

Virtual Coexistence in a Persian Diasporic Weblog Community

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This paper investigates the use of weblog technology among a group of Iranian immigrants residing in Australia. It focuses on the formation of a virtual community among the bloggers and the way they use their weblog network to provide and seek support in and from diaspora. The paper starts with an overview of virtual communities and the conditions that need to be met for any online group to be considered a community. This is followed by the communicative characteristics of weblogs that allow for community formation. The discussion then moves specifically to the examination of the existence of a sense of community (SOC) among the Persian bloggers in the Australian diaspora by highlighting different communication features of these weblogs and analysing their social networks. The paper concentrates on the performances of the bloggers and their interactions with each other, and the way they use their weblogs to create an ethnic virtual community. The findings illustrate the importance of weblogs in forming close-knit networks for this group of Iranians in the diaspora.

Keywords: virtual coexistence, Iranian immigrants, Persian diasporic weblogs, weblog community.

Introduction

The enormous advancement of the Internet and cyberspace has overwhelmingly affected almost every aspect of our life. Cyberspace has made it possible to communicate with and meet new people, work or shop online, and live a virtual life without having to leave the house or office. Such online interactions have brought together people with the same interests or hobbies and have caused the formation of communities on the Internet. Online communities, also known as “virtual communities”, have become a very popular phenomenon and very much part of everyday life. Social networking sites, chat rooms, bulletin boards, discussion groups, forums, and other possibilities of the Internet allow people to communicate with each other and form their virtual communities. Äkkinen (2005) points out that the popularity of virtual communities is due to the fact that they “bring some collectivity to this world where people are isolated, far away from each other and always in a hurry” (p. 4). Hence, virtual communities provide comfortable spaces where people can meet online and get together at their leisure regardless of how far they are from each other.

The development and popularity of online communities has also attracted different researchers from almost all academic fields because cyberspace raises interesting questions to researchers and, at the same time, puts old and routine questions into new perspectives (Stolterman, Agren, & Croon, 1999). Among these questions is one of definitions as the old definitions of community before the advent of the Internet concentrated on “close-knit groups in a single location” (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2005, p. 1) with distinctive physical or geographical borders where people interacted face-to-face. Nonetheless, the application of such a definition to the Internet and cyberspace has become problematic as communication among people has taken on new dimensions.

In order to account for online communities, a number of researchers have come up with working definitions. A pioneer among them is Rheingold (1994) who defines virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (p. 5). This early definition of virtual community has been influential and fundamental in understanding the concept of community in cyberspace. Subsequently, researchers in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) studies introduced other definitions that ranged from inclusive versions to assigning a series of conditions to be met for a group of people on the Internet to be considered a community (Androutsopoulos, 2006).

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Some researchers have operationalised the term in the hope that they can design, analyse, and evaluate particular communities. Among the working definitions, Herring's (2004) framework is one such case that delineates virtual communities and has much in common with the community of practice model of Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015). Herring (2004) considers six dimensions for an online community including:

- a) active, self-sustaining participation around a core of regular participants;
- b) the emergence of roles, rituals, and hierarchies;
- c) evidence of shared history, culture, norms and values;
- d) self-awareness of the group as an identity that is distinct from other groups;
- e) solidarity and support;
- f) and criticism, conflict, and the emergence of means of conflict resolution (Herring, 2004, as cited in Androutsopoulos, 2006, p. 422).

Herring (2004) states that these conditions are the main characteristics of virtual communities and their presence or absence will ensure that researchers understand that not all online groups establish virtual communities.

