

City, Self, Network: Transnational Migrants and Online Identity Work

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ABSTRACT

We use qualitative interviews with 26 transnational migrants in New York City to analyze socio-technical practices related to online identity work. We focus specifically on the use of Facebook, where benefits included keeping in touch with friends and family abroad and documenting everyday urban life. At the same time, many participants also reported experiences of fatigue, socio-cultural tensions and concerns about maintaining a sense of personal privacy. These experiences highlight how transnational practices complicate context collapse, where the geographic dispersal of participants' personal networks renders visible conflicts of "flattened" online networks. Our findings also suggest a kind of technology-enabled code-switching, where transnational migrants leverage social media to perform identities that alternate between communities, nationalities and geographies. This analysis informs HCI research on transnationalism and technological practices, and helps expose the complexities of online identity work in terms of shifting social and spatial contexts.

Author Keywords

Identity work; social media; transnationalism; urban informatics

ACM Classification Keywords

H.1.2. User/Machine Systems, Human Factors.

INTRODUCTION

Transnational migration is a process that involves a range of technologically-mediated practices of information and communication, including research to prepare for living in a new place [2], services to maintain existing social ties and form new ones [3, 24, 37], and tools for navigating a new environment [10]. In this paper, we report on interviews

with 26 transnational migrants in New York City, conducted with the goals of understanding how social network sites (SNSs) are used in everyday life, and the socio-cultural tensions that emerge around managing relationships with a social network that spans multiple languages and geographic locales. Throughout our analysis, we use the term "transnational migrant" as a more inclusive alternative to "immigrant," referring people that might otherwise not be associated with the term immigrants, such as exchange students, tourists and temporary workers.

Our investigation contributes to a growing body of scholarship addressing transnationalism and information and communication technologies (ICTs) by exploring the role of technology in maintaining social ties. For example, researchers have analysed uses of technology to maintain ties to their communities of origin, such as Castro and Gonzalez's [11] work on the ways in which even very basic ICTs (such as an online guest book) can provide a sense of connection to one's family and local community. Wang and Brown [37] examined the range of ICTs used by families in a remote village in Mexico to keep in touch with family members who had migrated to the U.S. Taking more of an interventionist approach, Weibert and Wulf [38] examined the ways in which a computer-supported collaboration projects enabled cross-cultural interaction between Turkish immigrants and native Germans in Bonn. In these investigations, technology plays a deeply important role in different moments of transnational life, facilitating social connectivity through the production, consumption and circulation of information about everyday life.

Our work addresses two gaps in this body of scholarship, the first being methodological, the second conceptual. First, there is a tendency across literature on transnationalism to focus on a single nationality or ethnicity. In contrast, we gather accounts of 26 transnational migrants from 20 different countries. This allows us to identify practices that emerge across varied experiences of transnationalism. Second, much of the literature on human computer interaction (HCI) and transnationalism constructs ICTs as tools of collapsing geographic boundaries and facilitating communication, without addressing ways in which these same tools of connectivity can generate socio-cultural complications to the point of rupturing or threatening social

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ties [e.g. 3, 11, 24, 37]. We instead take a holistic approach to transnational experience, gathering narratives that discuss both the benefits and drawbacks of ICT use. Our qualitative approach highlights the importance of looking not just at dominant uses and narratives surrounding technology (e.g. Facebook and connectivity) but also at some of the counter-intuitive, less immediately evident practices and experiences surrounding transnational use of ICTs.

Our analysis bridges research on urban transnationalism and investigations of identity work. Identity work provides a focal point for investigations of the role of technology in shaping the construction of the self, where a number of technological practices are deployed in everyday tasks related to identity. SNSs offer their users highly useful tools of maintaining and building ties in ways that can build social capital [15], where the different choices that users make regarding their online profiles are read as indicators of taste and identity [25]. Transnational migration in particular creates a context in which issues related to identity work are rendered quite clearly, as evidenced by tensions related to managing relationships with a culturally diverse personal network.

