We are all in the same boat:
How online communities facilitate the process of migration

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Previous research has indicated that immigrants gain support, primarily though sharing information, from participation in online forums. This study examined how migration forums function as communities to facilitate the transition to the destination country. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted on a 1-month cross-section of the posts made to 3 forums for migrants to New Zealand. Overall, members of the online communities encouraged each other through the uncertainties and stresses of international migration, including offering and receiving emotional and tangible support. Results also demonstrated that members behaved in altruistic ways to benefit their community as a whole. Protocols of thankfulness and sharing achievements assisted in the development of a sense of "we-ness" for the group. Notably, participation in the community fostered a normalization of risk, thus lowering the barrier to international migration. Overall the shared experience made the process of migration easier for forum members. Further study into how forums create their own cultures, which shape participants expectations and experience are needed.

Although New Zealand's economy is only slowly improving from a long-term recessionary period, the increasing need for skilled workers will soon be a key issue to both business and policymakers. Given the fact that New Zealand has had a net migration loss, meaning more people are leaving than arriving, in the year to June 2012 (Labour & Immigration Research Centre, 2012), there is a growing demand to attract workers to replace those who have left. Fortunately, skilled migrants want to come here for the lifestyle, climate and safety (Department of Labour, 2009b; Statistics New Zealand, 2008; Tabor & Milfont, 2011). British migrants have been particularly drawn to what New Zealand has to offer, as the United Kingdom has long been the top source country for New Zealand skilled migrants (Department of Labour, 2009a; Labour & Immigration Research Centre, 2011; Merwood, 2007; Shorland, 2006). Given the vast distance, these migrants are likely to turn to the internet as an alternative information source when they are unable to easily scout out New Zealand for themselves. Moreover, the process of leaving is not an easy one for people who intend to remain permanently, with logistical and emotional stresses such as the loosening of ties to extended family members, friends and communities (Adelman, 1988; Tabor & Milfont, in press).

There is no gathering space in the physical world for those who are in the process of migrating, except the international departures lounge, so where can those in the process of leaving for New Zealand find a community to support them through this stressful period? Internet communities have been found to aid migrants as a tool for informational social support in the pre-departure period (Tabor & Milfont, 2011), during settlement in their new societies (Elias & Lemish, 2009) as well as maintaining connections between cultural groups that are widely scattered around the globe (Georgiou, 2006). Even so, researchers have not tackled the question of how migration forums function as communities.

Theoretically, shared emotional connection is a main element in sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), and though the migrants who frequent online forums may never meet in person, they are sharing an important life experience. A tangible function of any community is the fulfillment of needs (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) and forums seem to assist their members primarily through the sharing of information (Tabor & Milfont, in press). Beneath this surface layer of interaction, indirect emotional benefits may be present even in discussions related to practical issues (Skinner, 2008).

The internet has been called "a medium of selective social interaction and symbolic belonging" (Castells, 2001, p. 37). Though Reich (2010) found that Facebook and MySpace were characterised by networked individualism rather than community, smaller and more focused social networking sites (SNS) may be able to foster more typical community behaviour. For example, Obst and Stafurik (2010) found that people living with disabilities gained a sense of community from participating in online interaction and that this was associated with increased wellbeing. In a related study, Fayard and DeSanctis (2009) found that members of a small but active forum formed a unique culture and sense of "we-ness" with each other through their virtual relationship. Though researchers have looked at internet forums as supporting people who are experiencing migration, research has not examined how this "we-ness" may influence people who are in the process of migrating.

Sense of virtual communities,

as defined by Koh and Kim (2003), entails membership, influence and immersion as key dimensions. They defined membership as "feelings of belonging in their virtual community" (p. 81). Influence is the sense of having an impact within their community. Immersion is based on the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), while interacting with the community. Koh and Kim also highlighted the important role of off-line activities between members in fostering a strong sense of community. The extent to which these are important in migration forums has not been explored previously. Because forums have members who are considering migration, as well as in the process of leaving and already in the destination country, we were interested in what goes on in migration forums and how they affected the members. Aside from the information they acquire online, do they gain further benefits? Our main research question was: *how does participation in a migration forum facilitate the process of migration?*

Methods

As described in detail in Tabor & Milfont (2011), following approval by the Human Ethics Committee, a thematic analysis was undertaken to qualitatively explore the posts to online forums made by migrants before, during or after migration to New Zealand. Data items were open coded initially, followed by closed coding, both performed by a single rater with substantial knowledge of both the language of the forums and the migration process from more than 4 years of participant observer experience in a migration forum as well as the lived experience of migration to New Zealand. This study took a phenomenological approach to the migration forums as communities.