In line with Herring's (2004) conditions for identifying virtual communities, other scholars have drawn a distinction between virtual communities and virtual settlements arguing that not all virtual settlements do form virtual communities (Mata-Domingo, 2018; Solas, & Sutton, 2018; Waters & Russell, 2016; Vijayavalsalan, 2018). Jones (1997) states that there needs to be a distinction between cyberspace or a virtual settlement on which virtual communities exist, and the existence of actual virtual communities. He argues that a virtual settlement is composed of a minimal level of interactivity, by a variety of people who communicate online in a common public space, and have sustained their membership. These conditions need to be met and reach a minimal threshold in any online group in order to be called a virtual settlement. Jones (1997) maintains that a virtual settlement is distinct from a virtual community although there is a possibility that a virtual community emerges once a virtual settlement is identified. The fundamental and distinctive feature of a virtual community is the development of affective ties among the members of an online group. A virtual community is a virtual settlement in which a sense of community (SOC) co-exists with a set of community-like behaviours and processes. A SOC is defined as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith the members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), SOC has four dimensions:

1. membership: feelings of belonging to, and the identification with the community;
2. influence: feeling that one has an influence on, and gets influenced by the community;
3. integration and fulfilment of needs: feelings of having support for others, and being supported by others in the community;
4. shared emotional connection: feelings of identification with a shared history, and having a relationship with others due to shared history and connection.

SOC has not been studied widely in virtual communities; however, there are a few studies that have addressed SOC in virtual environments identifying evidence of the existence of SOC such as McMillan and Chavis' (1986) membership, influence, fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection (cf. Blanchard, 2004; Blanchard, 2008a; Blanchard, 2008b; Blanchard, 2011; Rotman & Wu, 2014).

As research is expanding on the concept of virtual communities in different fields (see e.g. Akar, Mardikyan, & Dalgic, 2018; Blanchard, Askay, & Frear, 2011; Chang, Hsieh, & Fu, 2016; Hermon & Warden, 2018; Ho & Lin, 2016; Lazakidou 2012;), researchers have come up with simpler definitions of virtual communities. For instance, Tami-Maury, Brown, Lapham, and Chang (2017) define a virtual community as an online space where individuals socialize around common themes and interests. In principle, any online space that provides functionality for its users to share and exchange information is considered as a virtual community.

Theoretical Framework

In order to find out if weblogs can establish virtual communities, the characteristics of weblogs and how they operate online must be determined. Basically, weblogs are interactive web pages that provide a virtual space for bloggers to write and publish posts as many times as they want. In addition to the main page where the primary posts are published and updated, there are spaces for their readers to leave comments regarding each blog entry. The comment space provides an opportunity for the reader to interact with the blogger and with other readers.

Hyperlinks are another feature of weblog technology that enables bloggers to link to other Internet sites. Hyperlinks are very useful as they work as shortcuts and redirect readers to other websites that bloggers have referred to in their entries. Hyperlinks are also part of another feature of weblogs called a “blogroll”. The blogroll is the space usually in the sidebar of the weblog where bloggers list other weblogs or web pages that they frequently visit. Each weblog name is hyperlinked in the blogroll and by clicking on the link readers are redirected to that page.

Some weblogs may also use certain widgets such as C-box (chat box) which adds chat technology to the weblog, allowing bloggers and their readers to interact with each other. The distinctive feature of C-box is the permanent message history that allows readers to follow a thread of discussion on a weblog at any time they go to that weblog.

The presence of such features shows that weblogs can provide a virtual space for interaction and thus have the characteristics of virtual settlements. Nonetheless, some researchers have argued that weblogs are different from other forms of CMC in that communication tends to be one-to-many as opposed to many-to-many (cf. Blanchard, 2004). This means that public interaction among a minimal number of people is an element of the composition of virtual settlements. While this argument may be true of some weblogs, it cannot be applied to all weblogs. Bloggers, especially those who have links to others and are linked back in return, know that there is a potential audience in cyberspace that will definitely come to their weblogs and read what they publish. In addition, weblogs that have features such as comment spaces and/or C-boxes are specifically providing space for the interaction of their readers with each other and the blogger. Furthermore, bloggers use hyperlinks in their posts that can take their readers to other pages that have been authored by other bloggers. In the same way, the use of blogrolls provides readers with the chance to see which blogs the blogger visits and click on the links in the blogroll to go to other blogs. Hence, weblogs create a social network between themselves and their readers and indicate signs of virtual settlements.