We begin by introducing the concepts of *identity work*, *context collapse* and *code switching* as useful frameworks for unpacking the objectives as well as the drawbacks of technological connectivity. We then analyze the use of SNSs (specifically Facebook) among transnational migrants, addressing both positive outcomes (e.g. keeping in touch with friends and family abroad) and drawbacks (e.g. the fatigue of feeling obligated to disclose personal information) of SNS use in the context of everyday life. We conclude with a discussion of how these findings help inform our understanding of identity work and ICTs in a transnational context.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS: IDENTITY WORK, CONTEXT COLLAPSE AND CODE-SWITCHING

This paper focuses on technological practices of urban newcomers as tied to identity work, or how “individuals shape and reshape who they are through language, behavior, appearance, and affiliation” [34]. Our conceptualization of identity is a constructionist one, where people make sense of themselves and others by following (or not following) social norms and scripts [19]. This sociological approach to understanding identity provides a framework for how different socio-technical practices are read within a wider socio-cultural context of conventional behavior. This approach is particularly appropriate to a study of transnational migration, which requires navigating different expectations of comportment and social interaction [22].

Within HCI research, scholars have investigated the role of technology in identity work, such as Ames’ work on technological practices related to iPhones among university

students [1]. In Ames’ analysis, access to technology alone is an insufficient signifier of identity – the social consequences of using or not using technology, and the contexts in which those technologies are deployed are far more indicative of identity work as manifest through technology. In the context of designing SNS, Farnham and Churchill [18] argued that people’s lives are faceted, meaning that “people maintain social boundaries and show different facets or sites of their character according to the demands of the current social situation” (p. 359). As such, the design of online platforms interpersonal communication should reflect the faceted nature of human identity. In these studies (see also, [12, 15, 25]), identity work becomes a means of gauging the efficacy of various technologies in ways that account for the social (as well as purely functional) objectives.

For scholars interested in issues of online identity work, the notion of *context collapse* offers a useful means of analyzing sources of tension in curating online identity. Context collapses result from a multi-faceted social network being flattened into a single audience, such that users find it difficult to curate content intended for or legible to only part of their personal networks [7] - See also [8, 20, 21, 27, 39]. Offline, people have the option to modify behavior based on their immediate social surroundings or to encode messages and gestures for a select few [18]. On sites like Facebook, such practices are far more challenging, potentially generating tension and fatigue.

The construct of code-switching originated in linguistics to describe the transition between languages in a single conversation among bilingual speakers [30]. From this fairly narrow construction of code-switching as conducted between speakers fluent in two languages, the concept has been expanded to refer to altering between forms of vernacular or between professional identities (e.g. [14]). We use a fairly expansive conceptualization of code-switching, referring both to linguistic shifts and more nuanced alterations in cultural markers of identity, including behavioural norms and social customs.

METHODOLOGY

This project takes a qualitative approach to identifying and analyzing information practices of transnational migrants in the New York City metropolitan area. Interviews were conducted between December of 2011 and September of 2012. Participants were recruited through two methods: 18 were recruited from English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in and around New York City. A second group of eight participants were recruited through word-of-mouth via our personal networks, and consisted mostly of current or former graduate students from countries outside the United States. Participants were screened based on the length of

time that they had lived in New York, where we limited the interview pool to those who had arrived within the last two

years. In total, the 26 participants hailed from 20 different countries and ranged in age from 22 to 60. For details on participants, see Table 1.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were audio recorded. Interview questions focused on resources for tasks like finding an apartment and locating ESL classes. Participants were also asked about technologies for keeping in touch with people abroad and the role of SNSs in everyday urban life. Transcripts were coded using NVIVO software. In terms of data analysis, we used an emic/etic coding strategy [29], which involves creating a series of high-level “etic” codes corresponding to themes identified prior to coding: urban space, changing relationships to space over time, personal networks and technological practices. We then nested “emic” subcategories underneath that emerged in participants’ own terms. In addition, we used an open coding method [36] to identify emergent themes and concepts, many of which were then brought into the emic/etic hierarchy. A number of themes grew out of this process, including information practices used to become familiar with city space, relationships to the city in terms of navigational as well as ethnicity-based landmarks, and technology and identity work. In this paper, we present findings related to this third area.

