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Identity Meanings and Online Interactions of Hybrid Transnational Communities of Immigrants

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates identity in Hybrid Transnational Communities of Immigrants. As predicted by the integrated theory of identity, members enact different salient identities based on situational factors. Community members do enact their place-based identity. However, their role-based identities in the physically community are also brought over to the virtual community. The connection of the virtual community to a geographic location provides members with a tool to verify the identity of others. Members ask or disclose information that can only be known to locals providing a natural filter to screen insiders from outsiders. Members deny their support to any mechanisms to verify the identity of people participating. Even if such mechanisms were enforced, the identity verification is limited because virtual communities have no power, authority or means to verify the identity disclosed.

Keywords

Virtual communities, identity, social identity, personal identity, transnational communities of immigrants, hybrid communities.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the utilization of information and communication technologies by communities of immigrants. Hybrid Transnational Communities of Immigrants (HTCI) are dispersed national groups using the Internet to preserve their sense of community. As opposed to pure Virtual Communities (VC) that use the Internet as their only communication channel, hybrid communities rely upon traditional means (e.g. telephone and fax), Web based tools (e.g. e-mail, chat rooms, bulletin boards) and face-to-face communication.

HTCI are the focus of attention of both, host and home countries, because of the social, economical and political effects of migration. Home countries are interested in maintaining close ties with migrants because resources are mobilized from the host to the home country (Conway and Cohen, 1998; Massey, 1987). Remittances promote the development of the home country leading home governments to foster the relationship with its migrants. Migrants can also influence the political sphere in their home and host countries (Graham and Khosravi, 2002). They use the Internet as a public forum to express their opposition or support to new legislations concerning the community (Mitra, 2000; Smith, 1998). Host countries are interested in HTCI because of its impact on the migrants’ acculturation process and well-being (Sonn, 2002). Therefore, both host and home countries are concerned about the success of HTCI.

Virtual communities are successful when members’ satisfy their needs through the community. Members’ needs are diverse and might include information sharing, moral support, recognition, counseling, or any other need members seek to satisfy. Regardless of the type, needs are satisfied through the information exchanged among community members. High quality information helps members to fulfill their needs. Therefore, the sustainability of a VC depends on the quality of the information exchanged.

VC members who have an identity are more conscious of their participation and more concerned of the quality of the information exchanged (Blanchard and Horan, 1998; Blanchard and Markus, 2004). Having an identity strengthens the commitment to the community and it is a critical factor for the success of the VC (Navarrete and Huerta, 2006). Having an identity is also important because members contributing to the community expect reciprocity from their contributions.

In VC people can shape their online identity as they please unless the VC establishes a mechanism to ensure the authenticity of a person’s identity. People might even create fake identities for wrongdoing (Donath, 1999). But not all VC require members to verify their identity and this lack of verification does not prevent VC from being successful (Blanchard, 2004; Blanchard and Markus, 2004; Churchill, Girgensohn, Nelson and Lee, 2004).
Findings from previous research suggest that members are able to infer the identities of others either by the content of the information exchanged (Blanchard and Markus, 2004) or by voluntary disclosures (Navarrete, Huerta and Horan, 2008). However, empirical studies of identity based on theories are limited (Koh, Kim, Butler and Bock, 2007). Moreover, studies on identity must employ a holistic perspective based on sound theories.

The present research investigates identity in HTCI. In particular, it explores 1) how identity is enacted by community members, and 2) the perception of members of HTCI regarding the disclosure of identities. The study uses the integrated theory of identity (Stets and Burke, 2000) as the theoretical framework. The paper is structured as follows. First, previous literature on identity in VC is reviewed. This section also describes the integrated theory of identity. Then, the research methodology is presented and findings are discussed. The last two sections present the conclusions drawn from the study and the limitations and areas for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity is the categorization of identification of the self (Stets and Burke, 2000). There are three main theories of identity: identity theory, social identity theory, and personal identity theory. In the past, theories on identity were seen as “parallel” theories with no communication between them (Hogg, Terry and White, 1995). However, more recently theories on identity are seen as complementary theories (Stets and Burke, 2000).