Having established that weblogs can act as virtual settlements, some researchers have tried to find out if weblogs can emerge as virtual communities. Blanchard (2004) explored the SOC in a case study of a weblog. In her study, participants expressed a SOC within the blog and she concluded that weblogs “have the potential to evolve into socially beneficial, self-sustaining virtual communities” (p. 10). Efimova and Hendrick (2005) also explored the existence of weblog communities by examining artefacts of virtual settlements. In their study they suggested six artefacts that can be used to indicate if a weblog community exists:

1. Meme paths: where ideas are initiated by a blogger and then go from one weblog to another. The circulation of ideas around weblogs is not random and is influenced by social norms and structures.
2. Weblog reading patterns: where the regular reading of weblog posts and comments can establish a relation or maintain an already established one.
3. Linking patterns: that show connections between a weblog with other weblogs.
4. Weblog conversations: that can trigger when a weblog post attracts feedback whether in the comment space or a post as a reply in another weblog that is linked to that weblog.
5. Indicators of events: where bloggers talk about their face-to-face events or their online event participation, which can indicate the existence of relation between bloggers.
6. “Tribe” marks, group spaces and blogger directories: which indicate that a weblog belongs to a particular community.

Based on these artefacts they argue that blogging is the same as “life between buildings in a real city” (p. 7) with shared social spaces that account for different social activities of its residents. This implies that weblogs are capable of providing a virtual space for interaction where people with some interests or common background can get together and form a SOC. In the case of migrants and transnationals an obvious sense of common interest in forming SOC is shared cultural background, history, and emotional attachment to their past and homeland that lead to the formation of communities in the diaspora.

Methodology

Procedures for data collection and preparation

The data provided in this paper is part of a longitudinal study that was conducted over a period of 5 years. The main source of information was a group of Iranian bloggers living in Australia publishing posts about their life in the Australian diaspora. The choice of the weblogs was based on virtual snowball sampling (Baltar & Brunet, 2012) and the reliance on the blogroll of each newly-found weblog. When a

new weblog was found, the other weblogs' hyperlinks that were available in the blogroll of the weblog were used to access other Persian weblogs. In order to make sure that all the bloggers were living in Australia, the available information on the weblogs' "About Me" was used to locate the bloggers. If there was no geographical information available, then the weblog was excluded from the study. A total of 44 blogs that were publishing posts in the Persian language were identified as sources of information and included in the study.

Due to the large volume of data and the danger of losing online data, an offline browser utility called WinHTTrack was used to download all the weblogs and their contents. This was accompanied by a research log where the researcher recorded questions and points that were raised in the process of reading the posts and comments. Using a grounded theory approach, the data were re-visited over a period of time through open, axial, and selective coding until the themes emerged.

All the original data were in Persian, and they were translated into English. The English translation were revised by both Persian and English native speakers to ensure the accuracy of meaning. If there were certain Persian terms that were culture-specific and not easily translatable, then a transliteration was used along with a rough English translation and cultural explanation.

In order to ensure the anonymity of the bloggers, all possible identifiers such as weblog names, weblog URL, bloggers' screen or real names, hyperlinks, and so forth were excluded from the study.

Diasporic weblogs as virtual communities

The use of the Internet among migrants and transnational communities and the existence of SOC have been explored in the past by several migration researchers (see e.g. Adams, 2004; Mitra, 2000; Navarrete & Huerta, 2006; Rao, 1998; Smith, 2002). However, the bulk of research has focused on the use of Internet technologies such as electronic mailing lists, bulletin boards, forums, chat rooms, and so forth. There are few specific studies of weblogs among transnational/diasporic communities of immigrants exploring the question of a virtual community (see e.g. Frank-Job & Kluge, 2015; Yao, 2009).