It’s important to note that although we analyze experiences of transnational migrants, many of our findings are likely also applicable to people who migrate domestically, or even from one part of the city to another. At the same time, our data does not allow us to make claims about the extent to which participant experiences are representative of transnational migrants generally. As a whole, we take an interpretive approach in analyzing narratives of transnational migrants with whom we spoke; rather than using qualitative data as a means of addressing hypotheses, we use participant accounts to draw out themes for discussion of SNS use as it relates to identity work, as manifested in practices of keeping in touch with one’s personal network and documenting everyday life.

RESULTS

In this section, we analyze references to identity work in an online context, focusing on Facebook, which was by far the most popular SNS among participants in this study. Online identity work can take place in numerous environments – e.g., video chats, search engine use, online shopping and social media. We focus on SNSs because they were nearly universal among people we interviewed and because analyses of transnational use of SNSs are still not well documented [10]. Among the 26 transnational migrants interviewed in this study, Facebook was by far the most popular SNS, referenced by 24 participants. Other references to SNSs (with the number of participants who referenced each in parentheses) included Twitter (8), LinkedIn (6), foursquare (6) and Weibo (1). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the two oldest participants in this study,

Name	Age	Nationality	Residence in NYC	Profession
Alice	26	Australia	18 months	Barista
Amelie	27	France	2 weeks	Unemployed
Araceli	29	Mexico	7 months	Hostess
Cecille	33	Cameroon	2 years	Teacher
Ishmael	42	Togo	6 months	Unemployed
Julio	60	Dominican Republic	9 months	Unemployed
Jorge	29	Spain	6 months	IT worker
Juan	37	Uruguay	3 months	Factory worker
Kiki	32	Japan	1 year	Nanny
Lalo	35	Chile	4 months	Auto mechanic
Laura	34	Brazil	1 year	Unemployed
Luka	29	Georgia	2 years	NGO
Miao	36	China	1 month	Student
Midori	38	Japan	3 months	Research fellow
Nalan	32	Turkey	2 years	IT worker
Noely	32	Venezuela	1 year	PR person
Raul	22	Honduras	18 months	Student
Rob	28	Puerto Rico	1 year	Delivery person
Carla	26	Philippines	2 years	Student
Dinan	25	India	18 months	IT worker
Gia	32	Indonesia	2 years	Journalist
Jacinta	33	Mexico	2 years	NGO
Javier	26	Brazil	18 months	Student
Lu	28	Mexico	1 year	NGO
Sue	29	Korea	2 years	Student
Wen	26	China	1 year	Student

Table 1. Participant details include age at time of interview, country of origin and the length of time in New York. Julio declined to provide his age, but we estimate him to be about 60. “NGO” denotes participants who worked at a non-government organization. As discussed in the methods section, participants were recruited in two groups – first through ESL classes, and second through word-of-mouth and snowball sampling among transnational graduate students. Gray shading denotes the latter group.

Julio (60, Dominican Republic) and Ishmael (42, Togo) did not use Facebook, or any other SNS.

