

## Building Virtual Bridges to Home: The Use of the Internet by Transnational Communities of Immigrants

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### ABSTRACT

For decades transnational communities of immigrants have used various forms of communication to maintain ties with their places of origin. Transnational communities of immigrants are creating and enhancing virtual spaces for (re)creating and maintaining a SOC across national borders. This paper explores the concept of sense of virtual community in transnational groups of immigrants. We review research from different disciplines to understand how the Internet is shaping the ability of dispersed national groups to create, preserve and extend their SOC in virtual spaces. The theory of SOC applied to virtual communities provides the frame of reference in which this phenomenon is analysed. Based on our analysis of the literature we argue that the unique characteristics of communities of immigrants—such as shared histories, cultural values, experiences, common country of origin, and offline interaction—shape the nature and dynamics of their interactions online. Social, political and economic implications of the offline/online interaction are also addressed for the host and home society.

### INTRODUCTION

The use of the Internet as infrastructure for community interaction has caught the attention of researchers for more than a decade. Previous research reveals a special interest in the study of how computer-based technologies provide the setting for the traditional characteristics of physical communities to emerge online.<sup>2</sup> In online communities face-to-face (F2F) communication and social relationships among participants do not always take place before the formation of the virtual community. However, research shows that online communities that combine characteristics of F2F and virtual communication can be more sustainable.<sup>3</sup> *Hybrid virtual communities* (a recent term referring to groups that overlap their offline and online communication) have been proposed as a surfacing phenomenon that deserves careful analysis.<sup>4</sup>

Transnational communities of immigrants (TCIs) constitute an example of traditional physical communities that have recently started to use the Internet for community interaction.

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<sup>2</sup> See Anita Blanchard, *The Effects of Dispersed Virtual Communities on Face-to-Face Social Capital*, in Social Capital and Information Technology 53-73 (M. Huysman & V. Wulf, The MIT Press, 2004). See Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*. Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley (1993). See Petra Schubert, *The Pivotal Role of Community Building in Electronic Commerce*. Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 33rd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, Hawaii (2000).

<sup>3</sup> See Mark Gaved, & Paul Mulholland, *Grassroots Initiated Network Communities: A Study of Hybrid Physical/Virtual Communities*. Paper presented at the 38th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, Hawaii (2005).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*(discussing the life of hybrid communities).

The term Transnational Community of Immigrants (TCI) has been defined in different ways.<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this study we will refer to a TCI as a dispersed group of individuals from the same nation who maintains a sense of togetherness across geographical borders.<sup>6</sup> Although migrants can be geographically dispersed around the globe, it is also common to find ethnic enclaves of migrants (or migrants from the same country, region or town) in urban areas.<sup>7</sup> Because F2F interaction is possible in TCIs, we will refer to Virtual Transnational Community of Immigrants (VTCI) as a *hybrid community of interest* where participants use off-line and online channels of communication to nurture their social ties<sup>8</sup> and their interests concerning life abroad, and their home country or geographical region.<sup>9</sup>

This paper shows that existent research in Online Communities Studies and Transnational Studies provides enough evidence to argue that TCIs experience community-like feelings and behaviours in online settings paralleling those of physical communities. Moreover, we contend that the unique characteristics that these communities display offline are reproduced online and shape their virtual sense of community.<sup>10</sup>

In this paper we draw from past theoretical and empirical research to investigate whether the Internet provides the context in which the unique characteristics of TCIs converge to facilitate the interaction of participants in a VTCI and shape the resulting virtual sense of community. The theory of sense of community (SOC) applied to virtual communities<sup>11</sup> provides the framework to analyse the online interactions of TCIs. This paper is organized as follows: First, we describe the characteristics of immigrant communities and the different uses of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) made by these groups. Second, we use the theory of SOC to analyse the interaction of people in VTCIs. Finally, we provide conclusions and recommendations for future research; we also discuss alternative theoretical frameworks that could be used to investigate this phenomenon.

## TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITIES OF IMMIGRANTS AND ICTS

A sense of community (SOC) has been defined as the “feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and shares faith that

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<sup>5</sup> See Ludger Pries, *The Approach of Transnational Social Spaces in NEW TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL SPACES* 3-33 (Ludger Pries, Routledge Research, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> See Robert Smith, *Transnational Localities: Community, Technology and the Politics of Membership within the Context of Mexico and U.S. Migration in TRANSNATIONALIM FROM BELOW* 6, 197-238 (M. P. Smith & L. E. Guarnizo eds., New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers 1998).

<sup>7</sup> For Example Korea-towns, China-towns, Little-India and Latin quarters. See Amanda Mitra, *Virtual Commodity: Looking for India on the Internet, in THE CYBERCULTURE READER*, 676-694 (D. Bell & B. M. Kennedy, New York: Routledge 2000).

<sup>8</sup> . See JOHN HAGEL, & ARTHUR ARMSTRONG, *NET GAIN: EXPANDING MARKETS THROUGH VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES*, (1997).

<sup>9</sup> See generally Gaved & Mulholland, *supra* note 2.

<sup>10</sup> See Michael Dahan, & David G Sheffer, *Ethnic Groups and Distance Shrinking Communication Technologie* 7(1) NATIONALISM & ETHNIC POLITICS 85-107, (2001). See David S . Massey, *Understanding Mexican Migration to the United State* 92(6) AJS JOURNAL 1372-1403 (1987). See Robert Smith, *Transnational Localities: Community, Technology and the Politics of Membership within the Context of Mexico and U.S. Migration in TRANSNATIONALIM FROM BELOW* 6, 197-238 (M. P. Smith & L. E. Guarnizo eds., New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Anita Blanchard & Lynn Markus, *The Experienced "Sense" of a Virtual Community: Characteristics and Processes* 35(1) THE DATA BASE FOR ADVANCES IN INFORMATION SYSTEMS 65-78, (2004).

members' needs will be met through their commitment together"<sup>12</sup>. In TCIs, emotional attachment to the place of origin is central for the construction and maintenance of a SOC<sup>13</sup>. Being far from home increases the need of community format. According to Sonn<sup>14</sup> emotional attachment is based on *shared histories, experiences, and common country of origin*. Community settings in the host country (e.g. social and cultural events, sporting clubs, and churches)<sup>15</sup> provide the context for shared histories and experiences to converge. For instance, Smith studied how Mexican immigrants in Chicago sustain their SOC through the extension of their traditions in the United States. The community distributed videotapes of a pageant contest held in Chicago among the members of the community in the United States and in their hometowns. This event (the pageant contest) is an extension of a similar tradition in their hometown in Zacatecas, México.<sup>16</sup>

Historically, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have played a central role<sup>17</sup> in the maintenance of an emotional connection to the home country<sup>18</sup>. "[T]echnology [has] made possible for migrants and their children to have simultaneous participation in their communities of destination and origin"<sup>19</sup>. Previous research shows how technologies such as telegraph, telephone, fax, and radio have been used to maintain cultural, political and social links to the home country. An illustration of this is the case of a Mixtec community (an indigenous group from Southern Mexico) in California. This community maintains connections to their hometown in the state of Oaxaca through "Línea Abierta", a bilingual radio show transmitted in the United States.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the community of Mexican immigrants in Brooklyn, NY use conference calls to discuss the progress of development projects in their hometown with Municipal authorities.<sup>21</sup>

More recently, the Internet has started to change the ways in which these groups interact by providing an integrated *bridge home*<sup>22</sup> that overcomes time and distance barriers faced by these dispersed communities at a minimal cost. Sophisticated uses of the Internet include the use

<sup>12</sup>Davis W. McMillan & Davis M. Chavis, *Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory* 14 JOURNAL OF COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY 9, (1986).

