other's diversity. It demonstrates the program's success in fostering mutual understanding among participants.

It was fine, as PYs would try to overcome those obstacles through effective communication. (Informant: LPY02)

The absence of an internet connection has played a pivotal role in fostering meaningful relationships among the PYs in a more traditional manner, where direct communication is essential. When PYs felt shy or faced challenges in reaching out to someone they wished to speak to, they could convey their messages by leaving notes on their designated contingent boards, each allocated according to their respective contingents. However, it is essential to note that SSEAYP is not solely a recreational experience; rather, it represents a significant investment by the Cabinet Office of Japan, which has been organising this annual event since its inception in 1974.

One of the program's core components is the Discussion Group, where PYs are assigned to specific DGs based on topics aligned with their interests. Within these groups, PYs engage in intellectual discussions, addressing sensitive global issues and exploring possible alternatives or solutions to prevailing problems and international crises. The pre-program tasks assigned to PYs before embarking on their SSEAYP journey are crucial in narrowing down the discussion topics. It includes sharing each country's demographic information and insights into how the government of each participating country addresses particular issues.

After SSEAYP, PYs must commit themselves to a post-programme activity, initiating projects and contributing to their communities. As aspiring youth leaders, they have the potential to serve as catalysts for change, working towards a brighter future for all. While many PYs have embraced this aspect of the program wholeheartedly, some have expressed the need for improvements, particularly regarding the Discussion Group (VPY01, VPY02, IPY01, IPY02, SPY01, MaPY02, MyPY01, LPY01, LPY02, and BPY01). MaPY01, MaPY02, VPY01, and IPY02 have conveyed that a more independent and creative approach by Facilitators during DG sessions, with fewer constraints imposed by the Administrators, would enhance the overall learning experience for PYs.

Additionally, all PYs, except JPY01 and JPY02, have emphasised the need for greater attention to the Post Programme Activity (PPA). It should extend beyond meeting program requirements to have a more significant impact on effecting positive changes within communities. Some PYs have even suggested the possibility of collaboration between participating countries in organising PPAs, with the potential for a designated country to host a PPA on a rotational basis each year, preferably from countries not serving as that year's Ports of Call (POCs). While the PYs agree that the program's objectives have been fulfilled from their perspectives, they also acknowledge that there is room for enhancement and expansion of both the Discussion Group and Post Programme Activities.

SSEAYP stands out as a unique youth exchange program that brings together over 300 PYs from ASEAN countries and Japan, enabling them to spend more than 40 days aboard the ship *Nippon Maru*. The diverse backgrounds and nationalities of the selected PYs allow for the exchange of knowledge and cultural experiences throughout the voyage and cultural activities. Notably, the program's restriction on internet access sets it apart, as it prevents participants from maintaining contact with their families in their home countries. It distinguishes SSEAYP from other youth exchange programs, where participants often spend shorter durations in specific locations or countries.

DISCUSSION

The SSEAYP program marks a pivotal juncture for PYs when external and internal growth converges into a reservoir of wisdom. Brimming with experiential knowledge, this reservoir becomes a source from which PYs draw valuable insights, particularly in intercultural

communication. In navigating the complex landscape of their SSEAYP journey, these insights shape their narratives and offer profound reflections on crucial issues such as culture shock, homesickness, and the intricate process of returning adaptation.

Culture shock, an intrinsic part of the cross-cultural experience, finds resonance in the advice of PYs. Their counsel to future participants emphasises the imperative of authenticity, urging them to shape their unique narratives rather than conforming to predefined roles. This authenticity protects against the disorientation often associated with culture shock, fostering an environment where diversity is celebrated rather than feared.

The echoes of homesickness reverberate in the encouragement to share one's culture and background. This enriches the SSEAYP experience and becomes a potent antidote to the pangs of homesickness. The bonds forged through shared values and traditions provide a sense of belonging, creating a surrogate home within the SSEAYP community.

The returning adaptation phase, a complex journey of readjustment, is mirrored in the narrative of embracing challenges and seizing opportunities. PYs advise their peers to contribute to solutions actively, underscoring the need for adaptability in the face of post-program challenges. They can be called as '*Proactive* returnees' which refer to the active optimist types of individuals who readily acknowledge and are adept at incorporating changes, demonstrating a strong ability to seamlessly integrate both domestic and international experiences (Adler,1981). This mirrors the returning participants' struggle to reintegrate into their home cultures, where the skills acquired during SSEAYP prove crucial in navigating the complexities of readjustment.

Earning the title of an SSEAYP participant through hard work and dedication establishes a link to the global communication aspect. PYs are positioned as ambassadors representing their nations, emphasising the vital role of effective communication in a global context. This aligns with the understanding that as future leaders, the youth wield the power to influence positive change through nuanced cross-cultural communication.

