Article No 5

Closing the Gap:
Using a Series of Social Networking Environments to Collapse Time and Space by Giving and Receiving Social Support

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Keywords
Social networking, Facebook, Orkut, Yahoo! Groups, communities of practice, virtual communities, informal learning

Abstract
Social networks are altering learning, communication, and relationship patterns as they have the potential to close gaps once created by physical distance. This study, based on findings from a qualitative research project that featured open-ended interviews and content analysis of social network usage among 16 Brazilians who had relocated to the United States, explores social network environments within the communities of practice framework. Findings indicate that participation in social networks foster Wenger's (1998) three dimensions of communities of practice: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. These dimensions worked to break isolation by sharing information and providing social support among the participants in the series of social network environments that were studied.

Introduction
Social networking environments and communicative technology are beginning to play a larger role in our everyday lives as they give individuals a constant 24 hour a day, 7 day a week access to friends, family, and communities no matter the physical distance that might exist between them. This is especially true now that we have seen an intense growth in the use of mobile technologies (e.g., smartphones and wireless networking). When taking part in social networking activity members share experiences, expertise, and gain recognition through interactions in the community (Skiba, 2007). This is increasingly important as individuals find themselves moving from place to place and wanting to remain connected to old networks while finding their way into new networks to establish relationships and knowledge bases.

While social networking participants may develop new global relationships and participate in Web communities that introduce them to new and different kinds of people and experiences, individuals tend to use these spaces to keep ties with people they know from a face-to-face

group (boyd, 2008). It has been evident that when people move from place to place, so do their networks via social networking Web sites (Vivian & Sudweeks, 2003). However, when individuals choose to remove themselves from familiar ties, such as moving for a job or educational opportunity, the need to connect with the new community makes itself apparent. Moving often forces one to step outside their familiar networks, even though they are still there for much needed support, to meet new people and create a new knowledge base around their new physical location. This study seeks to explore social networking participation among a group of individuals, who at one point in their lives stepped away from familiar ties. The significance of this research lies in its revelations concerning meaning and scope of virtual community networks made possible through the power of intelligent networking. Intelligent networking focuses on the "combination of technology and electronic pathways that makes global communication possible" (Gershon, 2011, p. 13).

Background
New social communication technologies, like social networking sites, have the potential to alter the way individuals communicate and connect with one another. Therefore, it is important to first explore what social networking is and how these sites blur the lines between offline and online before examining how they may be used as a tool for perpetuating virtual communities and even further, a virtual community of practice among their participants.

What is Social Networking?
Rheingold (2000a) writes that "social networks emerge when people interact with each other continually" and that they "can find you a job or a husband, information you need, recommendations for restaurants and investments, babysitters and bargains, a new religion, emotional support" (pp. 47-8). boyd and Ellison (2008) define online social networks as having three major components that allow individuals to create a profile, articulate a list of people they're connected to, and to see connections made among other users. Social network sites (e.g., Facebook, Orkut, etc.) revolve around users creating profiles about themselves. Profiles contain a place to post messages (such as the Facebook's Wall), information about the user (for example, education and work experience, favorite sporting teams and athletes, activities and interests, favorite television shows and movies, etc.), photos, and a friend list. Gunawardena, Hermans, Sanchez, Richmon, Bohley, and Tuttle (2009) hone in on Boyd and Ellison's (2008) second and third components emphasizing connections by defining social networking as "the practice of expanding knowledge by making connections with individuals of similar interests" (p. 4). Social networking sites provide a space where individuals can add each other as "friends" or join a community group to make connections with others to gain knowledge around a particular subject or to provide social support.