Navarrete and Huerta (2006) state that an emotional attachment to the place of origin is a crucial factor for transnational communities of immigrants to construct and maintain a SOC, and since they are far from their homeland the urge for the formation of a community increases. Emotional attachment for migrants can originate from several sources including country of origin, shared histories, and shared experiences (Sonn, 2002). This kind of attachment among migrants has led to the use of Internet technology as a bridge between the country of origin and the host society. The use of the Internet has brought together dispersed groups of individuals from the same nationality inside the host country and the homeland. Cyberspace plays the role of a community in which migrants can establish their SOC based on their shared histories and experiences.

Currently there is an emerging body of research on different aspects of diasporic nations and their use of Internet technology to create and use virtual communities. These studies include topics such as transnational embodiment (Alinejad, 2010), minorities and their use of new media (Georgiou, 2013), diasporic identity and digital communication (Goudenhoofft, 2015), use of social network in the diaspora (Al-Rawi & Fahmy, 2018), etc. What all these studies highlight is the importance of virtual spaces among diasporic nations and the application of these spaces as communication channels within and across diasporas.

Discussion

The above discussion offers a venue for the exploration of sense of community (SOC) among Persian bloggers in the diaspora. This paper examined different dimensions of SOC among the bloggers to find out if they had developed a SOC and had established a virtual community as a result. As illustrated, according to McMillan and Chavis (1986) the first dimension of SOC is a feeling of membership which sets boundaries for the community to identify who belongs to the community. Iranians in this network of diasporic weblogs communicated with each other based on several characteristics. As Iranians, the bloggers shared a common background, history, cultural values, and language to identify them as a distinct ethnic group in the diaspora. Their weblogs were spaces where they could express their concerns about their common struggle with life in the diaspora and share them with others. Furthermore, their diasporic background provided an opportunity for the gathering of Iranian immigrants and Iranians who were planning to migrate or were in the process of immigration at the exclusion of other Iranians who did not belong to this category. Therefore, members in this virtual community consisted of a group of unified people with some common goal and understanding and a sense of belonging to an online migrant community. In essence, the Persian immigrant virtual community addressed certain issues which were only

of interest to certain people, and membership for them was a self-selection process to be part of the community.

The second dimension of SOC is a feeling of influence (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Individuals feel they have an influence on and make a difference to the group as well as being influenced by it. Researchers state that the amount of individual influence on a virtual community of immigrants corresponds with the amount of influence individuals have on the physical community (Navarrete & Huerta, 2006; Márque, Peña, Jones, Orange, & Simieou, 2018). People who have major influence in the physical world are more susceptible to creating or sponsoring a transnational virtual community. The group influence on its members includes compelling and supporting desirable behaviour and punishing deviant behaviour. This dimension also existed in the Persian weblog community in that members tried to impact the community in different ways, and the rules of community and their sense of belonging to the community coerced or motivated them to do certain activities. A case in point is the following post that affected the members to a great extent:

Three weeks to lose weight

Why I chose this title for this post is related to something that we're going to do together. There are no excuses like I don't want to or I can't for what we're going to do. It crossed my mind that as of today we get together and promise each other to do some kind of work-out for three weeks. I mean it. I think it is possible to make a team via this weblog for working out together and becoming our own trainer. People also don't cheat and everyone honestly writes down their results every day. Three weeks of work-out, every day 45 minutes. I will remind you every day during these three weeks. Right now, I will write on the top left part of the blog that we have a work-out plan for three weeks, and I will change all the photos on the sidebar into sports photos that give you athletic feelings....Don't eat chocolate for three weeks. Don't drink tea with sugar and stop smoking for three weeks and spend your money on fruit instead....