In identity theory and social identity theory “identity refers to the various meanings attached to oneself by self and others, and locates one in social space through the relationships implied by the identity” (Hitlin, 2003, p. 120). According to identity theory an identity is a role enacted by a person (Hogg et al., 1995; Stets and Burke, 2000; Stryker, 1968; Stryker and Burke, 2000). Persons have as many identities as roles enacted. Role identities are expressed in terms of the role in a relationship, e.g. teacher of or mother of. Identities are organized in a hierarchy of importance. The importance of an identity depends on the social network associated to the particular identity. The social network can be expressed in terms of the number and the depth of the relationships associated to the role.

On the other hand, according to social identity theory a social identity is a “person’s knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group” (Stets and Burke, 2000, p. 225). Persons can have as many identities as groups they belong to. Social identities are expressed in terms of the group, e.g. engineers or Canadians. Social identities define the boundaries between the persons inside and outside the group. In social identity theory identities are also organized hierarchically and are enacted based on the situation.

Identity theory emphasizes roles within a group. Meanwhile social identity theory emphasizes group-based identities. Rather than being a contradiction these theories recognize that “one always and simultaneously occupies a role and belongs to a group, so that role identities and social identities are always and simultaneously relevant to, and influential on, perceptions, affects, and behavior” (Stets and Burke, 2000, p. 228).

Group and role identities also interact with personal identities (Hitlin, 2003). Personal identities are qualities, traits and expectations internalized by an individual (Burke, 1980; Hitlin, 2003). Values are the core of one's personal identity and give a cohesive understanding of the different identities enacted (Hitlin, 2003). Personal identities are expressed in terms of characteristics, e.g. honest or kind. The importance of a particular identity is also situational. An identity is invoked (enacted) depending on the circumstances. That is, a person can be simultaneously the mother of her children, an engineer, and a honest person. Personal identities might pervade in all circumstances.

However, role and social identities are enacted depending on the circumstances. A mother engineer will act as a mother at her children’s school but we’ll act as an engineer at work. When an identity is enacted the person behaves according to the expected behavior of that role or social identity. The identity that is enacted in a particular situation is named the salient identity. Some personal identities might pervade in all circumstances.

Past research on VC has used social identity theory as the theoretical framework to understand the enactment of offline/online identities. Other studies have explored personal identity as the possibility to identify a member in the community without reference to any theory on identity. The following is a discussion of past research on identity in VC. Table 1 describes the different identity theories and the empirical studies on VC that either use the theory or that their findings can be related to that particular theory.

Studies investigating personal identity associate identification with identity. People get to know a person’s identity online by the type of information exchanged and for other identifiers commonly used in online setting, such as digital signatures. Based on the context of the quality and frequency of the information exchanged people might infer personal traits of other members such as helpfulness and commitment.
Studies using social identity theory define the boundaries of the group based on a particular interest (i.e. runners) or a particular geographic area. These studies show how members voluntarily disclose their affiliation to a particular group. For instance, Navarrete et al (2008) demonstrated that members of HTCI draw from their offline identities to shape their online identities. In their study, they identified different types of place-based identities: locals, locals living abroad, and foreigners. Their study also showed that members discriminate themselves in these categories and each category is vested with different degrees of importance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>References (alphabetical)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity theory</td>
<td>Identity is the role enacted in a relationship</td>
<td>No empirical research was found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social identity theory</td>
<td>Identity is the belonging to a group</td>
<td>(Bernal, 2008)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(Gonzalez and Castro, 2007)</td>
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<td>(Jin, Daniel and Boudreau, 2006)</td>
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<td>(Mitra, 2000)</td>
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<td>(Navarrete et al., 2008)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal identity theory</td>
<td>Identity is the set of personal traits</td>
<td>(Blanchard and Markus, 2004)</td>
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Table 1 Studies on identity in virtual communities

HTCI are strongly anchored to geographical places enabling members to disclose their place-based identity. The goal of HTCI is to discuss the interest of their members either abroad or in their home country. However, no-nationals also participate in HTCI because they need information on the region or because they are living or have lived in that region (Navarrete et al., 2008).

If place-based identity is but one type of social identity composing the self, then, according to the integrated theory of identity, members of HTCI should enact other types of identities. As stated above, the self is composed of multiple identities and identities are invoked based on situational factors. That is, the fact that a member is living in a specific place might be irrelevant in some discussions but might become relevant in others. Therefore, studies in identity require an integrated theoretical view of the self taking into account the multiplicity of identities people can enact.