The main feature of these sites is the flexibility incorporated in them as they allow for anytime, anywhere access by their members (Gunawardena et al., 2009). This way both information and support can be shared and gathered at any time and place, which is convenient to the user. While social networking sites have the ability to connect individuals to the larger world, people tend to connect to their established physical networks except in cases where they may feel marginalized (boyd, 2008; boyd & Ellison, 2008; Ito et al., 2010). Steinfield, Ellison, and Lampe (2008) studied social network use among young adults attending university and found that they relied on social networks to maintain former connections and develop relationships with new peers. Therefore, it is important to note that social networking sites do not function in just a face-to-face only or virtual-only capacity. Instead they often "operate both on-line and off-line" (Wellman & Gulia, 1997, p.10), "blur the boundaries between the real and virtual worlds" (Gunawardena et al., 2009, p. 7), and "are as real as communities that meet physically or whose members exist near or convenient proximity" (Abdul-Rahman & Hailes, 2000, p. 1). Just because virtual communities communicate mostly online doesn't make it any less real (Rheingold, 2000b).

Social Networking Sites as a Virtual Community

Social networking sites can be viewed as virtual communities. Johnson (2001) defines a virtual community as "a group separated by space and time" that utilizes "networked technology in one form or another to collaborate and communicate" (pp. 52-3). Further, Chiu, Hsu, and Wang (2006) view virtual communities as "online social networks in which people with common interests, goals, or practices interact to share information and knowledge, and engage in social interactions" (p. 1873). Porter (2004) agrees with this definition as she indicates that a virtual community focus on "interact[ion] around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported and/or mediated by technology and guided by some protocols or norms" (Defining Virtual Communities, para 2). Therefore, vital components of virtual communities include an interaction around a particular shared interest, which are guided by norms in an electronically supported fashion. This study utilizes these definitions for its working definition of virtual community and views virtual communities as social networks that are at least partially supported by technologies to bridge space and time in order to collaborate and communicate around interests to share knowledge and engage in social interactions.

Senges, Seely Brown, and Rheingold (2008) write that "personally meaningful connections are created in interaction with others and through the individual's *learning to be* [emphasis in original] a respected participant in a community" (p. 129). Like a face-to-face community, the most important aspect of a virtual community is its people (Rafaeli, Ravid, & Soroka, 2004). Technology, like social network sites, is not the focus of the communities, but technology helps tie the different aspects of these communities together (Rheingold, 2000a).

It is the people that utilize technology and have the motivation to participate and perpetuate the sharing of information and social support to create a sense of community (Blanchard & Markus, 2002; Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006; Ridings & Gefen, 2004; Welman & Gulia, 1997; Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, & Haythornthwaite, 1996). Moreover, there are two major motivational components for people to participate in virtual communities: sharing information and social support.

In virtual communities individuals "can easily post a question or comment and receive information in return" (Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, & Haythornthwaite, 1996, p. 219). This information is quickly available at other members' fingertips and according to members often more accurate than other media outlets Wellman & Gulia, 1997. Rheingold (2000) reflects on the security that comes with participating in a virtual community in that real people are typically always available if you need their help. It is important to note that active participation (e.g., frequent posting and interaction) and passive participation (e.g., lurking) when it comes to benefiting from shared knowledge yield the same result as both gain the knowledge shared. Active participants are motivated to share information due to their need to give back to the community and general feelings of usefulness (Blanchard & Markus, 2002).

Giving and receiving social support is another popular reason for participating in a virtual community (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). This is especially important for those individuals who seek support for social, physical, and mental problems (Wellman & Gulia, 1997). When support is given in virtual communities there is typically a reciprocal supportiveness. This occurs as people are alone reading messages and typing replies to other members. As these messages are posted, read, and responded to there is also a connection made where one feels like they are the only one who could provide aid at that particular moment (Wellman et al., 1996). Depending on the intensity of need these helping relationships may even be developed though further mediums (e.g., phone, e-mail, or face-to-face meetings). Through the sharing of information and the giving of support members of the virtual community build a sense of community generated by norms and structures put into place by the virtual community members, which produce each community's distinct culture (Wellman et al., 1996). While virtual communities often offer aid, comfort, and inspiration to their members, it is also important to understand that it can also be like "an endless, ugly, long-simmering family brawl" (Rheingold, 2000, p.9).