<sup>13</sup> See generally Pries, *supra* note 4 at 3-33. See Smith, *supra* note 5 at 197-238. See Christopher C. Sonn, *Immigrant Adaptation. Understanding the Process Through Sense of Community in* PSYCHOLOGICAL SENSE OF COMMUNITY 205-222 (A. T. Fisher, C. C. Sonn & B. J. Bishop, eds., New York: Plenum Publishers 2002).

<sup>14</sup> See Christopher C. Sonn, *Immigrant Adaptation. Understanding the Process Through Sense of Community in* A. PSYCHOLOGICAL SENSE OF COMMUNITY 205-222 (T. Fisher, C. C. Sonn & B. J. Bishop eds., New York: Plenum Publishers, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> See Smith *supra* note 5 at 197-238.

<sup>16</sup> See Smith *supra* note 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> See Michael Dahan, & David G Sheffer, *Ethnic Groups and Distance Shrinking Communication Technologie*, 7(1) NATIONALISM & ETHNIC POLITICS 85-107, (2001) ; See Amanda Mitra, *Virtual Commoality: Looking for India on the Internet in* THE CYBERCULTURE READER, 676-694 (D. Bell & B. M. Kennedy New York: Routledge 2000).

<sup>19</sup> See Smith *supra* note 5 at 214.

<sup>20</sup> Federico Besserer, *Politica Cuantica: El Uso de la Radio por Comunidades Transnacionales*, 17(57) NUEVA ANTROPOLOGIA 11-21, (2000).

<sup>21</sup> See Smith *supra* note 5.

<sup>22</sup> Angel Adams Parham, *Diaspora, Community and Communication: Internet Use in Transnational Haiti* 4(2) GLOBAL NETWORKS 199-217, (2004).

of videoconferencing to communicate with the community of origin.<sup>23</sup> The characteristics of the Internet (combining text, image, audio and video) not only satisfy the communication needs of the community but also, as we show in the following section, are useful for the (re)creation, expansion, and maintenance of a SOC across distance. In some cases existing TCIs are using the Internet as a supplementary instrument for community interaction (Smith, 2002). However, the Internet has also been used as a platform for the creation of the community itself e.g. India Network<sup>24</sup> and the Coalition of Haitians for the Advancement of Haiti<sup>25</sup>. Technology does not create a community, however, it is only the communication means that enables community members to reach others.<sup>26</sup> In addition, “the Internet sustains the bonds of community by complementing, not replacing, other channels of interaction”.<sup>27</sup> The interaction of TCIs online has been studied from different disciplinary perspectives. We conducted a literature review to see what these disciplines can bring to the understanding of the *sense of virtual community* (SOVC). Table 1 shows a summary of existent studies about VTCIs. Research in VTCIs suggests that: First, VTCIs sites display different levels of sophistication in the use of Internet-based technologies ranging from mailing lists (Rao, 1998) to more complex sites that integrate various types of technology—such as chat rooms, newsgroups, and bulletin boards.<sup>28</sup> It is evident that there has been an evolution in the uses of technology made by these communities.

Second, virtual communities’ sites are rich in content. In these sites, it is common to find information about events going on in the community, participants’ stories and anecdotal information, forums where opinions and ideas about community interests are exchanged.<sup>29</sup> More recently, sections dedicated to the organization and monitoring of development projects in the host country and the community of origin.<sup>30</sup> These electronic environments resemble a “kind of public square that gather participants from across the diaspora [and from the community of origin] for community communication”.<sup>31</sup>

Third, grassroots participation and significant manifestations of social capital are common in the formation and maintenance of the online community. For instance, the construction of virtual communities is commonly initiated by leaders of the community<sup>32</sup> or by educated members. In addition, members of the community volunteer to maintain the technological infrastructure of the community running<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> See Joseph Berger, *What's on TV? A View of Loved Ones From Afar; Videoconferences Give Immigrants a Link to the Families They Left Behind*, N.Y.TIMES, Jan.8, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> See V.K Rao, *India Network. The First Case Study of a Virtual Community* 20 COMPUTER COMMUNICATIONS 1527-1533, (1998).

<sup>25</sup> See supra Adams note 22 at 199-217.

<sup>26</sup> See Amitai Etzioni & Oren Etzioni, *Face-to-Face and Computer-Mediated Communities. A Comparative Analysis* 15 THE INFORMATION SOCIETY 241-248, (1999).

<sup>27</sup> See Paul DiMaggio et al., *Social Implications of the Internet* 27 ANNUAL REVIEW OF SOCIOLOGY 318, (2001).

<sup>28</sup> See Torres M. Cardenas, *Las comunidades virtuales de migrantes en los Estados Unidos, su impacto y su vinculacion con el lugar de origen. El caso de San Martín de Bolanos, México*, available at <http://www.sanmartinjalisco.com/sanmartin.htm>

<sup>29</sup> See Smith supra note 5. See Amanda Mitra, *Virtual Commodity: Looking for India on the Internet in THE CYBERCULTURE READER* 676-694 (D. Bell & B. M. Kennedy, New York: Routledge 2000).

<sup>30</sup> See Cardenas Torres supra note 28 (2005).

<sup>31</sup> Adams supra note 22 at 210.

<sup>32</sup> See generally Cardenas Torres supra note 22. See Smith at note 5.

<sup>33</sup> See V.K Rao supra at note 24.

Fourth, ICTs are fundamental to maintain social connections with the community of origin. However, the literature makes clear that SOC when immigrant groups interact online is based on a geographically bounded location (community or country of origin). For example, it is a common practice across these groups to create an online community in order to re-establish contact with other members of the diaspora they knew before the geographical displacement took place.

Fifth, VTCIs that are based on grounded relationships (offline relationships) are more sustainable (Adams, 2004). Moreover, hybrid communities such as VTCIs that combine both F2F and computer-mediated communication “would be able to bond better and share values more effectively than communities that rely upon only one or the other mode of communication”.<sup>34</sup>

In sum, although TCIs have used different ICTs to maintain their ties, the interactive characteristics of the Internet seem to be helping these communities to reproduce community-like feelings and behaviours online. However, if we want to fully understand how these groups manifest a SOVC we need to rely on theories that have been tested and validated previously.<sup>35</sup> This is the purpose of the following section.