The post motivated almost all members, and they responded zealously to the idea. The noticeable point about the writer of this post was that he normally played the role of a leader in the community, and his age as a mature Iranian and his hobby as a freelance journalist attracted the attention of almost every member. His leadership had a deep influence in bringing Iranian immigrants together in cyberspace. Being able to do this is an important step in building trust among Iranians, as Iranians normally avoid each other in the physical world due to a long-existing "conspiracy theory" (Bar, 2004; Zeiden, 1996) among them. Iranians may avoid each other for different reasons including the current socio-political situation in Iran, and the variety of ethnic groups with different political views and religious beliefs and backgrounds. These reasons have created a social phobia among Iranians that acts as a repelling force and drives them away from each other in the physical world, and it takes time for them to build trust and form a group or community. However, cyberspace and in this case blogging has become an invaluable resource for Iranians in the diaspora to build trust and get along with each other regardless of differences in social status and ethno-religious and political beliefs. In fact, weblogs seem to have influenced immigrants to establish an Iranian circle based on their common background, history, and language as a distinct group in the diaspora where individuals influence the group online and are influenced in return.

The third SOC dimension is integration and the fulfilment of needs (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Suliman, Shah, Ullah, & Jamal, 2016) which is a feeling of support that members have for others and the feeling of being supported by other members of the community. Navarrete and Huerta (2006) state that this dimension is characterised by two feelings: (a) reinforcement which is the attraction of members to people who have special skills or competence that they can benefit from; (b) shared values which guide decisions and priorities regarding emotional and intellectual needs. This aspect of SOC was definitely present in the Persian blog community and it was by far the most important one for the members. The community represented an indispensable source of information and support for all members especially those who were new in the diaspora or were in the process of migration. They received all types of support and information about the host society from the veteran members. On the other hand, each member was a contributor to the community and they used their skills and knowledge to support other members and the community. For example, a blogger answered some of the questions of migrants-to be in a post based on his own experience of living in Australia and asked other members to share their experience regarding what he had published:

What should we bring to Australia from Iran?

Well this is a very general and somehow hard question and you can't prescribe something for everybody. Depending on the flight you're taking, being single or married, and your finances people may

propose different options. As always, I'll try to put my information and experience in my weblog. Therefore, they are not guaranteed and may not help everybody.

1. Where should we buy a laptop?

Laptops are cheaper in Iran but the warranties that they offer in Australia are better. Also, you can get a refund for a proportion of what you have paid at the end of the fiscal year. Therefore, it's better to buy your laptop in Australia.

2. Shall we bring our electronic gadgets?

Sockets in Australia are different and you need an adaptor, which are available in most supermarkets at a price of about 12 dollars. But remember that some of your gadgets may not work here as the voltage is different. You should also know that the prices of some household items such as irons, CD players, and cell phones are almost the same as Iran, and it's better not to make your luggage heavy with these things....

If other friends have other experiences or think that I have forgotten anything, put them in the comment space so that others can use them.

The individual member support included, but was not limited to, accommodation, medical care, job search, banking, Internet and mobile services, finding Iranian businesses in the host society, news about both the homeland and the host society, etc that helped and supported the members in the community. The community was in itself a virtual bridge between the homeland and the host society where migrants could stay in touch with families in the homeland and vice versa.

The last dimension of SOC is shared emotional connection which is "the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together and similar experiences" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Shared emotional connection is seemingly a distinctive feature of migrants living in another country as their shared histories and values draw a border between them and the host society or any other community or ethnic group. The same was true of the Persian bloggers as their virtual community provided them with a space in which members had a shared history, the same cultural background, and in some cases were from the same city, province, or local area. The online community was therefore a channel for interacting with other members and participating in shared events that were historically or culturally significant and that were missed as a result of migration. The community was a space that filled the gap for the migrants and connected them emotionally to each other across the host society and within the homeland. For example, one case that was frequent in the bloggers' posts at a certain time each year was the Iranian New Year (Nowruz) festival. Each year around March 21, the bloggers had a large number of posts with spring season greetings celebrating the Nowruz festival and wishing each other a happy new year. Posts were usually accompanied by the traditional photos of *Haft Sin* (a table cloth that is decorated with seven symbolic items each starting with the letter *Sin* /s/ in Persian and hence the name *Haft Sin* which literally means seven Ss):