From its origins in 2004 as an online community for university students, Facebook has grown into the most popular SNS in the world, with over one billion users, and approximately 81% of monthly active Facebook users live outside of the U.S. and Canada [17], indicating the global reach of the site. This is also in contrast to platforms with users bases concentrated in only a few geographic regions (e.g., Weibo in China or Orkut in Brazil and India). Depending on individual configurations of privacy settings, users can see each other’s photos, links and messages, and geographic location check-ins. These operational functions have important consequences for norms of disclosure and expectations of privacy, as demonstrated by the choices that participants made in when and how to use Facebook as part of the process of managing their own experiences of newness. In contrast to HCI research that focuses on a single face to social media operations (for example, looking only at photo sharing or location functions), we take a holistic approach in our analysis of Facebook, integrating discussion of messaging, posting, uploading photos and

using locative functions. In other words, we sought to understand how different components of Facebook are deployed in the larger socio-technical assemblage of everyday life and online connectivity.

Online identity work: An analysis of Facebook

Benefits of using Facebook included maintaining relationships with friends and family abroad, and providing a platform for garnering prestige, as well as documenting everyday life. At the same time, participants also described drawbacks of SNS use: issues of language and audience; privacy concerns; and the exhaustion of feeling obligated to maintain an online persona.

Facebook and Connectivity

In looking at social media use among people we interviewed, Facebook was used by participants to document everyday life and maintain social ties, both in New York and abroad. This is in keeping with arguments that devoting time to online interaction displays a commitment to the maintenance of social ties [5, 20], and to previous work on transnational use of ICTs [3, 11, 24, 37]. Nalan's (32, Turkey) description of using Facebook is typical of this type of SNS use:

[Facebook] is very useful, definitely. I keep in touch with my friends, a lot of friends, family, my ex co-workers. It is good, you can see pictures of what's going on in their life, it's good, good. I like Facebook ... I like using technology, especially [because] my family is in Turkey, I'm here, but we don't feel so far away from each other. We can see each other online.

Nalan had lived in New York for about two years and although she visited her native Turkey about once a year, she had no plans to return permanently, and her family had never visited the U.S. Thus SNSs provided a vital means of communicating with family and friends abroad. Although she uses language that emphasizes visual interaction, Nalan is not referring here to videoconferencing tools like Skype or Google Hangouts. Rather, she refers to the sense of connectivity that takes place through online interaction. This use of Facebook confirms much of the literature on use of SNSs (transnational or otherwise) to maintain a sense of intimacy and connectivity with people in one's personal network, irrespective of distance [5, 20]. For Nalan and others in this study, Facebook provides an important means of articulating a social network of her friends and family, and signaling a commitment to interpersonal connectivity across space.

SNSs and Signals of Prestige

Participants also used Facebook as part of a particular kind of identity work intended to impress one's friends and family by documenting visits to well-known places or consumption of particularly famous, location-specific goods. Demonstrating how this process works via use of Facebook's locative functionality, Alice (26, Australia)

stated that she mainly used Facebook check-in to "show off" to her friends in Australia: "I was in a bar [I'd seen] from [the TV show] *Sex in the City*. So I had to check in on Facebook. I knew my friends in Adelaide would die." Similarly, Araceli (29, Mexico) referenced using Facebook check in to document visiting "the favorite tapas place [of] Lady Gaga." In both cases, Facebook becomes a means of documenting everyday life, but participants were also motivated by the ability to use Facebook updates as a kind of impression management, gaining status among their connections abroad for having access to iconic foreign locations. These technological practices are fairly complex accounts of signals that traverse space (New York and abroad), media (indirect encounters with celebrity translated into gaining status among one's friends), and technology (showcasing offline spaces to one's online connections).

Even outside of references to celebrities, we noted frequent references to everyday uses of Facebook's check-in functionality as a means of showing off. Sue (29, Korea) noted that she rarely checked in on Facebook in New Jersey, where she was a graduate student, however, "in [New York City] all the time I turn it on, the location function, so that I can just keep track of the location ... I can check in somewhere cool in Facebook or Foursquare. Just try to show off I'm in the city now, something like that." Araceli described similar uses, stating that she used check-in on Facebook on

happy days, like when ... I was visiting many places with my friends [from Mexico] a few weeks ago. I post because all the time they told me like, please post us in this place, la la la, they didn't have service, phone service, so all the time [they] told me, please post us in this place. So yeah, I use [check-in] sometimes. Or when I want to remember some place, like some good restaurant. I like to do that.

