

Debating Communities and Networks Conference 2021

Communities and Social Media Stream

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Abstract

The paper will explore the growing and evolving subject of Australian individuals who choose to relocate overseas, establishing a new sense of community through the virtual networks offered through Facebook, and utilising its other messaging platforms to remain in contact with family and friends back home. Facebook is a platform that generates a strong sense of community, enabling its users to form and maintain connections with family and friends. Social media platforms, such as Facebook significantly reduce isolation, particularly in the case of the COVID-19 global pandemic, which resulted in social distancing and lockdown laws. Facebook demonstrated the ability to mitigate these feelings of isolation by allowing people to remain connected. Similarly, Facebook networking communities provide a platform through which individuals are able to obtain real-time answers about questions pertaining to moving abroad, from first-hand perspectives. A virtual Facebook community allows for individuals to virtually meet others with whom they may not have otherwise interacted, had they not shared similar circumstances. This also provides them with the opportunity to meet these people in person through organised meetings, events, and other social exchanges to encourage interaction, allowing expatriates to feel part of a community, and hence, strengthening their sense of belonging and identity. There are some challenges associated with moving abroad, in that individuals in certain regions may have minimal or complete lack of access to the Internet, and hence, Facebook, and as such, do not have insights into the valuable information shared through this platform. This may also make it harder to maintain contact with friends and family back in their home country.

Key Words

Community/Communities. Network/Networking. Virtual Community. Online Network. Facebook. Living Abroad. Expatriate. Communication. Support.

Australians Abroad: Utilising Facebook to establish and maintain a sense of community for Australians living overseas

Moving overseas can be an enticing opportunity for those who want to explore and experience new environments, cultures, people, and activities. (Mao & Shen, 2015). Many will have their own personal reasons for doing so, whether it be for a change in lifestyle and routine, to travel more, or to gain more life experience. However, moving away from family and friends, and into unfamiliar surroundings, can be a daunting experience, particularly when there is not a strong support system in place. (Mao & Shen, 2015; Nardon, Aten and Gulanowski, 2015). Many individuals regularly connect with their family and friends, maintaining the relationships and sense of identity left behind in their home country. This has been made more convenient with continuous advancements in technology that have led to increased digital platforms through which individuals are able to connect, share, create, and learn. One such medium is the social media site, Facebook, allowing its users to engage with all these capacities within one centralised platform, and enabling virtual communities to be established. Eysenbach et al. (2004), describe a virtual community as, “social networks formed or facilitated through electronic media.” These online communities can be established for various purposes including to gather information; build relationships; to develop a social identity; to help others; or to gain a sense of belonging (Porter et al., 2011). Facebook communities, such as the group, *Aussies in London*, allow Australians to connect with family and friends back home, and to form new relationships with like-minded people over shared experiences, topics, or circumstances, particularly concerning living abroad. These virtual communities and the provisions to remain connected to an individual’s previous sense of self, ultimately minimise feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and ambiguity, thereby strengthening their belonging to various communities.

Facebook’s online communities can provide a platform through which to communicate, thereby minimising or preventing isolation for those living abroad. Relocating to a new country can create feelings of loneliness and homesickness, in which an individual can long for the surroundings and community they are familiar with. However, these feelings can be significantly reduced when communicating through social media and online sites, such as Facebook (Cao, Hirschi & Deller, 2014). Although this cannot completely replace body language, emotions, or feelings of affection, it is still an effective and ideal