Social Networking as a Virtual Community of Practice

According to Educause (2010), "virtual communities of practice (VCOPs) function as persistent online forums in which people with common interests explore and address shared issues or problems" by giving individuals "direct access to information and interaction at the time and place most convenient to them" (Virtual Communities section, para 2). Further, virtual communities of practice have members that know each other who "collaborate to solve common problems, share best practices, support each other, and have a common identity" (Daniel, Schwier, & McCalla, 2003, p. 127). According to Daniel, Schwier, and McCalla (2003), virtual communities of practice have a reasonably stable membership, informal learning goals, common language, and no formal distribution of responsibilities. They also focus on key features including: shared interests, common identity, shared information and knowledge, voluntary participation, autonomy in setting goals, awareness of social protocols and goals, awareness of membership, and effective means of communications (Daniel, Schwier, & McCalla, 2003).

To summarize, people are the most important aspect of social networking sites and virtual communities. It is the people—not the features or sites themselves—who are motivated to utilize social networking sites as tools to share and gather information and to give and receive social support. Therefore, it is the people who create a vibrant sense of community in these virtual spaces by providing information and supporting others who share common interests.

This leads us to the research question of this study: How do virtual communities, like social networking sites, work to build new relationships, maintain existing relationships, and learn new things about their new environment?

Theoretical Framework

Findings from this research study were analyzed through a community of practice framework (Wenger, 1998) to ascertain how a group of individuals used the social network sites to build new relationships, maintain older relationships, and learn through informal experiences. Wenger (1998) looks in depth at communities of practice and highlights three major components found in them: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire.

Table 1
Wenger's Communities of Practice Components (1998)

Components	Component Aspects
Mutual Engagement	Building relationships, negotiating meaning, supporting one another includes tensions and disharmonious aspects
Joint Enterprise	Sharing knowledge, knowledge negotiation among members, feelings of accountability, overall community development
Shared Repertoire	Specific activities, symbols, artifacts, words, stories, gestures

According to Wenger (1998), mutual engagement focuses on members of the community building relationships with one another. During this building of relationships, members negotiate meaning in a new environment and support one another. Wenger (1998) indicates that engagement in a community of practice doesn't always have to be harmonious as members can have different perspectives on issues and different feelings about how the community should be run. Wenger's (1998) second component, joint enterprise, highlights the sharing of knowledge and how knowledge is negotiated between its members. Further, it takes into account how members feel accountable to the rest of the members and how the overall community develops. The final component of Wenger's (1998) community of practice is that of shared repertoire. This aspect refers to actually building a set of communal resources through negotiated norms that include specific activities, symbols, artifacts, words, stories, and gestures that work to create

and maintain relationships in the community. Within shared repertoire group norms are created and have the potential to be consistently negotiated by the community that partakes in them (Wenger, 1998).

Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore social network participation among individuals who had, at one point in their lives, stepped away from familiar ties and to examine how they used these sites to build new relationships, maintain existing relationships and to learn new things about their new environment. According to Creswell (2008), a qualitative approach "relies on the views of participants; asks broad, general questions; collects data consisting largely of words (or text) from participants; describes and analyzes these words for themes; and conducts the inquiry in a subjective, biased manner" (Creswell, 2008, p. 46). For this study, a qualitative approach was selected to gather rich data provided by actual words (i.e., social networking participatory comments and interview sessions) and experiences regarding social networking practices by a group of individuals who at one point in their lives had stepped away from familiar ties. To do this, findings from content analysis of social networking usage and interview sessions were analyzed through the community of practice framework (Wenger, 1998) that features the three components of mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire.

Sample

To explore the phenomenon of social networking sites as virtual communities of practice, one group of individuals was selected to ascertain how they created and maintained relationships, as well as provided learning opportunities within the social networking sites.