In both Sue's and Araceli's descriptions, the use of locative media accomplishes a number of tasks – it helps them find locations in the city and documents those locations for future reference. Sue and Araceli also noted that Facebook's check-in function allows them to transmit the experience of visiting a location to friends in a way that shows off, garnering prestige. In Araceli's case, there was an external pressure from her friends to check in and tag photos on their behalf as a way of accruing their own markers of status, or what might be called identity work by proxy. Araceli's friends push the efforts of gaining social status onto her own Facebook updates, where online connectivity can produce a shared labor of identity work.

Another facet of collaborative identity work as tied to locative SNS functions took shape via friend-based recommendations. For example, Carla (26, Philippines) noted "I can see recommendations [from my friends] to find places, [so it's] kind of tailored to what you like, I see suggestions based on where my friends are going, which I

like.” Although Carla had lived in New York for over a year, she still felt that her knowledge of the city was limited to the neighborhoods immediately surrounding her school and where she lived, and Carla commented that seeing updates about where her friends had checked in served as both a motivational and vetting mechanism to visiting new places. As a kind of follow-up function, Javier (26, Brazil) commented on the sense of satisfaction and pride that surfaced when he could post on someone’s page that he had been to a location where one of his friends had checked in, effectively demonstrating his familiarity with different bars, clubs and restaurants. This kind of interactive communication is at once spatial and social, and underscores the extent to which identity and information work on Facebook is highly networked, in that identity work isn’t solely a matter of what an individual user shares, it is also comprised of the content posted by those in one’s personal network, where comments, posts and tags that link users also shape how identity is performed online.

Transnational Facebook Fatigue

Interestingly, some participants expressed discomfort with SNSs precisely because of the possibility of using them to impress one’s friends. At the time of our interview, Amelie (27, France) was just two weeks into a three-month stay in New York, during which time she was focused on improving her English. Amelie mentioned that although she had been a Facebook user prior to moving, she rarely updated her page in New York, partly because she wanted to resist a construction of everyday urban life as overly conventional or touristy: “I don’t want to post like typical sentences, ‘I’m in New York and I do this.’ So I don’t know, I prefer to send email and maybe I use [Facebook to] send some the message. [I] send message more than like publish something, post something [on Facebook].” For Amelie, the communication functions of Facebook were useful, but the locative functions were more problematic. Voicing similar concerns, Lu (28, Mexico) described a transition in her use of Facebook check-in over time, moving from excitement at checking in to a sense of unease:

Lu: When I was in a cool place, or when I was with a big group of friends, you know, then I wanted to show it to other people. But now I think it’s weird.

Interviewer: Weird?

Lu: I don’t know. It’s weird ... because I don’t want to be that person who checks in somewhere because I want people to know I’m living in New York.

Here Lu suggests a kind of backlash to signaling that can be interpreted as posturing or patronizing. Facebook users with transnational connections may want to use functions like Facebook check in largely for personal reasons, like documenting where they’ve eaten in a given neighborhood, but these actions may still have social consequences in

producing unwanted connotations, such as showing off and generating “typical” rather than personalized identities.

Code-switching on Facebook

For 25 of the 26 people interviewed in this project, English was not their native language. Thus one important component of transnational use of SNSs centers on multi-lingualism. Participants explained that decisions about posting on Facebook in one language versus another indicate the intended audience of a given online update or comment. As Araceli (29, Mexico) indicated, “If I want to say something that I think is involved with my friends in New York, I write in English, because I have friends from ... many places. Or if I wanna say something just for my friends in Mexico, I will post in Spanish.” Bilingualism enables transnational migrants to direct (albeit somewhat loosely) their content to various parts of their personal networks, and they assume that people will take language as an indication of whether or not the message is intended for them.