Sample

Three English-language forums were selected for inclusion in the study. The forums had 3,000, 7,000 and 120,000 registered members respectively, though the largest forum also contained boards for migrants to destinations other than New Zealand. Only those sections of the forum that related to New Zealand as a destination were included in the corpus. The most active forum typically had 100 or more

viewers at any given time. All forums were primarily, but not exclusively, frequented by British migrants.

Procedure

The qualitative corpus consisted of publicly viewable posts to the three forums over a 30-day cross-sectional time frame in October/November 2008. Any thread that had a final posting in the date range was analysed, thus some posts were included in the analysis that were older than the specified date range.

Data Analysis

Using the coding techniques detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006), data extracts were meaningfully coded portions of posts of a word or more. Coded extracts were selected manually from the corpus, however Nvivo 8 was used to track and report the codes. An initial round of open coding yielded 1,898 data extracts in 40 codes. Codes were then combined to make 5 themes: Precontemplation, Contemplation, Action, Acculturation and Belonging. Themes were reviewed for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. The first four themes were reported in Tabor and Milfont (2011); the belonging theme was excluded from that study for lack of relevance to the research question. Belonging, which comprised 5% of the total corpus is related to the experience of participating in an online migration forum and is relevant to the present study. The belonging theme was further analysed looking into both the semantic and latent meanings of the posts.

Ethical issues with online data collection from publicly available sources include the size of the forum (larger forums are places where people do not expect their communication to be private), privacy measures (quotations in this manuscript are not listed with names of sources, nor are the forums named), sense of being watched (most acute for patients suffering disease) (Eysenbach & Till, 2001).

Results

The belonging theme was composed of subthemes on both the semantic and latent levels. These included the semantic subthemes: altruism, shared celebration, thankfulness, breakthrough, and cohorts,

as well as the latent subthemes: 'like others' and normalisation of risk.

Semantic subthemes

Altruism. Among forum members, there is a desire to share information based on one's own experiences and research. Many times information is offered as the result of a specific request, and these helping behaviours were very common. Some were aimed at helping others avoid bad decisions, such as this post: "At least you guys who are yet to buy [a house] here can learn from my mistake!" Beyond these simple responses to queries, advice is sometimes offered even when not specifically requested. For example: "The forum helped me in the past - so time for a little pay back." These were altruistic behaviours where group members posted to proactively provide tips and information for others to learn from their experiences. There was a feeling of needing to reciprocate for help given to the member, but the obligation appeared to be to the level of the group as a whole, not to individual members who might have been particularly helpful in the past. Since the advice is often coming from members who are further along in the move process there may be no way to reciprocate, so instead there is an urge to "pay it forward" by helping others instead.

Thankfulness. Demonstrating appreciation was a part of the normal language of the forum, such as when a specific question was asked the poster was expected to thank those who replied. Moreover, members often spontaneously posted about how thankful they were for the guidance and support provided by the forum in general. One person posted: "I'd like to also take this opportunity to thank everyone who has contributed to this invaluable forum!!"

Breakthrough. The virtual world does not exist in isolation of the real world. The forums contained evidence that members used the internet to gain friendships that continued offline, thus "breaking through" the barrier that divides the internet from the real world. In one example of breakthrough, a poster had "some excellent forum members who checked the area out and took pictures" to help them decide where to live in a new town. Certainly

this type of assistance was not the norm, but it was mentioned regularly as forum members needed help and others who were geographically convenient assisted. Another member posted: "I've been out with a couple of forum members a few times (thanks!) and I even ran into another forum member at a party last night (it's a small world!)."