As one of our researchers is of Brazilian descent and moderated a social networking Yahoo! Group that focused on Brazilians that had relocated to Wisconsin, this population was selected as our target population. Participants were purposefully selected by way of a snowball approach to identify 16 individuals who met the following criteria: Brazilian-born; currently living in Southeast Wisconsin and had lived in the area for at least one year; and active members of at least two (e.g., Yahoo! Group, Facebook, or Orkut) social networking sites. Active membership was characterized as participating at a minimum of once a week in at least one social networking site.

There were sixteen participants in the study (5 males, 11 females) who were Brazilian-born, currently living in Southeast Wisconsin, had lived in Southeast Wisconsin for a minimum of one year, and were active members of at least two social networking sites. Age range varied from some participants in their 20s to others in their 50s. At the time of the interview, the majority of the participants were employed in a variety of fields. Their occupations went from educator to accountant, from nanny to professional athlete. In terms of relationship status, eight (50%) of participants were married while the rest were single. Of those married, some had grown up children who lived outside of the household and others had younger children. Some participants had relatives in town while others were the only ones in their families living abroad. While some of these Brazilians did not have Facebook accounts at the time of the study, all of them participated in the Orkut social networking site. Regardless of their status and presence, or lack of family in the United States, there was in all of them an expressed need to keep in contact with their families and friends living in Brazil. This was the most mentioned reason to use the social networking sites. In consequence, it is not surprising that most of the participants preferred to use Orkut, a site in which they communicate mainly in Portuguese and keep them connected with their native country.

Data Collection

To collect data for this study a message was first sent through the Yahoo! Group site inviting potential participants who met the study criteria to contact the research team. Participants

contacted the team and a snowball approach was used to identify further individuals who met the study criteria. Individuals who agreed to participate in the study gave the research team access to their Facebook and Orkut social networking sites as friends. Researchers were also added to the Yahoo! Group to review messages that were sent within the community. The research team observed participant behavior in the different social networking environments for one week. Researchers used a consistent observation protocol that focused on documentation of particular social and cultural activities (e.g., status updates, wall posts, picture uploads, picture tags, event participation) to conduct observations. The research team also conducted interviews among the 16 participants to gain in-depth knowledge surrounding their social network usage. Participants were asked to share which social networking sites they currently participated in, how often they accessed the sites, why they used the different sites, how they used the sites to create and maintain social ties, how they used the sites to create and maintain cultural ties, and how they used the sites to build relationships.

During the study participants were observed in three social networking spaces: *Yahoo Group, Facebook* and *Orkut.* The Yahoo! Group site was available as a Web site, but members interacted through email postings of the listserv while the Facebook and Orkut sites each participant had a personal site and interacted through Web postings.

Yahoo Group
The social space in the Yahoo! Group site, formed in August 2001, has generated 1,409 messages and has 239 members as of March 12, 2009. The primary language of the listserv site is Portuguese; however, messages are posted in English occasionally. Membership for this Yahoo! Group requires approval from the moderator, but messages do not require approval.

All members can post messages and email attachments. Membership is open to anyone who is interested in the Brazilian culture. It is not possible to differentiate between Brazilian and non-Brazilian members. Web site demographics show that members have steadily joined the Yahoo! Group since 2001, but had nearly half of its members (49%) joined between the years of 2006 and 2008. When members post messages to the listserv other members can view messages in two ways: on the Yahoo! Group site or by email. Almost all of the members (93%) receive email messages that contain the messages posted by other individual members, while only a few (5%) choose to receive the messages in different forms like a daily digest where posts are summarized on a daily basis or only receive messages that are considered special announcements. Over half of its members (56%) have not posted a message to the listserv, while the moderator, has posted more than 100 messages.

Facebook
Facebook was founded in February 2004. According to the Facebook Web site, its mission is "to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected."