Bilingual posting can be marked as code-switching, but because of the visibility of this switch, it also becomes a coping mechanism for negotiating collapsed contexts, in keeping with Marwick and boyd’s [27] findings on SNS steganography, which refers to practices of hiding things in plain sight. Looking specifically at teenagers, Marwick and boyd found that adolescent Facebook users relied on inside jokes, slang and pop culture references to post content that only some of their connections could parse. Yet, at times, teens would also post encoded language that was explicitly meant to exclude by making it very clear to readers who could not understand the message that they were not part of the intended audience.

Bilingualism and code-switching enable SNS users to draw linguistic boundaries around their social media content, signaling information intended for a specific subset of their social networks. This kind of code-switching takes place not in a single conversation, but in a larger conceptualization of communication as a social awareness stream [31], where a constant feed of information is intended to keep one’s connections abreast of activities and events. Unlike teens who are actively obscuring their encoded messages, the transnational migrants we interviewed were actively trying to signal their intended audience through the use of language.

Participants were typically highly tuned to how their networks would respond to content that they couldn’t understand. Laura (34, Brazil) described how some of these tensions unfolded on her Facebook page:

I started to publish, not *all* news that I publish, but *sometimes* I publish in Portuguese and in English. But all photos, all pictures that I publish, I publish with both languages. Because I know that my new friends that don’t speak Portuguese want to know what I put in the pictures ... I’m trying always to do this. I think, like, [it

shows I] respect new friends. But sometimes it's only to publish news, some phrase or expression, I forget and I publish in Portuguese. But sometimes I publish in English and my father, my mother, my sister complain, "Oh, we couldn't understand, you need to write in Portuguese!"

In the context of language choices and SNS, Laura's account demonstrates the extent to which language is an indication of audience, such that her family's voicing objections to the language used in Facebook content is moreover an objection to being excluded from information about everyday life because the information being remitted lacks translation.

As a counterpart to earlier comments that signaling location via SNS can be read as posturing, there was an additional complication of feeling that adopting non-native language was presumptuous or haughty. As Jacinta (33, Mexico) explained, "I have some judgment issues with people that use English in Mexico. I don't like it, because it's like snotty, a little bit. I'm like, 'Oh, come on. Oh yeah, we know you're in New York, I see that too.'" Where Facebook check-in was sometimes used to generate status among one's followers in terms of place, here Jacinta reads a similar kind of identity work linked to language in a derogatory sense. Part of the SNS fatigue described earlier can be tied to efforts of code-switching and the continuous shifts between languages as well as normative social scripts. Code-switching allowed participants some leeway in directing social media signals to certain segments of one's personal network, but it also opened up complications of managing a multi-lingual audience that may react negatively to messages perceived as exclusionary or as posturing.

Facebook and breaking ties.

Other modes of using Facebook emerged from interviews that diverged dramatically from participants' typical use of SNSs to keep in touch with friends and family. Although mentioned less often, participants also discussed transnational migration as responsible for radically altering previous Facebook practices. Overall, research on SNSs – and, transnational practices in particular – has been more focused on adoption and tie maintenance than departure and defriending [4, 32]. The following examples are useful precisely because they are atypical, and allow for a counter narrative challenging highly prevalent assumptions about SNSs (and transnational use of ICTs in particular – see [10]) as always, only or predominantly connective.

As a somewhat extreme example of altering SNS practices post-migration, Rob (28) moved from Puerto Rico to New York and promptly deleted the majority of his friends from his Facebook account. As Rob explained: "When I came to New York, I erased most of the people, most of my friends. Because I just wanted to change. I like changes. I wanted to change the past." Rob had been in the city for about a year at the time of our interview, during which time he had held

down a string of delivery jobs. Although he had no intention of returning to Puerto Rico permanently, Rob was also not tied to the idea of staying in New York, expressing an interest in moving "somewhere warm, somewhere that's green, with less hipsters."