Shared celebration. At a time in the migrant's life when few face-to-face friends or family members would celebrate the small successes that make up the process of leaving, the forums are filled with members who are happy to acknowledge the importance of these accomplishments. In response to a submitted application, approval, job offer, arrival in New Zealand, members regularly posted dancing banana icons, good lucks, and congratulations. Posts such as "go for it!" provided reassurance when few real-world contacts could be encouraging.

Cohorts. Due to the active nature of the larger forums, there were frequently groups of migrants who were going through the process at nearly the same time. In the application stage, people submitted paperwork and met deadlines and then (hopefully) were approved at the same time as other forum members. Often cohorts would arrive in New Zealand at roughly the same time. "Hope its been as good for others who set off the same time as us?" one posted. Another observed: "there were a few of us that seemed to arrive between March/April time and it is lovely to read how you are all getting on and adapting." This shared experience is only possible with the advent of large active migration forums.

Latent subthemes

Like Others. Though on the semantic level cohorts of migrants gained support from going through the process of migration at the same time, there was a much larger impact of having many *like others* who were further along in the process of migration. One poster said: "[forum member name] and I are in the same boat as you." The sense of shared experience was a powerful motivator to continue involvement with the forum (and by extension the process of migration). One member addressed the issue with this comment: "great post [forum member name],

it`s these kind of posts that make me want to go soooooo much." Reading the forum posts provided a constant reminder that success was ahead and the struggle was worth it. One woman posted: "sounds like your settling in well - i keep thinking that will be me soon!!!" Through the referencing of earlier threads, even the members who were no longer actively participating were still having their stories shared.

There were certainly a variety of professions (from plumbers to IT professionals) and backgrounds represented on the forums, and despite this there was recognition of common purpose that brought together people who would likely never interact otherwise. In the venue of the forums, the "sameness" was keyed into rather than the differences. As one member posted, "I can't tell anyone about our plans. It's as if we're living two parallel lives at the moment, but I'm sure there are lots of forumites out there who are having to do exactly the same."

Normalisation of risk. An effect of having so many members posting about their migration experiences fostered a perception among forum members that moving to New Zealand was a perfectly normal thing to do. Objectively, leaving an established home with family, friends and job for an unknown country across the globe where one does not have a job waiting and there is no guarantee of happiness is a highly risky endeavour. Conversely, the forums have thousands of members and the most active forums have posts being made throughout the day about successful applications and arrivals in New Zealand. One member encouraged others with the post: "Don't stress, it will all work out. We did pretty much exactly what you're doing." Forum members would often post about concerns that they had, as well as fears. But responses would focus on the fact that so many others were doing the same thing. Seeing others take the plunge literally inspired the same level of commitment: "Following [forum member's name] success with his application I decided to throw caution to the wind and apply online today!"

Discussion

Through both the semantic subthemes (altruism, thankfulness,

breakthrough, shared celebration and cohorts) and latent subthemes (like others, normalisation of risk) a complex picture emerges as to how participation in a migration forum facilitates the process of emigration. Overall, forums function as communities and they are able to influence their members' experiences, such as the perception of risk, as well as inspiring and bringing together people who would otherwise be strangers. Though no one claimed to have moved to New Zealand *because* of a forum, many participants emphasised how much they relied on the information provided to make their decisions. They were aware of the sense of "we-ness" and this seemed to increase their desire to participate, as was demonstrated in the altruistic behaviour of sharing information. Altruistic behaviours have also been observed in other online communities, such as Wikipedia (Baytiyeh & Pfaffman, 2010). Altruistic behaviour may also relate to the concept of influence (Koh & Kim, 2003; McMillan & Chavis, 1986), in that frequent posting is a way to have voice in the group.

Further, McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) found that people who express their true selves online are more likely to form close relationships with those they virtually interact with, and that many of these relationships continue offline. Goodings, Locke and Brown (2007) also focused on how identities are negotiated among users of online communities like MySpace, and the present study similarly found that there is a development of a migrant identity online, though it is often kept hidden from those real world social contacts who are not aware of the migration plans. Migrants who may be afraid to share their plans for departure with relatives and friends are revealing their truest self to the online forum, a place where they feel safe enough to be able to post about their hopes and fears. For these expressions, the online community accepts them, at a time when close others in the offline world are less supportive. In another study, extended family members being left behind were perceived as being less supportive following migrants informing them of the planned departure (Tabor & Milfont, in press). Perhaps to compensate for this,

forum members sometimes developed relationships online that continued in the non-virtual world, much as McKenna, Green and Gleason's internet users had brought online friendships in to their real lives. Particularly as members moved from around the globe to the few cities within New Zealand, the breakthrough of internet relationships to real-world relationships was a component of the forums. This finding lends further support to Koh and Kim's (2003) concept that off-line relationships compliment online community friendships.