Figure 1. A typical Haft Sin in the diaspora published in weblog community

The weblog community was also a space for the migrants to keep their families posted on their life in the diaspora including their children's birthday events and photos, their first year of school, family holidays, and any other events that they felt necessary for their families to know. For instance, the following post shows how a blogger felt about keeping a weblog and being part of the community:

An advantage of blogging for me, or perhaps a lot of other Iranian immigrants, is that blogs fill the empty place of friends and relatives who have been left in Iran. If a person spends a lot of time reading blogs, writing and revising posts, and answering comments, it is not because of their love toward Iranians nor their national responsibility to enlighten ignorant people. In fact, it's neither one. A lot of us who keep blogs are not social or political activists or even journalists. The majority of us are average people who have started blogging in order to escape the fact that we cannot speak or read in Farsi anymore, and we also feel that we are being cut from our ancestral roots....

A big advantage of blogging for me is that I have found friends. Although weblogs have sometimes been a source of unresolvable misunderstanding, they give you a good feeling that there is someone on the other side of the world or maybe near you who you can talk to and enjoy the talk even without having seen him/her. You can be full of joy of the good feelings that you receive, and you can even be courageous enough to go further and show him/her the real you and meet each other. The fact that virtual people become real is a strange and yet very interesting experience.

The blogger openly expresses how the blog community has replaced the empty place of those who have been left behind due to migration. The weblog and other members of the community have given the blogger the chance to share the experience of living in the diaspora and interact with other members which in some cases culminated in offline friendship. Therefore, a personal weblog was not merely a virtual space to keep and record a diary of life in the diaspora. It was a conduit to a virtual community and a place to receive emotional support from other members and the community and also a space to provide support to other members.

The emotional attachment to the community also imposed obligations on the members of the community. The obligations were greater on the bloggers than the commenters. Bloggers normally tried to publish new posts as often as they could. In cases that they got busy with their life in the diaspora and were not able to update their weblogs, then their new posts usually started with some apologetic sentences or explanation for their silence. This kind of opening was an indication of the bloggers' obligation to the community and the fact that they knew there were people waiting for their new posts. In some cases, the visitors left some comments in the form of a friendly complaint or showed their anxiety about why the blogger did not publish anything new by questioning if things were okay with the blogger.

With a focus on the success of virtual communities, Blanchard (2008a) argues that there are other elements that are vital in sustaining a successful virtual community. This includes the development of trust between the members of the community, and the development and imposition of norms and rules of conduct to be obeyed and respected by the members. While the development and maintenance of trust is vital in virtual communities due to deception and fraud online (see e.g. Chen & Huang, 2011; Tsikerdekis & Zeadally, 2014; Ullah, Ashraf, & Shah, 2016), it did not seem to be a problem in the virtual community of the Persian bloggers. There was not a single case in which the bloggers or their audience questioned each other's identity. Both the bloggers and their readers were quite open in discussing different aspects of their life such as their workplace, their living conditions, their location in the homeland and the host society, and any other issues that were raised in the community. The reason for trust being taken for granted among the Persian bloggers' community was that these people started their weblogs and their virtual community with the purpose of helping each other in the diaspora and in the homeland. Their aim was to develop a network of socio-emotional support where new migrants could receive information about the host society and have an easier transition from the homeland by using the experience and advice of others who were already living in the host society. For example, a blogger introduces her weblog as:

This weblog is a communication page between me and my beloved husband who is far from me as the result of my migration to Australia. I want to store my hours and days of living in Australia on this page so that he can be with me in all moments of my life. I also want to write about the stages of migration that I went through and my life experience in Australia for those who need this information. My aim is to write here so that I feel less lonely and feel that you and my husband are with me.