way for individuals to correspond with those back home, allowing them to form new connections within their new surroundings. Feelings of isolation were exacerbated during the 2020 global COVID-19 pandemic, when many Australians, particularly those living abroad, were unable to see their family and friends in person. Around the world, physical touch was discouraged, social distancing guidelines were enforced, and lockdown laws were implemented. This meant those who relied on physical interactions and connections had to do so through digital means (Hofhuis, Hanke & Rutten, 2019). For many of those living in lockdown in foreign countries, the isolation was heightened. Fortunately, many online platforms and social media sites such as Facebook, had built-in features to enable individuals to stay connected with their networks, albeit virtually. This had a positive influence on the ways in which individuals managed the uncertainty of the unprecedented situation, and aided in alleviating feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Similarly, the affordances of online community Facebook groups, such as *Aussies in London*, allowed those who were away from family and friends, or could not return home for important events, to connect with one another and to find comfort in their shared experience of being isolated. This is still applicable, regardless of a global pandemic, as individuals may have other circumstances preventing them from returning to Australia and connecting with loved ones. Nonetheless, establishing a support system within a new country of residence, can still have a great impact on minimising feelings of isolation by bonding with those in similar circumstances, and providing strong support for one another in times of need. This can cultivate a strong sense of belonging and allows individuals to develop a sense of social identity, knowing they are an integral part of a virtual community (Porter et al., 2011).

Researching to decide to move abroad can be overwhelming, particularly when you may not find answers pertaining to your unique situation. Speaking to someone else who has had first-hand experience can be comforting and enables individuals to anticipate the situation and be prepared, eliminating feelings of uncertainty and anxiety (Kraimer et al., 2001, as cited in Canhilal, Canboy & Bakici, 2020). Virtual communities depicted through Facebook groups, such as *Aussies in London*, are often set up for the purpose of sharing information with each other, specifically regarding Australians living abroad. Sharing this information, allows for relationships to be built and a strong sense of belonging to be established, as individuals can gain more perspective and insight into

each other's experiences. Individuals can ask and answer questions, allowing for real-time answers, which are not limited to time or place (Hofhuis et al., 2019). This first-hand data depicting personal perspectives may prove significantly more valuable to an individual, than commercial recommendations and research. This may ease any feelings of nervousness, providing some solace in anticipating the situation or circumstance and hence, may be perceived to be highly trustworthy and reliable sources of information.

The wide array of content that is shared within these virtual communities such as *Aussies in London*, is not limited to any specific topic concerning their expatriate situation. Individuals may source employment, homes to rent, suggestions on ideal dining or entertainment activities, and other information pertaining to establishing a new life and routine abroad. Such information would not be as accessible had it been shared through a different platform, or had to have been experienced by the individual themselves, before knowing the outcomes (Porter et al., 2011). By being part of a valuable virtual network, individuals may ascertain data that can greatly assist in their pursuit to learn, solve problems, and make decisions concerning their experience of living abroad (Porter et al., 2011). This information can then be validated and in turn, individuals communicating it are greatly helping others through sharing their own experiences. This can generate a strong personal connection between both individuals, whether they are providing the information or consuming it. Overall, this may cultivate a sense of belonging to the group, as individuals know they are integral to their virtual community.

Meeting new people and having to form new friendships when moving overseas can be a challenge, particularly if individuals may not be able to partake in activities that would allow them to meet others outside of their immediate surroundings. Having an online community of people with whom individuals are able to communicate regularly, and forming relationships with others that transcends time or place, allows Australians to meet others they may not have otherwise met, had they not been part of this virtual community (Porter et al., 2011). By being a part of an online network of like-minded individuals, community members are able to build valuable relationships and form strong social connections with each other. The content and interactions formed on these platforms can foster participation and engagement, as individuals can bond over their shared experiences, circumstances or other anecdotes relating to living abroad, or their home country of Australia.