On the whole, Rob's approach to living in New York seemed rooted in accruing as diverse a social network as possible, which partly explains his willingness to delete his Puerto Rican friends from his Facebook network. This is a marked difference from the typical use of Facebook, at least among participants in this study. Rather than using Facebook to maintain ties, Rob used Facebook as a means of severing them. Rob went on to explain, "I wanted to start over again. I didn't know nobody in New York, so I just deleted people. And eventually, friends grow." Here, Rob describes Facebook as a platform for performing a particular kind of identity work, where removing people from his online social network symbolized his physical removal from Puerto Rico. This can also be constructed as a pre-emptive move to avoid context collapse, effectively homogenizing his Facebook audience, at least in terms of geography.

Jacinta (33, Mexico) echoed Rob's practices in a less drastic way, reducing her engagement with Facebook and Twitter rather than deleting connections altogether. After moving to New York for graduate school, Jacinta found a job with a non-government organization (NGO) and had plans to return to Mexico, although not for another five or six years. Jacinta specifically linked her SNS fatigue to the burden of keeping her personal network in Mexico informed of her life in New York:

And I don't post anything because it overwhelms me now. I have this visceral reaction to my persona online, that I just quit ... I felt that I was living in Mexico too much, because I was too much monitoring what was going on in there, and I felt pressured to let people know what was going on in my New York life. Like I had to let them know that I was having a great life or something ... So I decided I was not going to tell them anything. And I can see that this is not very well taken from the other side, it is probably a form of selfishness. But for now, it's sort of an unchosen choice. I'm just doing it that way. I wish for some day to be able to find a grey area, you know, when I can serenely do Facebook and Twitter but for now I just feel it's too much maintenance, putting too much out there, like maintaining relationships with people, especially on Twitter, and I feel too exposed ... Too much exposure, I don't want to feel so exposed.

This account highlights tensions that emerge from transnational migration and are borne out online, specifically in terms of identity work via SNSs. Jacinta's desire for a "serene" post-migration engagement with SNSs speaks to a disconnect between the level of engagement desired by Jacinta's contacts and her own need for control

and privacy. Thus Jacinta is no longer willing to document information about her everyday life because it requires “too much maintenance, putting too much out there” and “too much exposure.” Jacinta’s description points to the cost of online identity work as a burden of time and energy, particularly because of the operational limitations at work: SNSs encourage sharing without necessarily providing a way to keep in touch without self-disclosure, which results in the feeling of removing oneself from the present location and, instead, being pulled back into one’s country (or at least, personal network) of origin.

DISCUSSION: EVERYDAY URBAN LIFE AND CONTEXT COLLAPSE.

The most popular SNS among participants in this study, Facebook operates on a number of levels in facilitating online identity work. Although this identity work is extremely helpful in connecting with friends and family abroad, using Facebook also generates moments of interpersonal and intercultural tension, as when code-switching between languages generates texts that include and exclude within a social network. Practices of rejecting, restarting or heavily reducing use of Facebook did not surface universally among participants, but are nevertheless useful in understanding drawbacks of SNS use. These experiences provide a useful counter-balance to HCI research on transnationalism that over-emphasizes or oversimplifies the use of ICTs among transnational migrants as linear, unproblematic and primarily about maintaining and forging ties rather than manipulating or breaking them. In the remainder of this article, we offer discussion of key themes from our findings and point to some areas for future work.