This weblog introduction shows that for this blogger the weblog was multifunctional. It acted as a communication bridge between her and her husband and a space to be part of the diasporic community

where she could both provide support for those who needed information about Australia and receive emotional support from the community.

The virtual community of the bloggers seemed to be the only space for people who were in the process of migration to trust each other regardless of the feelings of insecurity and mistrust that can be present in the Iranian society. The online community was the space where people listened to each other, followed the advice of other members, and supported each other without expecting anything. Therefore, the element of trust was not an issue in this particular virtual community as it belonged to a certain group of Iranian immigrants with a certain audience whose aim was to provide/seek socio-emotional support with respect to the diaspora.

Nonetheless, the development and enforcement of norms and rules of behaviour within the community was a controversial issue. The controversy was not about what or how to discuss different topics but rather if weblogs needed a series of norms such as self-censorship, or censoring certain posts or comments to be developed and followed by the members. The following is an example of such a discussion between a blogger and other members of the community regarding the development of norms for the weblog community:

Terms and Conditions

In all social relations around the world there are several terms and conditions in contracts that both sides are required to obey. In Australia, these terms and conditions are written in very small font at the end of the contract, and not reading them can cause a lot of trouble. After our first accommodation contract and the problems that we went through to cancel it, we have understood that before signing anything you have to read all those fine prints.

In my opinion, maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to introduce terms and conditions for our weblogs. I'm writing this because one of my comments was censored in an unseen friend's weblog which didn't come with any terms and conditions. She had written this for me, "harsh comments won't be published". Of course, she had written an explanation that my comment was harsh! I think what makes something a harsh comment should be defined since an opposing comment can be accused of being harsh. Last night I found out that certain other comments were not published either, and it was very probably because of being harsh or antagonistic or whatever you might call it. In a sense, if you have to approve of everything I say as a blogger then I shouldn't publish you, but instead censor you and accuse you of being harsh.

I myself censor comments that are insulting or nonsense. I also censor those comments that are not relevant to the post or are anonymous and partial. Because of this, I have been thinking of searching for what the tenets of blogging are. What are the tenets of commenting? Do you also censor comments? What are your reasons? If you have expressed your opinion wrongly in a post and someone opposes you, then what? Do you change the content of the post or do you add a post script? What do you do with misspellings after you have been reminded of them? What kind of writing do you consider harsh and how much is your tolerance for being insulted? How many unpublished posts stay published only in your brain?

In your opinion, is it right to introduce terms and conditions for weblogs?

The blogger tries to compare the weblog with the physical world where every contract has terms and conditions that need to be read and followed carefully or trouble may arise. She thinks that weblogs should have some kind of terms and conditions that define the norms of behaviour for visitors and readers who want to be part of the community and leave comments. For this reason she poses several controversial questions and asks other members of the community to get involved and share their opinions. The comments from other members are as controversial as the questions since each member has a different opinion of blogging. However, a final comment by a member which puts an end to the discussion of introducing terms and conditions to weblogs is worth analysing as it highlights several important aspects which are explicitly linked to blogging in the diaspora:

While I respect other people's opinions, I believe that weblogs are not private diaries that you hide away somewhere. We write online because we want others to read our thoughts and share their experiences with us. We also should consider the fact that lots of us are bloggers that write about our experiences of living abroad. Therefore, it's not just a private page and it belongs to others as well. We write here because we're far from the people we love, and we want to soothe the sorrow of being far from them by sharing our days of life living in a foreign country. We also want to be a source of information for those who are in Iran in order to have a better view of life in foreign land if they want to migrate.

I suggest that we get off our high horses, improve our tolerance of listening to each other, and forget about terms and conditions for our weblogs.