Millions of members use the Web site everyday to keep up with friends, upload photos, share links and videos, and learn more about the people they meet. Web site statistics indicate that there are more than 750 million active users, for which 50% of these active users log on to Facebook in any given day. From an international user standpoint, there are more than 70 translations available on the site. About 70% of Facebook users are outside the United States.

Orkut
According to its Web site, Orkut is an online community designed to make the social life of its users more active and stimulating. It can help users maintain existing relationships with pictures and messages, and establish new ones by reaching out to people they have never met before. Membership is free and the only requirement to join it is to have a Google Account.

In 2009, Brazil counts for 51.27% of its users, followed by India (19.81%), and U.S. (16.90%). Other countries included in their demographics with less than 1% membership are Pakistan, Paraguay, United Kingdom, Afghanistan, Portugal, Japan, and Australia.

Methodology and Data Analysis

Data gathered from the observations and interviews were coded and analyzed to reveal elements of the virtual community based on Wenger's (1998) three dimensions of communities of practice framework, which highlights mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. Data were coded into these three concepts and themes emerged. Participants discussed mutual engagement by partaking in the building of relationships, negotiating meaning in their new environment, and supporting one another. Joint enterprise was evident when participants shared their knowledge with fellow community members and negotiated knowledge among members, as well as when they spoke about their feelings of accountability in helping new community members and in overall community development. Shared repertoire was apparent when individuals talked about their participation in activities and in their contribution of symbols, artifacts, words, and stories to the community group.

Findings and Discussion

The general findings from this research show that that Brazilians, who have moved to Southeastern Wisconsin and participate in social networking activities, find themselves in a virtual community where they both share and use shared information and provide support and take advantage of support provided by others. Further, they engage in virtual community of practice as they participate in mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. Through these dimensions participants shared interests and supported one another in solving problems common among them in their overlapping virtual communities in an asynchronous manner that highlights convenience.

Brazilians who have moved to Southeast Wisconsin are a group of individuals who utilize a series of social networking environments to collaborate, communicate, and interact with one another even though they might not be in the same physical place at the same exact time. This group specifically utilized a series of social networking sites (Yahoo! Group, Facebook, and Orkut) and messaging systems (Skype and MSN) to connect with loved ones from Brazil and other individuals from Brazil who had relocated to Southeast Wisconsin. They articulated connections with people they knew from face-to-face experiences, but also added individuals to their social networking accounts or messengers that their face-to-face friends knew or that they did not have any face-to-face connection with at the time of adding them. However, due to events (such as Brazilian festivals in the area, local sporting event parties, dinner parties) created by members of the Yahoo! Group members in attendance often have the chance to meet, blurring the line between face-to-face and virtual environments.

This group bases itself around a shared interest of sharing information about Brazil and Southeastern Wisconsin. This information includes, but is not limited to Brazilian political news, Brazilian current events, jobs available in Southeastern Wisconsin, affordable flights to Brazil, and information about the particular new community (such as the closest grocery store that sells a certain Brazilian product). They also come together to provide support for other members and even create social events for further interaction. Leaders in the group indicated a need to give back to the community that had helped them get accustomed to their new environment. Social networking sites were also cited as an informal learning opportunity where English could be practiced.

Social networking sites also presented themselves as a community of practice. One participant commented that using virtual communities to facilitate getting together in person is easier because you can try calling someone, but they could be busy. However, a message by email or Facebook is always there for people when they want to read them. One participant commented

on her preference of using the virtual community, instead of the phone, to facilitate getting together in person with another member due to its convenience and appropriateness. She explained that if you make a phone call, it might not be the appropriate time for the other person to engage in conversation. A message in Facebook, however, will always be posted there for other people to read at their convenience. This example demonstrates that members of this group not only support each other by sharing information, but also by respecting other members busy lives and choosing to pass on information in a convenient way for both informant and receiver.