Context Collapse Transnational Audiences

For transnational migrants, experiences of context collapse can track along distinctly geographic lines, where SNS users are confronted with posting content to friends, family, and acquaintances spread across the globe. Context collapse hinges on homogenizing diverse audiences, where the heterogeneity of relationships managed through social media has been linked to anxiety or paralysis in terms of what, how and to whom one discloses personal information [39]. But for transnational migrants in this study, the problem was not hesitation at what to post because the audience being imagined was too difficult to conceptualize [7], but rather was imagined quite precisely, both spatially (in terms of whether people lived nearby or abroad) as well as temporally (before or after migration). Thus context collapse is not necessarily best conceived as an individual overwhelmed by an audience so heterogeneous as to be anonymous. Rather, experiences of transnational migrants inform a notion of context collapse that is much more linked to exhaustion of tailoring messages to known and discrete but different audiences. Feelings of exhaustion and fatigue are by no means limited to transnational migrants, and research on leaving or abstaining from SNSs is

beginning to address motivations for reducing time spent on Facebook or leaving altogether [4, 32].

Findings from this study also have implications for rethinking code-switching in the context of online identity work. Many transnational migrants we interviewed were deeply familiar with modes of code-switching and we regularly witnessed participants engaging in different forms of this practice, from deploying slang to changes in body language, depending on who else was in the room or engaged in conversation. In the context of advertising, Luna and Peracchio [26] examined the reception of ads that contained both English and Spanish, noting that code-switched slogans activate emotional associations related to the specific language and culture being used. In other words, code-switching takes place on a level that is not only linguistic, but also emotional and social. The emotion and affect at work in code-switching is in fact central to understanding how transnational migrants leverage bilingualism in order to signal an enduring commitment to friends and family abroad. But as in the case of advertising, this affective labor requires substantive knowledge about one’s personal network, and specifically their SNS reading practices. This finding underscores the above point about the extent to which context collapse for transnational migrants is experienced not necessarily in vague or paralyzing ways, but far more acutely in terms of personal networks divided geographically. Future work could focus on the reception rather than production of code-switching content. Participants commented on the reactions of their online networks to code-switching, but how are these messages understood and circulated by people whose friends and family have migrated abroad? To what extent is code-switching interpreted as an enduring commitment to one’s place of origin?

Bilingualism enabled participants some leeway in guiding content of their online identity work to certain portions of their personal networks. Yet it’s worth noting that with a broad definition for code switching, the experiences of transnational migrants have implications for other SNS users. Additional research on online identity work is needed to understand whether different levels of technological use are effective in managing context collapse – for example, using different platforms (e.g. Tumblr versus Facebook) to reach different members of one’s personal network, having different accounts within the same network, or using group functionality (like Google+’s circles).

Impression Management of Self and City

Context collapse is frequently constructed as a conflict experienced individually or a crisis of selfhood [21]. For participants in this study, concerns of authentic documentation of everyday life were partly tied to the self and partly tied to place. For example, references to reducing SNS use underscore tensions of producing selfhood both in New York and abroad. New York has its own identity, however, and participants’ references to concerns of

“showing off” tie context collapse not only to impression management of the self, but of the city. In the socio-technical practices we identified above, experiences of online identity work among transnational migrants in New York highlight the inter-relatedness of self, place and technologies at work in online connectivity. As locative media like Facebook check-in and Foursquare continue to gain popularity, issues of performing personal as well as spatial identity will become increasingly important to understand and untangle.

It’s likely that New York’s extensive presence in mainstream media heightens the extent to which participants’ connections are interested in their experiences of living in the city. Having consumed imagery of New York through film, music and news media, Facebook content of transnational newcomers becomes an additional source of information about New York. Yet even if the stakes of prestige are perhaps higher in New York than places with less visibility in popular media, similar dynamics of using locative functionality to gain status are also likely for other cities. Future work could explore conspicuous consumption in the specific context of using SNS to document purchases and entertainment in a way intended to gain status among one’s personal network.

As a whole, our qualitative analysis of transnational newcomers to New York City has discussed the relationships between technology and identity work, demonstrating the extent to which everyday life is technologically messy [13], with complications of language, privacy and socio-cultural differences. Taking a holistic approach to technological practices used by transnational migrants to produce and manage flows of information about everyday life throughout their personal networks, we have sought to consider how these practices provide insight into experiences of transnationalism, as well as more general experiences of online identity work.

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