**Table 1. Summary of Research in VTCIs**

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Study Description</b>	<b>Community Origin</b>	<b>Technological Platform</b>
Rao (1998)	Case study about the development of “India Network”, an online community created by a researcher at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) in Ohio, USA. It describes the technological, financial and human challenges faced in the creation of the online community. India Network resembles a <i>mini India</i> where people from around the world meet to share information about life abroad and different regions in India.	India	Mailing List
Mitra (2000)	Content analysis of messages posted in a bulletin board by Indians in the United States, Europe and India. Messages are classified as general postings (informational) and national	India	Bulletin Board

<sup>34</sup> Etzioni & Etzioni *supra* note 26.

<sup>35</sup> See McMillian & Chavis *supra* note 11.

	critical discourse (debates about religion, culture, national identity, and politics). This study also provides an analysis of the factors that produce a sense of community (or sense of commonality).		
Adams (2004)	Content analysis of the messages posted in online forums in “Haiti Global Village”, an online site that supports the communication and collaboration of Haitians in New York, Florida and Haiti. This research emphasizes the relevance of overlapping offline and online community interactions to reinforce social, cultural and political links with the community of origin.	Haiti	Discussion Forum
Cardenas Torres (2005)	Case study about an online community that supports the interaction between the inhabitants of a small town in the north of Jalisco (México) and migrants of this community in the United States. This research reports the implications of Internet-based interaction on the needs of the off-line community (e.g. formulation of political demands, increased political participation, planning and monitoring of development projects in the homeland).	San Martín de Bolaños, Jalisco México	Online site includes technologies such as chat room, bulletin board, guest book, and video/audio applications

**SENSE OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITY (SOVC)**

The difference between a mere settlement and a community is the “sense of community” (SOC).<sup>36</sup> This difference is highlighted in the definition of community itself. A community is a social entity grouping individuals with “affect-laden relationships” and a “commitment to a set of shared values, mores, meanings, and a shared historical identity”.<sup>37</sup> A group of individuals without an emotional connection is merely that and cannot be considered a community. In this

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*

<sup>37</sup> Etzioni & Etzioni supra note 26 at 241.

sense, the existence of a community is defined by the feelings experienced by its members. The definition of community above does not imply a geographic boundary. Communities, therefore, do not need to be in the same location.<sup>38</sup> Different types of social entities such as neighborhoods and even families do not necessary imply a community.

Recent studies on virtual communities have adopted McMillan and Chavis's definition<sup>39</sup> to differentiate the SOC that arises from physical communities and virtual communities Blanchard and Markus (2004) name the latter "Sense of Virtual Community" (SOVC). Just as in the physical world not all settlements develop a SOC, not all virtual settlements develop a SOVC.<sup>40</sup>

SOVC has been investigated in different contexts. Blanchard and Markus (2004) investigated a virtual community denominated by them as Multiple Sports Newsgroups (MSN). In their study, Blanchard and Markus demonstrate that a "sense of community" might exist in some virtual communities similar to the sense of community in physical (F2F) communities.

The Theory of SOC<sup>41</sup> identifies four dimensions of SOC: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment, and shared emotional connection. The dimensions of SOVC and the social processes contributing to create this feeling are similar to those arising on physical settings.<sup>42</sup> However, there are some differences that might occur due to computer mediated communication.

Based on empirical evidence Blanchard and Markus<sup>43</sup>, adapted the ' McMillan and Chavis' theory of SOC. Blanchard and Markus compared the dimensions arising from their study to those of the original SOC. They found evidence for three dimensions: membership, integration and fulfillment, and shared emotional connection. Interestingly, Blanchard and Markus did not find evidence of the influence dimension. However, they argue that the mere absence of this dimension in their study does not imply the lack of 'influence' on the virtual community. In fact, they suggest that 'influence' might have been absent because rules might have been set at the creation of the virtual community and did not need to be reinforced. In addition, Blanchard and Markus found evidence of two additional dimensions: identity and identification, and relationship with specific members. Figure 1 depicts the dimensions of the sense of virtual community based on the research of McMillan and Chavis, and Blanchard and Markus.

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<sup>38</sup> *Id.*

<sup>39</sup> See See McMillan & Chavis *supra* note 11. See Blanchard & Markus *supra* note 10. See Roberts et al *supra* note 53.

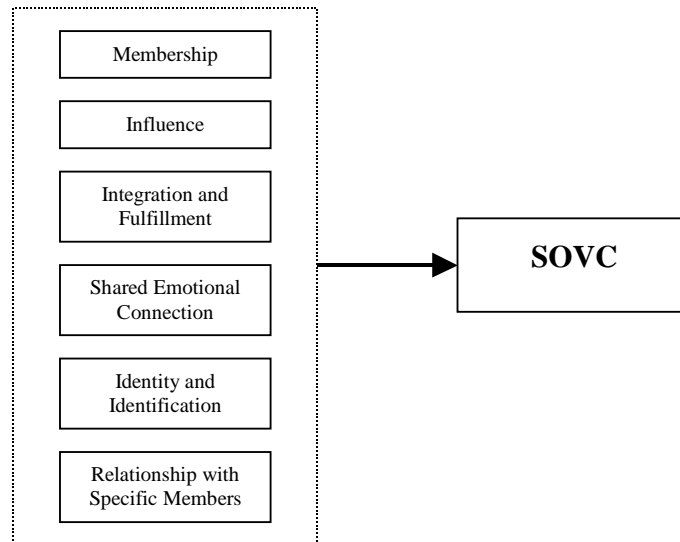
<sup>40</sup> See Blanchard & Markus *supra* note 10.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

<sup>42</sup> See Blanchard & Markus *supra* note 10.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

**Figure 1. Dimensions of Sense of Virtual Community**



Moreover, according to Blanchard and Markus the study of SOVC should be context dependent. In this sense, we argue that the specific characteristics of VTCIs make them different from other types of virtual communities. Therefore, social processes and SOVC dimensions will show characteristics and dynamics particular to the VTCIs. For instance, in VTCIs the SOVC is extrapolated from the SOC generated in the physical community.<sup>44</sup> Drawing from empirical evidence from Transnational Studies as well as Virtual Community Studies, we identify the factors influencing the dimensions of SOVC and the social processes to develop it.

### **Sense of Virtual Community Dimensions**

This section describes the dimensions of the sense of virtual community in the context of virtual transnational communities of immigrants. The first dimension, membership, “is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness”.<sup>45</sup> Membership establishes boundaries to identify who belongs to the community and who does not. According to McMillan and Chavis<sup>46</sup> membership has five attributes. 1) Boundaries identify who is inside and outside the group intimacy. 2) Emotional safety refers to the protection of group intimacy. 3) Sense of belonging is the feeling of being accepted by the group. 4) Personal investment refers to the effort required to become a member of the community. 5) Common symbol system refers to the symbols with a particular meaning for the community. Symbols help to maintain group boundaries.