Since personal identity and social identity have been studied before, we focus our research on identities based on roles. Moreover, we study how the salience of a particular identity is situational. That is to say, depending on the situation, members of HTCI might enact their role identity, letting aside their personal and social identities. The present research also explores the perception of HTCI members regarding identity disclosure. Members’ perception is relevant because, usually, HTCI do not require the verification of the members’ identity.

RESEARCH METHOD

The present research investigates two research questions on identity in HTCI. First, it explores how identity is enacted by community members. Second, it investigates the perception of members of HTCI regarding the disclosure of identities. To answer the first question we used an ethnographic approach. An ethnographic approach is useful to conduct a detailed investigation within its context (Hunter, 2004; Myers, 1999; Rennecker, 2004). To answer the second research question we conducted semi-structured interviews with members of a HTCI.

The hybrid community Oaxaca Web Community (OWC) (Comunidad Web de Oaxaca http://www.oaxaca.com) is examined in this study. OWC is an online venue created in 1998 where people share and exchange information about the physical place of Oaxaca. Oaxaca is among the states in Mexico with the highest rates of migration to the United States. It has a population of almost 3.6 million inhabitants (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática, 2005).

At the time of this study, almost 90% of registered users (4,549 of a total of 5,153 members) were originally from Oaxaca. OWC offers different types of services for its members. OWC had ten discussion forums and a chat room where people exchanged information and views on the cultural, political and economical landscape of Oaxaca (e.g. the 2006 teacher strike, the Guelaguetza festival, migrants’ acculturation experiences, etc.). The forums were organized into 10 different topics and had over 6,000 threads and 20,000 messages. About 30% of the messages were posted in topics related to commerce.
In addition, the online site hosting the hybrid community provided a directory with search capabilities, and a set of links to Web pages with tourist information and to a newspaper (The Grasshopper). Figure 1 shows a snapshot of the OWC directory. Members use this searchable database to obtain contact and address information for over 5,000 members. Users can conduct searches according to members’ country or state (only Mexico and the U.S.) of residence, and region of origin in Oaxaca (e.g. Istmo de Tehuantepec, Mixteca, etc.). OWC is an open, registration-free community. It does not have a mechanism that ensures the information in the directory is factual. Postings suggest that OWC relies in the members’ physical social networks to act as informal checkers of information verity.

OWC is appropriate for the study of role-based identity because OWC is a well-established community where exchanges between members have taken place for almost ten years. Moreover, OWC hosts archives of postings in forums that can be used to track patterns of online identities.

![OWC Member directory](image)

Figure 1 OWC Member directory

For the ethnographic study, we observed the information exchanged among OWC community members for 24 months. Out of the 10 topics in the discussion forum, 4 topics were selected to conduct the analysis after the initial screening of the site because they addressed topics other than commercial advertising. Within the topics the threads with the highest number of messages exchanged were selected. More than 40 threads and over 800 messages were analyzed. Our analysis of the messages posted was based on the integrated theory of identity. We searched for information that could support the validity of the theory with a particular focus on role-based identities. We also searched for evidence of the salience of different identities.

To answer the second research question, we conducted 17 interviews with members of the community. The webmaster of the community posted the invitation to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted an average of 45 minutes. Interviews were conducted using an interview protocol. Using an interview protocol increases the reliability of the study (Yin, 1994).

The interviews were tape recorded, with the authorization of the interviewees, and transcribed. Data collected were coded using a grounded approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). A grounded approach is an inductive technique and is more sensitive
to the context than a priori coding (Miles and Huberman, 1994). “In vivo” codes were generated using phrases repeatedly used by informants (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Interviews were coded by one researcher and the coding was validated by a second researcher. Data were analyzed following standard procedures for qualitative data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The following section presents our understanding of the data based on the analyses conducted.

RESULTS

As expected, and similar to past research, OWC members disclose their social identity identifying themselves as Mexicans living in Mexico, Mexicans living abroad, and Foreigners. However, as predicted by the integrated theory of identity, members enact different identities depending on the situation at hand. When a place-based identity is irrelevant to the topic discussed, members enact a different identity that is salient to the situation.