It is important to note that this gesture does not seem to be arbitrary, but the result of an implicit negotiated norm, which helps with the development and reinforcement of the community of practice.   Thus, social networking sites support the interaction among Brazilians who have moved to Southeast Wisconsin as they share knowledge and support one another in an accessible, anytime, anyplace manner, which is a key feature of these kinds of environments. Wenger's (1998) three dimensions of mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire were also evident.

Mutual Engagement

Wenger's (1998) mutual engagement hinges on community members building relationships, negotiating meaning in a new environment, and supporting one another. Brazilian individuals who join the Yahoo! Group and friend each other in the Facebook and Orkut environments are generally those who seek to actively (through reading and posting) or passively (through reading) engage with fellow Brazilians to break the isolation and support one another, which often comes with finding oneself in a new place. In an interview, a participant indicated:

> Somebody must have put the word "Wisconsin" in the [Orkut] and found me and asked to be my friend and she said that her husband was getting a position, was offered a job in Madison, and that she lived in California and she had never lived in Wisconsin, and how do I like Wisconsin, and how do I feel about Wisconsin, and, if I knew anything about Madison. So I gave her a lot of information about Madison, Wisconsin, the biggest city, Milwaukee, and so it was exchanging a lot of that...and believe it or not, she called me. She gave me her phone number and I didn't call her for like a day, and I'm like, "Well, I'm just gonna give this lady my phone number." She called me and we talked yesterday for an hour and a half on the phone. But the whole connection, it started because of Orkut. So she found me there and she said she really appreciated me helping her in this transition in her life, and she's a little nervous about moving up here, and, especially because of the weather.

This brief interview quote shows that individuals who are looking to move to an area or are new to an area look to make connections with people in the new area. This way they can gather first person knowledge of their potential new situation and begin to feel comfortable with their move. Others built relationships by just posting messages and inviting others to meet them when they had just arrived in the area and did not know anybody. By posting a message in a community in Orkut, others responded and the relationship started to develop. Romance stories also formed through social networking sites. These relationships went from dating to marriage. One couple met each other through one of the virtual Brazilian communities and ended up dating and now they are married. It was evident that the social networking sites not only build relationships, but they also kept them alive with friends in Brazil as this participant described:

> I personally lost contact with friends in High School and when I joined Orkut I found them and reconnected. I had a very good friend and I lost contact with her and I lost her phone number, but she founded me in Orkut and now we "talk" in Orkut every week.

Therefore, social networking sites can be used to build relationships within one's new physical location and maintain relationships within one's prior locations.

Mutual engagement in a community of practice doesn't always have to be harmonious (Wenger, 1998). Members can have different perspectives on issues and different feelings about how the community should be run. During the content analysis of the Yahoo! Group site, it became apparent that some individuals had wanted more strict rules about the kinds of messages that could be posted as some individuals were posting messages with a religious tone. The moderator was contacted, but responded that it was up to the group to negotiate group norms and rules so it would be best to post a message to the group site. Members did take part, at times, to negotiate group norms and rules by making compromises among themselves. For example, the Yahoo! Group had the most messages posted during the Brazilian presidential elections in 2006. During this period, members posted messages supporting a candidate and other members responded in different ways by supporting them, commenting negatively, or simply ignoring them. However, members never shut conversation down and allowed the process to take place. Tensions can also emerge with family members that don't understand or agree with participation in the virtual community of practice. One participant indicated that she had problems with her husband when it came to her participation in the social network by saying, "And my husband got really jealous about it, and he said, 'What is all these messages from this guy?" Her participation also created tensions with her sister:

> My sister, we got in a, like, in a little fiasco this weekend 'cause she called me … she said, "I just came back from Brazil and I heard you're in [Orkut] and you are chatting with everybody out there… I never would make an account, and those places, and What does that do to you?" … And then she went on into a personal thing, how she had a huge fight, almost got divorced with her husband, because of Facebook, when she found out that he was in Facebook and didn't tell her.