According to Dahan and Sheffer<sup>47</sup>, members in VTCIs share “a common background and heritage, common set of symbols, sometimes a common language, cultural values and a history

<sup>44</sup> See Gaved & Mulholland *supra* note 2.

<sup>45</sup> McMillan & Chavis *supra* note 11 at 9.

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*

<sup>47</sup> Dahan & Chaffer *supra* note 9.



of common struggles”.<sup>48</sup> Joining the virtual community is seen as a commitment to the original physical community.<sup>49</sup> In this sense, membership to the community is established not by the virtual community itself but for its counterpart in the physical world. In terms of the ‘sense of belonging’, if members have this feeling regarding the physical community, they will feel automatically accepted into the virtual community. On the other hand, it is unlikely that participants in the physical community who do not feel accepted by the group would try to participate in the virtual community. Also, only local people who have migrated (or are thinking of migrating) and people with family members who have migrated will usually be interested in joining the virtual community. The VTCl will address particular topics only of interest to this type of community. In that sense, we can say that membership in a TCl is a self-selection process.

It is important to note, however, that sharing a nationality does not by itself create a transnational community,<sup>50</sup> and a nation by itself is not a large community. A community needs to develop a level of intimacy. The larger the number of members, the lower the level of intimacy.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, rivalry and differences in the home country might be replicated in the transnational community. According to Sonn, Chileans who migrated to Australia had different political allegiances in their home country. They also had different immigration and socioeconomic backgrounds. These differences lead to the creation of different Chilean communities in the host country.<sup>52</sup>

The second SOC dimension is ‘influence’. Influence is “a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members”.<sup>53</sup> Influence is a bi-directional concept where members influence the group as well as the group influences its members. People feel attracted to communities where they feel have an influence. For TCIs, people who have an influence on the physical community would feel attracted to the virtual community. In fact, there is evidence in TCIs that people with a great deal of influence in the physical world create and sponsor the VTCl.<sup>54</sup> Smith further, explains how a Mexican immigrant to the US, known as the “Tomato King”, developed and sponsored a VTCl.

The influence from the group to its members refers to the rules for enforcing the desirable behavior. In virtual communities this influence can range from subtle to active. For instance, when Blanchard and Markus did not find evidence of feelings of influence, they speculated that the influence process might have been active at the beginning of the virtual community. Later on, joining members might prefer to have a chance to become acquainted with the community’s rules before actively engaging in the community. On the other hand, Robert<sup>55</sup> found that deviant behavior could be punished by temporarily or permanently banishing the offending member.

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<sup>48</sup> *Id* at 102.

<sup>49</sup> *Id*.

<sup>50</sup> See Sonn *supra* note 13.

<sup>51</sup> See Amitai Etzioni, *Communitarianism in K. Christensen & D. Levinson* ENCYCLOPEDIA OF COMMUNITY: FROM THE VILLAGE TO THE VIRTUAL WORLD 1 224-228 (2003). See Etzioni & Etzioni *supra* note 26. See Sonn *supra* note 13. (discussing the development of a community within a nation).

<sup>52</sup> See Sonn *supra* note 13.

<sup>53</sup> McMillian & Chavis *supra* note 11 at 9.

<sup>54</sup> See generally Smith *supra* note 5.

<sup>55</sup> Lynne Roberts, et al *Mooing Till The Cows Come Home. The Search for Sense of Community in Virtual Environments* in A. T. FISHER, C. C. SONN & B. J. BISHOP (EDS.), PSYCHOLOGICAL SENSE OF COMMUNITY, 223-239 (2002).

Participants joining a VTCI know the rules of the physical community.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, there is no need to state the rules explicitly because members would already be acquainted with them.<sup>57</sup> For example, participants in the Haitian Student Overseas forum maintain the discussion respectful and open-minded because of the inherent norms in the physical community.<sup>58</sup>

The third SOC dimension is 'integration and fulfillment of needs'. These terms are defined by McMillan and Chavis as the "feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their memberships in the group".<sup>59</sup> Two feelings characterize this dimension: reinforcement and shared values. Reinforcement means that "people are attracted to others whose skills or competence can benefit them in some ways".<sup>60</sup> In VTCIs members can benefit from past experiences from other members who have already adapted to the host culture. This experience is evident even on practical issues. For instance, VTCIs can advise its members on how to send money to their homeland.<sup>61</sup>

Shared values refer to the personal values that define and prioritize emotional and intellectual needs.<sup>62</sup> In TCIs, there is a need for the migrants to know about their homeland. Also, for the homeland family, there is a need to know about their migrant family.<sup>63</sup> For instance, Smith goes on to describe how VTCIs show pictures of the progress of public works that migrant have funded in their homeland. The process of defining which works to fund and publicly showing the progress is reached through values shared by community members.

Blanchard and Markus identify the 'integration and fulfillment' dimension with the exchange of support. This support is manifested through both informational and socio-emotional communications. Blanchard and Markus found that the exchange of support deals mainly with issues which can be exposed publicly. More intimate needs might be addressed privately.<sup>64</sup>

The last SOC dimension is 'shared emotional connection'. Shared emotional connection is "the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together and similar experiences".<sup>65</sup> Emotional connection grows from two sources: shared history and interaction in shared events. Members have a shared history when they participated directly on historic events or when they identify themselves with the historic events (even though they did not participate directly). Migrants have a share history regardless of the virtual community. People migrate from their homeland to foreign countries to have a better life. Migrants belong to the same culture and maybe even the same city or local area. Therefore, there is no need for the virtual community to develop from scratch a shared emotional connection. Even generations who were not born in their parents' homeland will identify themselves with migrants.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Karine Barzilai-Nahon, & Seev Neumann, *Bounded in Cyberspace: An Empirical Model of Self Regulation in Virtual Communities*. Paper presented at the Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (2005).

<sup>57</sup> *Id.*

<sup>58</sup> See Adams *supra* note 22.

<sup>59</sup> McMillan & Chavis *supra* note 11 at 9.

<sup>60</sup> *Id.* at 8.

<sup>61</sup> See Smith *supra* note 2.

<sup>62</sup> See generally McMillan & Chavis *supra* note 11.

<sup>63</sup> See Smith *supra* note 2

<sup>64</sup> See Blanchard & Markus *supra* note 10.

<sup>65</sup> McMillan & Chavis *supra* note 11 at 9.

<sup>66</sup> See e.g., Sonn *supra* note 13 (discussing the issue of migrant adaptation).

However, a shared history is not enough. The second and more important source of emotional connection is interaction in shared events. The elements of interaction in shared events are: 1) Amount of contact: number of times interacting with the community, 2) Quality of interaction: positive or negative experiences, 3) Shared valent event hypothesis: importance of the event shared, 4) Investment: time, money, or energy dedicated to community activities, 5) Honor and humiliation: attractiveness (or adverseness) of the community based on its honor (or humiliation) mechanisms, and 6) Spiritual bond: social unity.