We also found evidence of situational salience of social identities based on geographical locations. Depending on the interaction, members identified themselves as Mexicans, Oaxacans, or locals to a particular community. The definition of who is within or without the group changes. Some of the place-based identities observed were: Mexicans/foreigners, Mexicans outside Oaxaca/Oaxacans, Oaxacans/LocalITY. The identity enacted was situational. When the context was related to a particular locality in Oaxaca, even Oaxacans were considered outsiders. This interpretation was corroborated by data collected from the interviews. One participant stated:

“I identify myself as Oaxacan, because I am proud to be from Oaxaca. But I am also proud to be Mexican. I do not feel there is any difference. When you are in the region you were born, you feel that you belong to that community, and I guess that when you are outside your country you feel that you are Mexican. But I do not see any problem or conflict on this” [Spanish].

Similarly, a different participant stated: “I identify myself as Oaxacan, if I need to specify a local region, then I disclose I am from San Sebastian [Town in Oaxaca]” [Spanish]. When interviewees ranked the relative importance of their place-based identities, they usually did it from the smallest to the largest community. This confirms that the size of the community has an impact on the sense of community. The larger the size of the community, the lower the attachment to that community is.

As predicted by the integrated theory of identity, we observed members enact different identities depending on the situation. We observed not only group-based identities but also multiple examples of identities based on roles. We identified a variety of messages expressing role identities such as friend, mother, sister, teacher, and trainer, to mention but a few. For example, one member disclosed his writer identity expressing his gratitude to the Oaxacan people who helped him find the meaning of a Oaxacan term he wanted to include in his next book:

I want to thank you for your help with this information … I went through a big odyssey to find out the meaning of [the term] “Cloud People”. The song “Offrenda” [worship] by Lila Downs uses the term “Cloud Boy” and it inspired me to write a fiction novel which includes a series of four Mexican tales about Mexican migrants living in the city of New York [Spanish].

Participants behave according to the expectations associated to a particular role, reinforcing their identity. Participants assess behaviors based on the meanings they attach to the roles played in the physical community. For instance, a participant who presented herself as a Spanish teacher enacted her teacher identity when another member suggested she was not using the appropriate criteria for selecting participants for her language exchange program in Oaxaca. She responded according to what she perceived was the appropriate behavior attached to her identity.

Of course I have a criterion and a decent one for selecting [participants for] exchanges … I am not interested in contacting “Zocalo Boys” [a term referring to local persons who spend their time trying to flirt with foreign women]. I am professional and honest enough to select the [appropriate] students. In my message, I make it clear what the requirements for the program are: to improve English skills with the help of native speakers and vice versa [Spanish].

Once the teacher reaffirmed her identity, several participants posted messages with their contact information telling her they were interested in the exchange program. This exchange suggests that when the enacted identity meets the meanings and expectations of other participants, a sense of trust and respect is created around the invoked identity (Stryker and Burke, 2000).

Participants who receive respect and status from other participants are more likely to enact their salient identity and invest more time in their network of relationships. For example, we identified messages by the same teacher in a different discussion thread giving advice to English speakers about how to improve their conversation skills in Spanish. Thus, the verification of role identities not only contributes to the creation of an atmosphere of respect and trust where participants feel comfortable in revealing more details about their offline identities, but also can increase interest and participation in the
hybrid community. Identity verification is particularly relevant for those participants interested in extending their network of social relationships to offline settings.

We also observed that people posted messages in different discussion threads enacting different identities. Members only disclosed their role identity when the role enacted strengthened their arguments. For instance, one of the threads discussed the corruption of a government agency in charge of fostering education. In their messages, some people disclosed their role with the agency. Members disclosed roles identities such as rural trainer, administrative worker, teacher, student, and mother of student.

However, we observed postings from the same identifiers in different discussion threads where no reference to their role was disclosed. This implies that their identity, for example as rural trainer, was only salient when discussing the agency in charge of fostering education but it was irrelevant in other situations. These findings also support the hypothesized predictions of the integrated theory of identity purporting the self composed of multiple identities where the salience of a particular identity is related to situational factors.

The interviews collected data on member’s perceptions of identity disclosure. About half of the participants stated they used their real names as identifiers because they wanted to be identified by others. The other half of participants used nicknames. Regardless of the use of real names or nicknames, members were not bothered from other members using nicknames; because the use of nicknames is “natural” on the Internet.

