Migrant Worker Empowerment in Online Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Migrant workers can be described as people who leave their home country for employment purposes in a foreign country (United Nations Commision for Human Rights, 1990). Migration can help people to get a better income. It is also a life event containing many social challenges as migrants learn to cope with problems in a new environment. Consequently, migrants often seek social support from sources such as online communities which can be accessed independent of time and place. Migrants are known to access online communities for various purposes. First, social media is very useful for maintaining contacts amongst migrants and their home families (Bacigalupe & Cámara, 2012; Malik & Kadir, 2011). The interaction amongst migrants and home families is described as creating transnational families (Benítez, 2012). Second, the online world can help migrants to develop social networks, and access the dispersed community (Dekker & Engbersen, 2012; Komito, 2011; Ogan & Ozakca, 2010; Oiarzabal, 2012). Third, migrants also access the online world to voice their political aspirations and organize collective actions (Fitzgerald, Hardy, & Lucio, 2012). Fourth, migrants access their online communities to develop their own identity which influences the development of nationalism amongst migrants in their host country (Conversi, 2012; Rinnawi, 2012). Although there are a lot of researchers studying migrant and online communities, studies which describe how shared practices amongst migrants empower migrants and their community are not commonly considered in the information science domain.

This article proposes a conceptual model which provides a clear picture of shared online practices amongst migrants which are expected to empower them. This conceptual model can be described as a constructed abstraction (Jonker & Pennink, 2010) of migrant empowerment in online communities perceived by people including the researchers. We have constructed this conceptual model from the literature on online communities, the migrant experience, and empowerment theory. This model brings together various descriptions of empowerment both in online communities and general contexts. This model contributes to 1) scholarly discussions on the empowering effect of interactions and collaborations within online communities 2) an enhanced understanding of migrant empowerment in online communities for professionals and scholars who work in related sectors.

BACKGROUND

Our literature review shows that several scholars have conceptualized empowerment in online communities according to context and setting. In general, empowerment by the Internet can be described as the capacity of the Internet to provide information, interactions and collaborations (Amichai-Hamburger, McKenna, & Tal, 2008). Interactions within a social networking site enable people to construct their online identity which potentially empowers them (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). From a consumer orientation, consumers feel empowered through accessing information which potentially improves their understanding and knowl-

edge in decision making processes (Tina, Kathryn, & Gary, 2006). In health contexts, participation in online communities is seen to empower individuals in coping with health issues (Høybye, Johansen, & Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2005; Pitts, 2004; Sharf, 1997; Cornelia F. van Uden-Kraan et al., 2008). In educational contexts, online collaboration processes can empower lecturers and students (Ravid, Kalman, & Rafaeli, 2008). The literature shows that studies of empowerment in online communities are an emerging concept.

Describing Empowerment in Online Communities

The Internet has been emerging rapidly, allowing people to interact and collaborate independent of time and place. Recently the Internet has become dominated by users who can virtually interact and collaborate with each other freely and equally (Feenberg, 2009; Feenberg & Friesen, 2012a). People who have similar interests meet, interact and collaborate in an online environment. They can choose and set up the online technologies which satisfy their needs to interact and collaborate. Mostly they are tied together as a community by a common interest. It can be seen that the capabilities of the Internet to provide virtual spaces fundamentally contribute to the establishment of a new form of community, namely an online community (Feenberg & Friesen, 2012a). Therefore, an online community can be described as a group of people who have similar interests, who meet, interact and collaborate in an online environment.

Online communities can provide meaningful interaction and collaboration amongst members (A. Feenberg, 2012). These characteristics potentially support the solving of problems and enhance the capabilities of members to gain control over their lives and reach a better state of wellbeing. These affordances are strongly related to the concept of empowerment.

The concept of empowerment in online communities shows that these processes of interaction and collaboration are influenced by the characteristics of these communities. For example, anonymity in an online community has been shown to enhance the social skills of people with disabilities and of patients (Amichai-Hamburger, et al., 2008; Barak & Sadovsky, 2008; C. F. van Uden-Kraan, Drossaert, Taal, Seydel,

& van de Laar, 2009). Anonymity also helps a group of people from opposing sides to engage in dialogue during a conflict (Amichai-Hamburger, et al., 2008) whilst, in the education sector, writing collaboration tools embedded in an online community can empower teachers and students through online collaboration, for example through writing together on a topic (Ravid, et al., 2008).

In the case of migrants, the ease of disseminating information widely helps them to seek social support, find similar others and achieve settlement in the host country (Dekker & Engbersen, 2012; Komito, 2011). Distributing content to a wide audience supports the cohesiveness of the group, supporting virtual teams and benefitting the process of transferring a community vision (Walvoord, Redden, Elliott, & Coovert, 2008). Interactions and collaborations in an online environment also benefit users who face many social challenges, for example lack of psychological wellbeing and health issues, such interactions and collaborations may potentially provide empathetic support for sick people who need to strengthen their self-efficacy (Cornelia F. van Uden-Kraan, Drossaert, Taal, Seydel, & van de Laar, 2008; C. F. van Uden-Kraan, et al., 2009; Cornelia F. van Uden-Kraan, Drossaert, Taal, Shaw, et al., 2008). In addition, textual information accompanied by pictures and videos can help people to seek and provide more comprehensive information for example about the treatment of and medication for individuals with health problems (Pitts, 2004; Sharf, 1997). It can be seen that several characteristics of online communities support processes of empowerment which contribute to personal and community development.

Furthermore, online communities also benefit from the processes of empowerment which may affect the whole community in various ways; such as meeting with similar others, strengthening group cohesiveness, providing diversity in community decision making and developing a common vision (Amichai-Hamburger, et al., 2008). In an online environment, people can easily find others with similar interests and develop purposeful collaborations and meaningful interactions through the online environment (Ravid, et al., 2008). It can help people to respond to political issues and express their common aspirations and collaborate for taking actions towards changes through the online communities.

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