Another way that migration forums influence their members was that the forums themselves create a culture where there was pressure to see migration risk as acceptable. To sell your house, rehome your pets, leave your stable job, family and friends to move across the world to an unknown country entails great risk. Having large numbers of people taking the plunge and moving to New Zealand created a normalisation of that risk. This normalisation of risk is likely to occur in group settings, such as skydiving clubs (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993). Members are socialised into greater acceptance of risk through exposure to group norms and repeated experiences with the group (Powell, 2007). What may appear to an outsider as irrational behaviour becomes normal to the group members. This type of barrier reduction to an international move may be an important tipping point in a potential migrant's decision to migrate.

In the context of migration, *like others* are those who share an interest in migrating to New Zealand, regardless of their background or nationality. Migration forums are virtual communities full of these *like others*. Norris (2004) studied the bonding role of online communities, noting that they bridge real-world societal gaps such as socio-economic status. Yet the more similar the members are in the non-virtual world, the more powerful the effect of like others. Reading about a family who has successfully migrated to New Zealand from one's own town or region is a more confidence-building experience than reading about someone migrating from another country. To see others who have migrated posting about

their less stressful, less crowded lives reinforces the dreams of those deciding whether or not to take the risk. The New Zealand government could not pay for better advertising than the real people posting the message "life is good here, it's all worth it."

Increasingly, it seems that online communities create their own cultures. This may be accomplished through the development of a set of cultural norms and shared values. Much as Ward (2010) described new players joining multiplayer online games as an acculturation experience, the new members of the migration forums were becoming a part of an online community that exists as its own culture. As American businessmen greet each other with a handshake and Japanese businessmen greet each other with a bow, these online communities had rituals of introduction (a first post should include details on the new member's situation and location). Behaviours observed on the migration forums like altruism, shared celebration and thankfulness were similar to findings by Fayard and DeSanctis (2009) that forum members performed rituals to manage relationships within their community. The migration forums also had cultural expectations of thanking that worked to maintain relationships and smooth social interactions. Enthusiastic celebrations were frequent, as indicated by an animated banana icon in a post highlighting another member's achievement. Conversely, members may be scolded by others in the group when expectations are broken, thereby reinforcing cultural norms.

Further, Fayard and DeSanctis (2009) noted the socially constructed reality that is developed in online forums; through a common language and purpose boundaries of the in-group are defined. The jargon involved in a normal internet interaction is present in the migration forums, as are terms specific to the migration process (e.g., blue stickers meaning residence permits). New members learn the do's (post your question in an appropriate section of the forum) and don'ts (hijack or put off-topic posts in a thread someone else has created) of the culture.

As with previous research, information is the currency of the

migrant forum (Skinner, 2008; Tabor & Milfont, 2011; Wright, 2000; Ye, 2006), but collectively more than information is being exchanged. As communities develop, their rituals and systems influence the users and create virtual spaces that participants can express another part of themselves. The online interactions fostered a sense of community and a feeling of belonging that facilitated the migration process. The forum members frequently referred to the process of migration as being a roller coaster, with many moments of elation as well as fears and disappointments. The sharing of the process with others who were either going through it at the same time, or had already been through it, tangibly changed the experience from something isolating to a socially supported experience.

Implications from this study include the need to support and encourage the use of online forums for those who are in the process of migration. Given the benefits to New Zealand of skilled migrants (Ho, 2001; Mare & Stillman, 2009; Nana & Williams, 1999; Ward, Tabor & Leong, forthcoming), any instrument that attracts such migration ought to be supported by government policy. Further research is needed into how online communities can shape the expectations and behaviours of their members.

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