While supporting one another in a community of practice can create tensions, it also creates an environment that allows for the building of relationships and resources as a joint enterprise that eases isolation that might be felt when moving to a new area.

Joint Enterprise

Wenger's (1998) joint enterprise focuses on negotiating knowledge, member accountability, and overall development of the community. An interesting aspect of this virtual community of practice is that while Brazilians in Southeast Wisconsin were a homogenous group in one regard (originally being from the same place and now living in Southeast Wisconsin) the group also represented mutual engagement through diversity and partiality (Wenger, 1998) in a joint enterprise as members had different experiences and perspectives to share with one another. Study participants ranged in age, political beliefs, religious beliefs, marital status, gender, educational attainment, and employment in a variety of fields ranging from nanny to accountant to professional athlete. Having different perspectives that come from these different experiences allowed community members to contribute different forms of information and negotiate knowledge through interaction within the group that added to the group's overall knowledge base. It was these different experiences, while having the commonality of Brazil that allowed members to share information and experiences, negotiate knowledge, and provide support that help one another. It also gave them an interesting perspective that enabled them to compare cultures. When moving to another country, individuals tend to compare their own country to the new environment either because people from home ask them about the new environment or people in the new environment ask about their native culture. In addition, individuals make comparisons as a way to understand the new environment through similarities and differences.

One participant explained how individuals in Brazil asked about America,

> People ask me "how is America?" and "What do you do there?"… and everything about it and I try to teach them the culture here and I try to teach them my culture, which I think it's very different…and we are always having this exchange which is great because we have friends from other countries here, like from Mexico, Colombia...

Comparing and contrasting environments is one way our participants created opportunities for interaction with both past and current community members. Another way our participants engaged with others via social networking was in the sharing of accumulated knowledge with other members.

Moreover, members remembered what it was like to be new to a community and felt an accountability to ease the isolation and help solve problems community members might have. For example, members of the Yahoo! Group often posted messages that shared knowledge that includes resources (such as job opportunities, inexpensive flights to Brazil), services (such as Brazilian Consulate in Chicago procedures), and social events (such as Brazilian Carnival).

One member also gave an account how she works to break the isolation that comes with moving to a new community by having social gatherings:

> They go to [the university] and they come to work, so every time they go to Brazil and somebody's coming here, they go, "Oh, when you get there look for [name of the person], because [name] knows everybody in town." Because I'm big into social events and social gatherings and I try to get everybody to meet everybody. I remember… I started doing this a year ago. For the last three years I used to do dinner parties at my house and invite random people that I haven't really known and try to get them to get to know each other.

By working to share information, negotiate the community's knowledge base, and build new relationships, members worked, with the overall development of the community in mind, to build a wealth of resources through a negotiated shared repertoire.

Shared Repertoire

Wenger's (1998) final component of a community of practice is that of shared repertoire. This aspect refers to actually building a set of communal resources through negotiated norms that include specific activities, symbols, artifacts, words, stories, and gestures that work to create and maintain relationships in the community. For example, food, music, and sports can be strong cultural symbols that identify a group. These symbols can have an impact on how people feel about their identity. Some people use Internet sites to watch soccer games. One participant explained how the sharing of symbols in the social networking environment affected his feelings of belonging:

> I get informed, if there are demonstrations in Brazil, for example. My friends send me videos of performances or soccer games in Orkut. Orkut promotes more cultural aspects since I am related to more people in Brazil, soccer, parades, *churrasco* [Brazilian barbecue] and the gaucho culture. I belong there.

Food can show a sense of cultural identity through picture sharing and finding ingredients locally and cooking Brazilian food. One participant stated pictures are sent to him of a *churrasco* during a gathering he missed because he was in the U.S. The posting in Orkut said, "we miss you." Regularly members of the Yahoo! Group share where common ingredients to cook Brazilian food can be found in the Milwaukee area. These are ways that allow participants to get connected to the Brazilian culture.