The discussion on communication within the program introduces a compelling contrast between traditional and modern forms. While technology often dominates discussions on global communication, the SSEAYP experience challenges this paradigm. This youth exchange program also has challenged the notion of the global village concept, where the utilisation of new media technologies has linked individuals across the globe (Lule,2021). PYs, in their touch, resort to conventional means such as notes, postcards, and face-to-face interactions, contributing to the ongoing discourse on the enduring relevance of interpersonal communication in fostering genuine connections across cultures.

In essence, the counsel and experiences of PYs serve as a treasure trove for upcoming participants, offering practical guidance and enriching the broader discourse on intercultural communication. Their narratives humanise the issues of culture shock, homesickness, and returning adaptation, shedding light on the intricate interplay of personal growth and cross-cultural understanding within the SSEAYP journey.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, each individual has gained unique experiences, ideas, and perspectives contributing to their personal growth and development. These words of wisdom are shared with future PYs to help them learn from past mistakes and shortcomings. The most valuable advice is to cherish every moment and create as many memories as possible during the 51-day journey, as it passes by quickly. These memories will remain a part of their lives forever.

Based on the interviews, all informants expressed a strong desire to reconnect with their SSEAYP family and friends. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted travel plans, but they remain connected through social media and technology. Many have scheduled video calls and are saving money to visit each other in the future. It demonstrates the strong bonds and friendships formed through the program, transcending geographical distances.

PYs are planning to connect with their contingents and organise reunions. Some are even considering trips to ASEAN countries together. Wedding invitations from SG mates reflect the joyous occasions they share with their SSEAYP families and friends. SSEAYP is not just the end of a chapter; it marks the beginning of lifelong friendships. Despite the physical distance, their hearts remain close. The program has transformed strangers into lifelong friends, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds into a unified community. It has even paved the way for some to find love during this journey. Ultimately, the reason for feeling "SSEAYP Sick" is the fond reminiscence of the beautiful days spent in the SSEAYP program.

For future researchers interested in conducting similar studies on the SSEAYP program, several avenues for exploration present themselves. First and foremost, delving deeper into the long-term impacts of the program on participants' lives could provide valuable insights. Understanding how the unique experiences, ideas, and perspectives gained during SSEAYP continue to shape individuals over an extended period could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the program's lasting effects.

The desire expressed by informants to reconnect with their SSEAYP family and friends prompts the suggestion for future research to examine the dynamics of these post-program relationships. Investigating the factors that contribute to the strength and longevity of these connections, as well as the strategies employed by participants to overcome obstacles such as travel disruptions, would offer valuable insights into the resilience of the SSEAYP community.

Furthermore, exploring the varied plans of PYs to organise reunions and visit ASEAN countries together opens up avenues for research on the enduring impact of cross-cultural experiences on travel and social planning. Understanding how the SSEAYP program influences participants' future travel choices and event planning can provide insights into the program's broader societal effects.

Finally, the transformative nature of SSEAYP, evident in forming lifelong friendships and even romantic relationships, suggests a rich area for exploration. Future researchers may delve into the factors that contribute to the longevity and depth of these connections and the broader societal implications of a program that not only fosters friendships but also plays a role in personal and romantic life trajectories.

BIODATA

Dr Mohd Yusof Zulkefli holds a PhD from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, with an academic background that includes a Master's in Mass Communication from UiTM and a Bachelor's in Communication from USM. His focus lies in health communication, specifically social behaviour, communication and autism. Currently serving at UiTM Shah Alam in the Department of Liberal Communication, Dr. Yusof is a recognised expert contributing significantly to the field. His commitment to academic excellence extends to cross-cultural engagement, demonstrated by his participation in SSEAYP 46 in 2019. This experience enriched his understanding and highlighted his dedication to international collaboration. Dr. Yusof's academic journey, expertise in health communication, and engagement in cross-cultural initiatives underscore his multifaceted contributions to academia and promoting positive societal impacts. Email: yusofzulkefli@uitm.edu.my

Dr Ireena Nasiha Ibnu is a Senior Lecturer (Liberal Communication) at Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Shah Alam. In 2013, while pursuing her master's degree at UKM, she represented Malaysia in the 40th Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Ship for Southeast Asian Youth Programme (SSEAYP) exchange program for three months. Since then, she has developed an interest in intercultural communication and aspires to become an academic expert in intercultural, gender, Muslim, and mobility communication. In 2019, she completed her doctoral studies in Migration Studies at the University of Sussex, UK. Her PhD research topic was Female Malaysian Muslim students' experiences in the United Kingdom: piety and everyday life in Manchester and Cardiff. Email: ireena@uitm.edu.my

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