Even if nicknames were used for posting uncomfortable information (rude, libelous, etc.) there was a strong rejection to use identity verification mechanisms (e.g. a community registration system, member’s e-mail address verification). Participants considered people posting uncomfortable information as “immature”, “psychologically traumatized”, and “in need of attention”. The suggested strategy to deal with this type of postings was to “simply disregard them”.

However, we also observed in the discussion forum heated reactions to uncomfortable postings from some members. This finding suggests members fight against the allegedly impunity of anonymity by either passively disregarding the messages or by actively attacking the misbehavior. In any case, members prefer to deal with occasional uncomfortable messages rather than requiring the verification of identity.

We also observed that even real names are useless as identifiers. Most probably because of the numerous homonymous that might exist. Therefore, even when members disclose their real name, they are prompted to provide additional information to verify their identity. Members ask or disclose information about neighborhoods, elementary schools, or family relations, which can only be answered by a native of the region. For instance the following posting corresponds to someone disclosing his first and last name.

I, as you, “Peter”, migrated from Matias [Romero], 10 years ago, if I’m not mistaken you are the “Peter” from the “Malagueña” … I remembered those days and I am sad for not being over there, [but] I am happy because I found someone I know [in the Web community]. I also know the Velez family, my grandma lives in front of their house. By the way, one of our contemporaneous, “Nico” passed away a few months ago in an accident. He was friend of the Velez too, and of the other local people who answered your message. I was able to identify the “Islas” last name [Spanish].

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This paper aimed to examine the way in which identity is enacted in the online interactions of members of hybrid communities. This study also investigated members’ perceptions regarding the verifiability of identities. Our findings have demonstrated that identity disclosure depends on the context in which the online interaction unfolds. In the context of HTCI, we observed the interplay of different identities and their salience depending on situational factors (e.g. situations where emotional support or advice is needed). Even though the virtual community is anchored on a specific geographic location, members enact role identities in online settings (e.g. wife, teacher, friend) when deemed relevant. Participants do enact their place-based identity. However, their role-based identities in the physical community are also brought over to the virtual community.

In addition, we found that members commonly deny their support to any mechanisms to verify the identity of people participating. Moreover, as a member pointed out, the degree of verifiability is limited. Names, ages, and place or origin can be verified through birth certificates, but roles and personal traits cannot be easily verified. If a person claims she is a teacher, the VC has no power, authority or means to verify that claim. Occasional irritating messages where people take advantage of their anonymity to post disruptive messages are accepted because annoying comments are also common in physical communities and, as one participant stated, “we have to learn to live with that”.
This study also has implications for practice. First, the strong rejection of identity verification should discourage webmasters from HTC1 to implement mechanisms for that purpose. Members appeared to be more willing to deal with disruptive postings than with verification of identities. Second, the need for identity verification might be overstated in the case of HTC1. The relationship of the VC to a geographic location provides members with a tool to verify the identity of others. Members ask or disclose information that can only be known to locals providing a natural filter to screen insiders from outsiders. Third, HTC1 could provide tools to track the posting for a particular member. People disclose their salient identities in different contexts. A history of postings might provide several pieces of the puzzle to understand the identities composing the self.

The present study has some limitations. First, the Internet is but one of the communications means HTC1 might use to exchange information. Since the present study relies only on information exchanged through the Oaxaca Web Community site, information exchanged through other communication means was disregarded. Therefore, we provide a partial view of the dispersed community of Oaxaca. Future research could expand its objectives to understand the communication exchange between the physical and virtual community. Second, interviewees were self-selected. Only volunteers were contacted for interviews. However, findings from data gathered from interviews were triangulated with findings data gathered from the discussion forums. The triangulation of sources gives us confidence on the conclusions drawn from the study. Third, interviewees might consciously (social desirability effect) or unconsciously (imperfect recollection or rationalization) lie in their responses and the researcher has no means for identifying this situation. Also, semi-structured interviews are not reliable because different questions might be asked to different participants. The present research used an interview protocol and triangulated data collection methods to minimize the limitations.

As for areas for future research, there are several areas that remain unexplored. This paper has explored one key factor, namely, identity. However, other factors fostering the sense of virtual community, such as the use of common symbols, personal investment, and shared values, can be explored. Also, the claims made in this paper need to be corroborated with other groups of migrants. Research related to the online interaction of migrants groups is still scarce.

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