In communities of practice group norms have the potential to be consistently negotiated by the community that partakes in them. In the group studied there were no written rules created by community members for the overall community other than those imposed by the Web sites themselves (e.g., no harassment, no pornography, etc). Members participate in a way they feel comfortable (either actively reading and posting or passively just by reading) and in the language they prefer (Portuguese or English). However, as referenced earlier, when a community member approached the moderator of the Yahoo! Group to eliminate postings with a religious tone the moderator replied that she would not ban those posts. Instead she indicated that the individual should post to the group and get feedback from the other members. Therefore, when a member would like to make a group-wide change, the whole group must negotiate the change.

Based on the goal of making connections participants create meaningful statements about the world they find themselves in by sharing information and supporting one another from shared points of references as they came from the same place and now find themselves in the same place. In our study, we found that our participants used social networking to post information that created a sense of belonging to the community, which linked them to their culture. Members tended to share messages related to Brazil or Brazilian culture such as stories, Brazilian poems, politics (such as discussion on the current president and Brazilian elections, commentary after a lecture on Brazil, interviews related to Brazil), spirituality (such as prayers, church services), Samba dance lessons, Brazilian radio programs and news (such as Brazilian soccer team, elections in Brazil). Messages also included arranging a get-together to watch an important local baseball game, as well as links to American political materials and environmental messages. It is important to note that all message interchanges were not exclusively related to Brazilian culture, but that members of this group made it apparent that they wanted to keep their cultural identity as Brazilians and engage with their new community.

Conclusion

We live in a world without boundaries where we can connect with others at anytime from any place. Social networks are one form of intelligent networking technology that can be utilized to create and maintain connections with others that allow us to overcome a sense of isolation when physical space might be between us. Brazilians who have lived in, are currently in, or are planning to relocate to Southeast Wisconsin are an informal learning community that utilizes social networking features (group messages, wall posts, status messages, events, pictures) in different environments (Facebook, Orkut, Yahoo) to share knowledge and information, as well as to extend social support. Knowledge and support help to break isolation, solve problems, and feel "at home" in a new place at an increasingly engaging level—due to easy access via things like computers and smartphones—that we haven't seen before with individuals separated by space and time.

Participants utilized these sites to maintain connections to their old, familiar networks as research has indicated, but also used them to connect and build relationships with individuals in their new community through Wenger's (1998) dimensions of communities of practice. They mutually engaged with one another to build relationships and share resources in a joint enterprise that focused on supporting one another by way of a shared repertoire. In this study, social networking sites were seen as tools that allowed participants to keep connected with their communities virtually by sharing current life moments and supporting one another in a space where they had the chance to learn new things in a collaborative manner that not only enhanced communication skills, but also fostered personal growth and knowledge development.

While this study focused on Brazilians moving to Southeast Wisconsin there are implications for the broader public. At many times in life people move from place to place for things like education or employment and the same steps are applicable. First, individuals decide that they will be moving to a new location. Then, they search for resources about their new location. Next, they reach out to resources to get "insider" information about the area. Finally, they look for a community to get involved with to get used to their new location. These communities of practice

become informal learning opportunities where individuals can create and maintain social and cultural identity.

Social networking users no longer only communicate with people they know face-to-face or turn to these virtual group spaces due to marginalization. Instead they seek others with the same shared interests where they can participate in a reciprocal supportiveness. In the end individuals often use a series of social networks (such as Facebook, Orkut, and Yahoo! Groups) and communicative technologies (such as computers, smartphones, and Skype) to collapse time and space by giving and receiving social support. These networks are utilized to maintain relationships from the past, as well as to build relationships for various needs (for example, moving to a new location, needing social support from other cancer survivors, and meeting other first time moms) in the present and future. For these reasons social networks are not face-to-face or virtual-only spaces—instead they often work to blur the line between being offline and being online.

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