Despite meeting through an online community, individuals are able to organise in-person meetings or events, in which everyone will have the opportunity to socialise and meet those with whom they have only been communicating virtually, strengthening their sense of belonging to the group (Porter et al., 2011). By organising events that are specifically designed to cultivate inclusion, particularly during times when expatriates may feel the loneliest, such as during Christmas, New Years' Eve, and other holidays spent with loved ones, Australians are able to minimise feelings of homesickness, as they have established a strong sense of community within their new country (Demes & Geeraert, 2015; Geeraert & Demoulin, 2013, as cited in Hofhuis et al., 2019). Such events ensure that those who are isolated or have yet to meet new people abroad, can do so in an environment where they are made to feel welcome and comfortable, validating their feelings of being part of a strong network. They are able to establish and strengthen relationships with other Australian individuals, of whom they may have otherwise not met, had they not been part of a virtual community. This empowers them to expand their social networks, both virtually and physically, and to develop a strong support system during their expatriate experience (van der Laken et al., 2019, as cited in Canhilal et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, there are some challenges associated with connecting through an online community or network, as opposed to physical groups. Individuals who do not have access to the Internet, or who do not have a Facebook account, are unable to connect with the online groups on this platform, and do not have insight into the valuable information shared by others (Canhilal et al., 2020). Currently, 89% of the Australian population are active Internet users, the majority of whom utilise it to complete daily tasks such as paying bills, looking for product and service information, or for directions (Statista, 2018). They are not necessarily engaging with social media sites such as Facebook, particularly for the intended purpose of consuming expatriate information. Thomas, Wilson and Park (2018), highlight that 79.9% of active Internet users in Australia utilise it for the purpose of social media networking. As such, those who are not actively participating or communicating through social network sites such as Facebook, are unable to join and belong to virtual communities. This may make it more challenging to meet new people, as individuals will need to rely on physical social interactions to do so. There are also those living abroad who may prefer to not partake in expatriate meetings, both in an online and offline sense, in favour of immersing themselves in the

new country's culture (Cao et al., 2014). In turn, such circumstances may promote a digital divide, in which individuals are not across the same information as others, due to lack of digital resources. This can have a detrimental effect on an individual's sense of self and belonging, particularly if they do not have strong or established physical networks (Nardon et al., 2015). This may be exacerbated further if an individual is living abroad and is away from familiar surroundings and their immediate support system.

Additionally, individuals may find it difficult to maintain strong relationships with family and friends in Australia when they are unable to utilise Facebook's messaging, audio calling, and video calling functions, therefore relying solely on other social networking sites, or resorting to traditional forms of communication. This may be due to having little or no Internet connection, thereby minimising the opportunity to remain in constant contact with those back home. This may result in feelings of loneliness, homesickness and isolation, as they are unable to maintain a strong sense of identity and belonging. Thomas et al., (2018), highlight that the availability and distribution of resources available online ultimately underlines greater social and economic inequalities within Australia, and as such, these issues will need to be addressed before all individuals are afforded the same digital opportunities, particularly for the purpose of establishing a virtual community.

Despite certain obstacles that may arise in establishing a virtual community, it is evident that online interactions are an integral component in developing a strong support system, particularly for Australians living abroad (Haythornthwaite & Kendall, 2010). Nardon et al., (2015, p. 42), highlight that social support is critical for an expatriate's adjustment to their new country, and can help to minimise uncertainty and ambiguity, allowing them to feel at ease in their new surroundings. Furthermore, Nardon et al., (2015, p. 42), emphasise that technology-mediated social assistance, demonstrated through sites such as Facebook, has had a positive impact on an individual's transition to a new country, highlighting the importance of forming connections with others within a community, to strengthen one's feelings of belonging.

Ultimately, relocating overseas can be a unique experience for each individual, with either beneficial or challenging outcomes. No matter an individual's own situation, it is evident that having a strong sense of community can greatly assist those who are planning to, or who are already, living abroad, providing support and a strong foundation on which to build their new life. A virtual community can assist in gathering information; helping others; forming and maintaining relationships and a social identity; and hence, facilitate a strong sense of belonging. This will result in reducing feelings of isolation, allowing Australian individuals to form new friendships, whilst still utilising the same platform, Facebook, to maintain relationships with those back home in Australia. Similarly, individuals are able to gain information from a first-hand perspective, enabling them to make more informed decisions regarding the expatriate experience. These communities can transcend time and place, allowing for real-time questions and answers. Additionally, having an online community in which to confide, to converse with over shared experiences, can allow for individuals to meet other people who they may never have had the chance to meet, had it not been for a virtual community. Although there are undoubtedly obstacles and disadvantages to having a virtual community and not a physical support system when relocating overseas, personal experience and research dictate that these online communities, particularly those utilised through Facebook's platform, can have a positive effect on those who are looking for new information, solace, and connection, whilst still maintaining bonds with their loved ones back in their home country of Australia.

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