Evidence of several elements of interaction in shared events has been found in virtual communities. For instance, Blanchard and Markus found evidence of “emotional attachment”. That is, the degree to which a member feels attached to the community. Emotional attachment is the function of the level of activity the (concept of McMillan and Chavis’ amount of contact) and the perception of personal benefit (McMillan and Chavis’ quality of interaction). Blanchard and Markus also found evidence of ‘obligation’, which maps to McMillan and Chavis’ ‘investment’ element. Obligation is the commitment to actively engage in community activities. Interaction in shared events is also present in VTCIs. Physical TCIs recreate local customs in their host country. For instance, Sonn describes how the Chilean community in Australia celebrates the Chilean Independence Day. In addition, VTCIs use the Internet to communicate the social events hold by local communities. For example, Mexican communities in the US may hold beauty queens contests, or patron saint festivities. The physical community follows the development of the contest or festivities through the information displayed on the VTC. Also, Mexican migrants in the US fund projects for local development in their hometown. Migrants can monitor these projects through the VTCI’s web site.<sup>67</sup>

As mentioned before, Blanchard and Markus found evidence of two additional dimensions of SOVC: identity and identification, and relationship with specific members. They argue that the identification with the community described by McMillan and Chavis refers to the feeling of sharing the group identity. That is, a migrant will identify with other migrants. Being a migrant will be the initial step to belong to the community. However, pure virtual communities lack of F2F interaction; therefore, virtual community members feel the need to develop an individual identification within the group.

Since members in VTCIs hold physical and virtual relationships simultaneously, identity and identification will be different from pure virtual communities. In VTCIs identifications on the virtual community will extrapolate from identifications from the physical community<sup>68</sup>. However, techniques for personal identification within the communities can appear in VTCIs. For instance, Blanchard and Markus identified several identification techniques such as including signature files or “a witty quote or pun at the end of a post”.<sup>69</sup> Since, communications constraints are the same in VTCIs as in any other type of virtual community, it can be expected that members of VTCIs will use similar identification techniques.

Finally, the last SOC dimension is ‘relationship’. Relationship with specific members refers to the development of relationships that swing back and forth from virtual to F2F. In a VTCI the relationships coexists both online and offline. Potential members might know each

<sup>67</sup> See Smith *supra* note 5 (expanding on the role of such projects in Mexico).

<sup>68</sup> Id.

<sup>69</sup> See Blanchard & Markus *supra* note 1 at 9.

other from the virtual communities or from F2F relationships.<sup>70</sup> The relationship dimension impacts the ‘trust creation’ process explained below.

### Sense of Virtual Community Processes

Blanchard and Markus explain how SOVC is manifested through social processes and behaviors that the continued production of social processes leads to a feeling of online community. That is to say, people initially engage on social processes to achieve a goal. The satisfying feeling generated by the processes encourages further participation in the virtual community. This continued production creates the SOVC that maintains the virtual community. Markus and Blanchard identified three social processes: the exchange of support, creation of identities, and production of trust. These processes also adopt particular characteristics for VTCIs. The following is a discussion on how these social processes function on virtual communities of immigrants.

The ‘exchanging support’ process refers to the exchange of informational and emotional communications. Blanchard and Markus found that in the virtual community emotional support was given privately either F2F or online. However, other studies have shown that public forums are used to exchange emotional support.<sup>71</sup> Evidence from VTCIs have found that the Internet is mainly used for exchange of informational communication. That is, the information posted or displayed on the web site mainly refers to topics of common interest to members. It can be expected that emotional information be exchanged privately.<sup>72</sup>

The ‘creation of identities’ process, as the name suggests, refers to the processes employed by members to identify themselves within the community. As mentioned before, in VTCIs members’ identity from the physical community might be extrapolated to the virtual community. That is, “identities are brought to the network (Internet) which help the users to find their network identity by seeking congruencies that existed prior the entry into the virtual space”.<sup>73</sup> For instance, Mitra found that members of the Indian community tend to look for familiar relationships when they access the bulletin board. Moreover, when somebody responds to such call a new connection is created.

The ‘production of trust’ process refers to the trustworthiness assessment that members do of other community members. Members can learn about the trustworthiness of others by first hand experience. However, trustworthiness can also be assessed indirectly through references from other members of the community.<sup>74</sup>

There are at least two factors that cause people to act in a trustworthy manner in virtual communities. When the network established on the virtual community extends to the physical world members display a trustworthy behavior.<sup>75</sup> For instance, a member on a virtual community explained that he cared about what he posted because his friends (long-term relationships) were members of the community too. Inconvenient posting will not only affect his relationship in the

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<sup>70</sup> See Roberts at al supra note 55.

<sup>71</sup> See Amanda Mitra, *Virtual Commoality: Looking for India on the Internet* in D. BELL & B. M. KENNEDY, THE CYBERCULTURE READER, 676-694 New York: Routledge (2000).

<sup>72</sup> See Joyce. Y.M. Nip, *The Relationship Between online and Offline Communities: The case of the Queer Sisters* 26(3) MEDIA CULTURE & SOCIETY, (2004).

<sup>73</sup> Mitra supra note 60 at 63.

<sup>74</sup> ROBERT PUTMAN, *BOWLING ALONE* New York: Simon & Schuster (2001).

<sup>75</sup> See Blanchard & Markus supra note 10 at 65-78.

virtual community but also his long-term relationship with his friends. That is to say, online identification will be matched with a person in physical settings. Therefore, people will be careful to post trustworthy information. The second factor is the communication to community members about meetings held offline. For instance, Blanchard and Markus<sup>76</sup> studied a pure virtual community in its origins. Eventually, some online relationships moved to offline settings. The online reports of offline meetings publicly posted on the newsgroup enhanced the feelings of trust. The close relationship between the physical community and the VTCI allows greater levels of trust.<sup>77</sup> When there is a dense network of social interaction the potential costs for negative behavior increase.<sup>78</sup> A negative behavior from a member in the virtual community will directly affect his/her reputation in the physical world. Therefore, members are expected to display a trustworthy behavior.

## DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Studying communities should include different levels of analysis.<sup>79</sup> The SOC Theory<sup>80</sup> defines a community from the perspective of an individual within the community. The theory, therefore, studies communities at the individual level.<sup>81</sup> As such, factors at different levels of analysis that might influence the SOC have been left out from the theory. For instance, the 'expected length of community residence' (ELCR) might be a moderating factor. Glynn found that the longer people intend to stay in a community the larger their sense of community.<sup>82</sup> Probably, people who think they will stay for a long period would be more involved in the community: they will invest more (e.g. time, money) and therefore will feel a greater degree of membership and emotional connection. In the opposite way, people who think they will not stay for a long period of time might not be interested in investing in the community. Rejection from the community would have none or small effects on the rejected member, since he/she will be thinking to leave the community anyway. In a VTCI, even if members decide not to participate in the online community anymore they will still be part of the physical community. Therefore, rejection from the community will have serious consequences. It is important for future research to investigate how the ELCR affects the SOVC dimensions and social processes.