The comment from this member uncovers several aspects of blogging and the existence of a virtual community for the people in the diaspora. The commenter thinks that weblogs are not the traditional private diaries that people used to keep as a personal possession and the only person who had access to it was the writer of the diary. He believes that for people in the diaspora weblogs act as a public space and what is published is for the consumption of the public. He reminds others of the fact that they write about their life experience in the diaspora, an indication of writing for a purpose and with a potential audience in mind. For this reason, he thinks that the diasporic weblogs are not personal and belong to other Iranians as well. Furthermore, he indicates that weblogs are a social network for people in the diaspora to soothe the sorrow of distance and detachment from their loved ones. By highlighting different aspects of blogging in the diaspora he points out that bloggers have a responsibility with regards to others and they should improve their tolerance of criticism and let people express themselves freely without any conditions.

Apart from not making overt norms of behaviour in the weblog community, the bloggers made use of “sanctioning” (cf. Blanchard, 2008a) as a way of filtering the flow of comments. Sanctioning worked on different levels. Some bloggers activated comment moderation after being annoyed by some comments. The comment moderator allows bloggers to check the comments before they appear on the comment area. This way they were able to filter comments which were rude, insulting, or partial. Sometimes some bloggers deactivated the comment link for certain posts indicating they did not want to receive any comment or they thought their opinion in that post might cause controversial discussions. In other cases, some bloggers wrote a warning note for the commenter under their comments. This was especially common in cases where the commenters caused some discomfort for the bloggers. For example, if a commenter used Roman alphabet to transliterate Persian words (what was generally called *Pinglish* (Persian English) or *Finglish* (Farsi English) by the bloggers), then the bloggers warned them of not publishing their future comments.

On the whole, the discussion revealed that all four dimensions of SOC as proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986) were present among the Persian bloggers in the diaspora. The bloggers developed SOC online based on their shared common background, cultural values, and experience as an ethnic group living in the diaspora.

Concluding remarks

The Internet technology has redefined the concept of diaspora around the world. The interactive features of the Internet have provided new opportunities for migrants and transnational communities to communicate with each other in unprecedented ways. This has caused the creation of online communities among diasporic groups using Internet technologies such as weblogs for different purposes. The discussion in this paper illustrated the existence of Sense of Community among a group of Persian diasporic bloggers and the importance of weblogs in the daily life of Iranians living in the diaspora.

As a first attempt, this paper brought to the fore the way Iranians use weblogs in the diaspora to build a virtual community that acts as a network of socio-emotional support in the diaspora. This is a valuable step in studying Iranian diasporic communities since the literature on Iranians and their use of virtual spaces is somehow limited. In the same way, this paper adds to research on Iranian migrants as an under-researched community (Fozi, 2018). The results of this study can also be useful in studying other communities of migrants and the existence of weblog communities among them around the world, and how they make use of these communities in the process of migration and living in the host countries.

There are, nonetheless, some caveats that need to be taken into account. The first and foremost consideration in this paper is the small sample of weblogs. As illustrated, the information was limited to a group of Persian weblogs publishing from Australia. While these weblogs were an invaluable source of information due to the large amount of data that were produced on a daily basis, they may not necessarily represent all the Iranian weblog communities publishing from different diasporas. Hence, the results may not be generalizable to other Iranians living in other diasporas and their use of virtual spaces. Future research can focus on a larger number of Persian diasporic weblogs or run a cross-comparison of the use of weblogs among Iranians living in different parts of the world.

Another point to consider is the demography and background of the bloggers in this study. Based on the available information on the weblogs, all these bloggers were skilled migrants with high level of computer literacy. This may imply that they had the advantage of using weblog technology to create networks or the online community was limited to these IT savvy individuals. Other studies can look into this and find out if migrants from different layers of the Iranian society and different backgrounds will use weblog technology to create networks in the diaspora.

Finally, other scholars can explore the use of weblogs in creating diasporic networks and the possible degree of isolation that they may cause for migrants from the host society (Zare, 2018). Using virtual spaces may suggest that individuals use these virtual spaces to seek social and emotional support at the cost of integration into the host society and receiving support from physical environments. Investigating this aspect of diasporic weblogs and virtual spaces may produce interesting results.

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