Communities can also be studied as a network of relationships based on the theory of social capital. This theory has been successfully used to study physical as well as virtual communities. Moreover, empirical studies have found evidence of the importance of social capital in transnational communities of immigrants.<sup>83</sup> The mobilization of social capital that

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<sup>76</sup> *Id.*

<sup>77</sup> See Etzioni & Etzioni *supra* note 26.

<sup>78</sup> See Putman *supra* at note 72.

<sup>79</sup> See generally, John Hughey, & Paul Speer, *Community, Sense of Community, and Networks in PSYCHOLOGICAL SENSE OF COMMUNITY* (A. T. Fisher, C. C. Sonn & BISHOP, eds., New York 2002). See Patricia Tolan, Fern Chertok, & Lenoard A. Jason (1990). *Researching Community Psychology: Issues of Theory and Methods*. Washington, DC: AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION.

<sup>80</sup> See McMillian & Chavis *supra* note 11.

<sup>81</sup> See Hughey & Speer *supra* note 77.

<sup>82</sup> See TJ Glynn, *Psychological Sense of Community: Measurement and Application* 34(9) HUMAN RELATIONS JOURNAL 789-818, (1981).

<sup>83</sup> See e.g., Anita Blanchard & Tom Horan *Virtual Communities and Social Capital*, 16(3) SOCIAL SCIENCE COMPUTER REVIEW 293-307 (1998). See Hughey & Speer *supra* note 77. See Marleen Huysman & Volker Wulf,

occurs through these networks is manifested in the political, economic and social influence that transnational communities have in their hometowns and their host society.<sup>84</sup> In terms of political influence, a substantial number of transnational communities are turning to the Internet to express their concerns and opinions about political matters that concern their community.<sup>85</sup> The economical influence of transnational communities can materialize in different ways (e.g. remittances) and has been increasingly discussed in the literature and the press. Social influence establishes interpersonal ties to assist immigrants in the adaptation process to urban life in the host country.<sup>86</sup> Social resources such as information about shelter, employment opportunities, health care, and social services are accessed through these social networks. Interpersonal ties have also facilitated reintegration upon return to the community of origin.<sup>87</sup> Diverse perspectives can be used for a comprehensive study of transnational communities. Expanding the social capital theory to VTCIs would greatly increase our understanding of this type of community.

Finally, as all research, studies discussed in section two of this paper might present methodological limitations that need to be carefully considered both when interpreting their findings, and in designing future studies. First, some studies report the presence of a SOVC, but lack of a formal approach to examine the presence of feelings of sense of community in online settings. For instance, Rao<sup>88</sup> reports the existence of a SOVC in Indian Network, but he does not present empirical evidence to support his claim. Second, the main research methodology employed in the studies reviewed is the case study. Although this approach is appropriate for the study of communities a mixed research approach can also be used to understand the “overlapping facets of a phenomenon”<sup>89</sup> like in the case of offline and online communities.<sup>90</sup> In addition, use of multiple data sources (e.g. off/online interviews, focus groups, offline/online community observation) to strengthen the validity of a case study is rare.<sup>91</sup> Third, to study “how SOVC develops requires longitudinal observations of virtual settlements over time”.<sup>92</sup> So far, empirical research has dealt mainly with communities at a specific point in time. Longitudinal studies are needed to understand how the SOVC evolves. Fourth, most of the studies show successful virtual communities (an exemption is the work by Adams. This implies that findings might be biased to optimistically assume that all TCIs can leverage information and communication technologies to create successful VTCIs. Future research should aim to identify causes of failure.

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*Social Capital and Information Technology: Current Debates and Research in SOCIAL CAPITAL AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY* 1-15 (M. Huysman & V. WULF, The MIT Press 2004). See Putnam *supra* note 72.

<sup>84</sup> See Xochitl Bada, *Mexican Hometown Associations* 5 CITIZEN ACTION IN THE AMERICAS (2003). See Smith *supra* note 5.

<sup>85</sup> See Dahan & Sheffer *supra* note 9.

<sup>86</sup> See Smith *supra* 5. See Rafael Alarcon, *The Development of Hometown Associations in the United States and the Use of Social Remittances in Mexico* at <http://www.thedialogue.org/publications/alarcon.pdf>

<sup>87</sup> See David S. Massey, *Understanding Mexican Migration to the United States* 92(6) AJS JOURNAL 1372-1403 (1987).

<sup>88</sup> See V.K Rao *supra* at note 24.

<sup>89</sup> See ABBAS TASHAKKORI & CHARLES TEDDLIE, *MIXED METHODOLOGY: COMBINING QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES*, 46 43, Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications (1998).

<sup>90</sup> See JIM ORFORD, *COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY. THEORY AND PRACTICE*, Wiley & Sons, New York, (1992). See Tolan et al *supra* note 77.

<sup>91</sup> See generally ROBERT K. YIN, *CASE STUDY RESEARCH: DESIGN AND METHODS*, (1994).

<sup>92</sup> See Blanchard & Markus *supra* note 10 at 70.

## DISCUSSION

This section includes the theory and practice implications of this paper in the study of virtual communities.

### Theoretical Implications

The theoretical implications of this research include: first, the sense of virtual community in transnational communities of immigrants is similar to the SOC in the physical community. The interaction between a physical community and a virtual community that is geographically dispersed but linked by a common history, allows members to extrapolate the SOC from the physical community to the virtual community.

Second, online transnational communities of immigrants display the dimensions of the SOVC as described by Blanchard and Markus. However, these dimensions differ from those observed in pure virtual communities. That is, *feelings of membership* are understood as a natural consequence of the affiliation with the physical community. Members show their commitment to the online community based on their shared cultural values and history. *Feelings of influence* are experienced in two ways: 1) members who have a great deal of influence in the physical community also have an important role in the virtual community; 2) rules in the physical community influence members' online behaviour. Deviant behaviour in these settings has more serious consequences than in pure virtual communities. The *integration and fulfilment of needs* are satisfied by the exchange of emotional support (based on shared experiences). *Shared emotional connections* do not develop from scratch in VTCIs. They are a result of a shared history (e.g. migration process), and interaction in shared events in the physical TCI. *Identification* is extrapolated from the physical community to the virtual community. *Relationship with specific members* coexists both online and offline.

Third, the social processes in VTCIs are also different from those observed in pure virtual communities. In particular, the dual form of the community (physical and virtual) facilitates the *creation of identity* and the *production of trust* processes. Members bring their identity from the physical community to the online space. In addition, members assess the trustworthiness of other members through the extended network of members on and offline. In terms of the *exchange of support* process, it can be expected that VTCIs will display more informational than emotional communication. The physical community allows for F2F interaction where emotional communication can be held privately.

Finally, this paper enriches the literature on virtual communities by drawing theoretical guidance from the fields of transnational studies and migration studies.

### Contributions to Practice

Communities of Immigrants have social, economic and political effects in both the host and the home country.<sup>93</sup> From the home country perspective, migrants can have an effect on the local political and economical situation. The perception of the home country towards its migrants

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<sup>93</sup> See Yossi Shain, *The Mexican-American Diaspora's Impact on Mexico* 114(4) POLITICAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY 661-691, (1999).

is shaped by factors such as reliance on emigrant remittances.<sup>94</sup> Remittances provide home countries with funds for local development. Development can be either private,<sup>95</sup> directed to the family staying in the home country or to public institutions.<sup>96</sup> An online community of immigrants allows migrants to literally see, through pictures posted on web sites, what has been done with the funds sent for local development.

The home country has vested interests when it relies on remittances from its migrants and will try to enhance in its migrants a national feeling of membership. The importance of migrants' remittances led to countries like Mexico, Israel and Korea to take active steps to foster the relationship between migrants and their home country.<sup>97</sup> VTCIs are, therefore, a mean to maintain the ties to the home country to develop a sense of solidarity around a shared cultural heritage. For instance, Mexico created in 1990 the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad to strengthen the relationship between migrants and Mexico and developed a portal with links to Mexican VTCIs.<sup>98</sup>

The migrants' economic power influences not only the homeland country's economic situation through remittances, but also influences the political sphere.<sup>99</sup> For instance, migrants can finance political candidates' campaigns or non-for-profit organizations. Politicians running campaigns in migrants' host countries show the importance of TCIs to homeland countries. The VTCI's political influence can be seen when public forums are used for denouncing political corruption drawing the attention of government agencies and forcing authorities to act. For instance, a Web site from a Mexican community in the US denounced how a Mexican agency refused to act against a person who damaged public property. Members of the VTCI pressed the Mexican government until the person paid for the damages.<sup>100</sup> Online communities of immigrants have the advantage of allowing anonymous denunciation protecting the integrity of the denouncer.

For the host country TCIs have an economic effect. TCIs can help migrants in the adaptation process to their host country.<sup>101</sup> Even though the evidence is not yet conclusive, it seems that when migrants are assimilated to the host country their productivity increases.<sup>102</sup> Their assimilation to the labor force allows migrants to contribute to host country economic growth.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, the likelihood that migrants become a public charge diminishes. In this sense, the faster migrants assimilate to the host country the lower the cost to the host country. VTCIs can help in the assimilation process. For example, a VTCI can inform migrants about

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<sup>94</sup> See Smith *supra* note 5.

<sup>95</sup> See Ibarra Mateos, M., *Remesas y Posibilidades de desarrollo local* 108 EL COTIDIANO 22-30, (2003).

<sup>96</sup> See Smith *supra* note 5. See Torres *supra* note 28.

<sup>97</sup> See Shain *supra* note.

<sup>98</sup> <http://portal.sre.gob.mx/ime/index.php?option=displaypage&Itemid=87&op=page&SubMenu=%2>.

<sup>99</sup> See Mark Graham & Shahram Khosravi, *Reordering public and private in Iranian cyberspace: Identity, politics, and mobilization* 9 IDENTITIES: GLOBAL STUDIES IN CULTURE AND POWER 219-246, (2002). See Shain *supra* note. See Smith *supra* note 5.

<sup>100</sup> See Cardenes *supra* note 28.

<sup>101</sup> See Sonn *supra* note 13.

<sup>102</sup> See George J. Borjas, *The Economics of Immigration*, 32(4) JOURNAL OF ECONOMIC LITERATURE 1667-1717 (1994). See George Borjas, & Martha Tienda, *The Economic Consequences of Immigration*. Science, 235, 645-651 (1987).

<sup>103</sup> *Id.*



where to look for jobs and how to improve their proficiency of the host country's language.<sup>104</sup> However, host countries can also see TCIs as a threat to migrants' assimilation. The relationship between the migrants and their home country can raise suspicions about the migrants' allegiance. Historically, there is evidence of host countries considering the cultural heritage of the migrants to hinder their assimilation.<sup>105</sup> When host countries openly reject the cultural heritage of migrants, migrants might feel the need to hide their links to their homeland in order to be accepted in their new society.<sup>106</sup>

TCIs also have social effects in both the host and the home country. TCIs contribute to the well being of all members of the community, those who migrated and those who stayed home. VTCIs give members an alternative to keep in touch with others in the community establishing a virtual bridge between the host and the home country. The social interaction helps both parts of the community to participate in each other's life. This connection provides members with a sense of community.<sup>107</sup> The feeling of belonging prevents depression and helps assimilation to the host country.<sup>108</sup> VTCIs display information about events of the geographically dispersed community.<sup>109</sup> Members of VTCIs, therefore, can keep track of activities of the community regardless of their physical location.

The VTCI also serves as a social network complementing physical social networks. For instance, a woman found her sister, who she had not seen in a long time, asking for help in a public forum of a VTCI.<sup>110</sup> In addition, VTCIs can help to foster understanding between migrants and their children born in the host country. VTCI can show children the problems and challenges faced by their migrant parents and those still faced by their families staying in their homeland.<sup>111</sup> However, it is possible that not all social effects of VTCI are positive. For instance, in a VTCI a member of the community, protected by the anonymous nature of the postings, posted an apparently unfounded rumor of inadequate sexual behavior of another community member.<sup>112</sup> The rumor damaged the reputation and the social relationships of the accused member. The social effect of VTCIs is an area that remains open for further research.

In short, the impact of VTCIs in the social, political and economic sphere in both the host and the home countries should not be underestimated. Countries, such as Mexico, with high levels of migration, relying on migrants' remittances have taken an active role to foster the development of virtual transnational communities of immigrants. It is still to be determined whether host countries will see VTCIs as means to help migrants in their assimilation process or as a threat to assimilation.

### Implications for Public Policy

Host and homeland countries are concerned about immigrants' allegiance. Public policy usually determines whether citizens should be allowed to hold dual nationalities, to vote in more

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<sup>104</sup> See Cardenes *supra* note 28.

<sup>105</sup> See Shain *supra* note 91.

<sup>106</sup> *Id.*

<sup>107</sup> See Sonn *supra* note 13.

<sup>108</sup> *Id.*

<sup>109</sup> See Smith *supra* note 5.

<sup>110</sup> See Cardenes *supra* note 28.

<sup>111</sup> *Id.* See Graham & Khosravi *supra* note 97.

<sup>112</sup> See Cardenes *supra* note 28

than one country, or to fight in an army different from the host country's army.<sup>113</sup> However, public policy changes according to the circumstances and vested interests. For instance, Mexico accepted dual citizenship in 1997 after assessing the economical and political influence of Mexicans living abroad.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, Chinese migrant's status changed from traitors to patriotic with a redefinition of the Chinese Public Policy.<sup>115</sup>

Concerns about immigrants allegiance depends on the membership model embraced by the host country. There are conflicting models of membership. On one hand, the *citizenship model* argues that a person can only be member of only one nation at a time.<sup>116</sup> Within this model, immigrants need to cut ties with their homeland country to get full membership in the host country.<sup>117</sup> Countries following this model will see VTCIs as an impediment for full immigrant adaptation. These countries will discourage the existence of VTCIs. Governments might even be tempted to monitor the activities of VTCIs.

On the other hand, *post-national models* argue that a dual membership is possible.<sup>118</sup> When home countries have vested interests on their expatriates their membership model will lean towards the post-national membership model. Migrants tend to be perceived as citizens who risk their status and face diversity in the host country.<sup>119</sup>

Homeland countries encouraging the relationship between migrants want more than fostering social ties. Homeland governments attempt to control the influence of TCIs.<sup>120</sup> Governments are aware of the migrants' involvement and influence in the economy and politics of the home country.<sup>121</sup> For this reason, governments and politicians want to develop a close relationship with TCIs to promote the idea that both are working towards the same goal, diminishing the possibilities of TCI open opposition.<sup>122</sup> In fact, there is evidence of current efforts by governments to nurture their relationship with migrants through the implementation of initiatives based on the provision of digital spaces for community interaction.<sup>123</sup> For example, in 2001, the Mexican government launched *e-Mexico*, a public initiative that seeks to bring the country to the Information Society by reducing the digital divide and increasing online access to information and services related with education, economy, health and government.<sup>124</sup> This

<sup>113</sup> See Grace Halsell, Special Report: *Why are there Israeli – but not Mexican-American dual nationals?* THE WASHINGTON REPORT ON MIDDLE EAST AFFAIRS, (1993).

<sup>114</sup> See Mailer Sarah J. Mahler, *Constructing International Relations: The Role of Transnational Migrants and Other Non-state Actors* 7(2) IDENTITIES 197-232 (2000). See Shain *supra* note. See Smith *supra* note 5.

<sup>115</sup> See Pal Nyíri, *Expatriating is patriotic? The discourse on 'new migrants' in the People's Republic of China and identity construction among recent migrants from the PRC* 27(4) JOURNAL OF ETHNIC AND MIGRATION STUDIES 635-653, (2001).

<sup>116</sup> See Maurice Roche, *Citizenship and Modernity* 46(4) THE BRITISH JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY 715- 733, (1995). See Smith *supra* note 5.

<sup>117</sup> *Id.*

<sup>118</sup> See Thomas Faist, Jurgen Gerdes, & Beate Rieple, *Dual citizenship as a path-dependent process*, 32(4) THE INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION REVIEW 926-948, (1998). See Roche *supra* note 114. See Smith *supra* note 5.

<sup>119</sup> See Nyiri *supra* note 113.

<sup>120</sup> See Smith *supra* note 5.

<sup>121</sup> *Id.*

<sup>122</sup> See Mayler *supra* note 115 .

<sup>123</sup> See Scott S. Robinson, & Adriana Labardini, *Cybercafes in Mexico. Reconfiguring Digital Inclusion: Proposals for the Next Sexenio*. Paper presented at the CIDE. Internet in the Americas (2005).

<sup>124</sup> See Delia Crovi Druetta, *e-Mexico: Diversidad Cultural y Brecha Digital*. Paper presented at the Forum Barcelona. Políticas culturales y de comunicacion para la diversidad., Universidad Autonoma de Barcelona (2004)

initiative among other things included the establishment of an online space that supports the creation and interaction of communities of migrants (e.g. forums, chat room, and directory). Although this initiative seems to hold considerable promise, so far, only a few communities have become aware of it. The use of ICTs to link TCIs within the host country and with their homeland raises some questions that need to be considered: What public policies do need to be in place in order to foster TCIs participation in digital spaces provided by the government? What do governments need to learn from current uses of digital technologies by VTCIs? How do VTCIs function, develop and grow? How can ICTs be used to meet the communication and information needs of communities abroad? How do online spaces oriented to migrants can be transformed into entities owned and managed by the principal actors—migrants? To what extent can the government use the Internet to strengthen political and economic ties with the members in the diaspora?

But not only homeland countries have vested interests. Host countries might, for example, foster VTCI for neocolonialist purposes. Migrants bring back to their home countries more than money.<sup>125</sup> They bring back “social remittances”.<sup>126</sup> That is “ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving- to sending- country communities”.<sup>127</sup> For example, governments have actively fostered social remittances through student’s exchange.<sup>128</sup> However, people from home countries might distrust programs sponsored by the host country’s government; social remittances are more effective when they are delivered through family or friendship relationships.<sup>129</sup> The social remittances communicated through the VTCIs might be an incentive for host countries in favoring the social influence of VTCIs on their homeland.

Finally, host countries might favor VTCI to facilitate the immigrants’ adaptation process. Homesick feelings are not uncommon on immigrants. The sooner migrants adapt to the host country the sooner they will join the workforce.<sup>130</sup> Within their TCI, migrants are not stigmatized persons but accepted community members.<sup>131</sup> The VTCI can become a place where migrants can express their demands and get recognition. VTCI can help migrants to fulfill their psychological needs without host countries spending resources. Therefore, host countries embracing this model will not consider VTCIs a threat. However, even though it seems countries are increasingly leaning towards the post-national membership model, the degree to which a country accepts dual citizenship varies.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, host countries might establish different public policies towards immigrants from different countries.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> See Peggy Levitt, Social Remittances: migration drove local level forms of cultural diffusion, 32(4) INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION REVIEW 926-948, (1998). See Mahler *supra* note .

<sup>126</sup> See Mahler *supra* note 115.

<sup>127</sup> See Levitt *supra* note 123 at 917.

<sup>128</sup> Mahler *supra* note at 115.

<sup>129</sup> *Id.*

<sup>130</sup> See Borjas *supra* note 103. See Borjas & Tienda *supra* note 103.

<sup>131</sup> See Smith *supra* note 5.

<sup>132</sup> See Faist et al *supra* note 119.

<sup>133</sup> See Halshell *supra* note 114.

## CONCLUSION

Since the sense of community can take different forms in different communities, sense of virtual community can also take different forms in different virtual communities.<sup>134</sup> We argue that the specific characteristics of transnational communities of immigrants make their virtual communities different from other types of virtual communities. Drawing from past empirical evidence from Transnational Studies as well as Virtual Community Studies, we evaluated how the characteristics of virtual communities of immigrants shape the dimensions, and the social processes that lead to the development of a sense of virtual community. Analysis of literature suggests that the hybrid nature of virtual communities of immigrants facilitates the (re)production, expansion and reinforcement of a sense of commonality across geographical borders. In addition, this paper highlights the significant role of the Internet plays in the lives of migrants and those who stayed home. Understanding that virtual transnational communities have unique characteristics can be helpful to groups of immigrants in using information and communication technologies effectively to foster sense of virtual community. People experiencing a sense of community are more satisfied with and more committed to the community. This can significantly contribute to the successful continuation of the online community. The challenge for researchers, therefore, is to understand how the diverse forms of organization of immigrant communities online impact the life of community members in the host and home society.

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<sup>134</sup> See Blanchard & Markus *supra* note 10.