

Chapter 11

‘I Am One of Them’: Exploring the Communication of Identity of Latvian Migrants on Social Networking Sites



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11.1 Introduction

Social media, especially social networking sites, are among today’s most popular personal media (Lüders 2008), and they also are widely employed by migrants (Dekker and Engbersen 2014; Bucholtz 2018). Such sites have a variety of personalised connection features. This makes it easier for individuals to access both international and local information, and enables the development of interpersonal relationship networks (Zhang and Leung 2014).

Communication flows supported by personal media, including social networking sites, play a role in maintaining and strengthening transnational ties among migrants and their friends and acquaintances, and with relatives who live in different countries. These media are incorporated into the social activities of contemporary migrants, including those of the Latvian diaspora. In addition to keeping in touch with familiar people, they use them to locate other compatriots living in their host societies. Moreover, features available on social networking sites to access information and maintain diverse connections also have implications for the manifestation and negotiation of migrants’ identities (see also Sūna, Chap. 9, this volume).

‘Transnationalism and identity are concepts that inherently call for juxtaposition,’ states Vertovec (2001, p. 573). According to him, transnational networks are held together by shared identity, a homeland and an association with that homeland’s language and culture. However, contemporary migrants in their communities may develop and negotiate identities that embrace more than one physical space

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(Vertovec 2001). Thus, while many migrants retain a strong affiliation with their place of origin, their culture, ethnicity and identity processes are constantly shaped by their experiences and social environments in host societies, which are different from those in their homeland (Koroļeva, Chap. 4, this volume).

Vertovec (2009) also points to the prominence of communication technologies in the emergence of the contemporary forms of transnationalism. Phone calls, mass media accessible through satellite TV and other channels, exchanges of emails and the use of internet communication platforms allow migrants to maintain and expand their networks and enable speedy and intense communication across borders (Vertovec 2009, pp. 14–15). This is also the case for social networking sites, which are the focus of this study. However, since most people do not limit their communication and information-gathering activities to one type of media or one communication platform alone, it is not practical to isolate social networking sites from the general mix of media employed by migrants. Thus, while stressing the prominence of social networking sites as spaces where migrant connections are developed and maintained, we analyse them in the context of other means of interpersonal communication, such as Skype, chat applications or phone calls.

Based on interviews with Latvian migrants from various countries who are active users of social networking sites as well as data from *The Emigrant Communities of Latvia* survey, this chapter examines the ethnic and transnational identities of migrants on social networking sites and other personal media. We pose the following research questions:

1. Which media do Latvian migrants use and which of these are the most popular?
2. How are media, including social networking sites, being employed to maintain migrant transnational networks and express the migrants' 'belonging' to the Latvian community?
3. How are Latvian migrant identities being manifested, negotiated and contested in online discussion spaces?

We argue that the facilitated access to Latvia-related information, formation of migrant online exchange groups and possibilities to maintain transnational social networks all contribute to 'doing identity' (Buckingham 2008). By the term 'social network' we understand a social structure that connects individuals who have relationships based on some level of acquaintance (Pescosolido 2007; Wellman 1988). In colloquial speech, social networking sites also are often referred to as 'social networks.' That, however, is a misnomer – this concept refers to ties maintained by individuals, whereas social networking sites provide only an online-based infrastructure for such networking. Many of the interviewees in this research project use the term 'social networks'; by which they mean social networking sites. This use of the concept is preserved in citations, but in the rest of the paper we maintain a strict distinction between 'social networks' as a general phenomenon intrinsic to all people regardless of whether they use the Internet or not, and 'social networking sites,' which are a type of online communication platform.

We start with a review of the role of online interpersonal connections in the development and maintenance of transnational migrant social networks. In the empirical part, we describe the place that social networking site use occupies in the media repertoire of Latvian migrants. Then we analyse how various types of media are employed to maintain their connections with friends, relatives and fellow compatriots and how exposure to Latvia-related media content helps them to maintain their ties with Latvia in general. Next, we go into the specifics of social networking site use with regard to the manifestation and negotiation of migrant identities. Finally, we illustrate the use of social networking sites in the development of hybrid identities (Brinkerhoff 2009; Hall 1992). On such communication platforms, migrants can more comfortably access diverse identity elements from more than one culture. Subsequently, a migrant can feel integrated and identify primarily with the host society, yet he or she may reject some of its norms or beliefs and choose Latvian alternatives instead.

11.2 Transnational Communication and Migrant Identities

Migration is a networked phenomenon. Units of migration are networks, rather than individuals or households (Tilly 1991). According to this interpretation, the first (pioneering) migrants are followed by others who have accessed the knowledge the pioneers have gathered through their own research and experience (Samers 2010, p. 97).

Migration networks are sustained through mediated connections. Before they move, contemporary migrants will have already employed various media widely, which allows them to gather information about resettlement and other opportunities in the prospective host countries. After their arrival in another country, the use of media, especially personal media, can facilitate the development of new acquaintances and help gather information about their new place of residence, as well as enable them to maintain contact with friends, relatives and other people back home (Horst 2006; Ros 2010). Ultimately, Hepp et al. (2012, p. 172) stress that contemporary migrant cultures should be understood as 'media cultures,' because the former can only be understood in relation to practices of media use: 'In this sense, migrants are nowadays mediatised; their articulation of a migrant identity is deeply interwoven with, and moulded by, different forms of media.'

Online interactive media are of particular importance in the realm of migrant communication. These provide important social spaces where migrants can access and develop transnational connections and express their identities (McGinnis et al. 2007). Many migrants are willing to maintain contact with both their country of origin and their compatriots living in the host country, and it is common to engage in various online and offline activities that are based on ethnic or national belonging. Schrooten (2012) stresses that 'online togetherness' in online social spaces is a

relevant part of migrants' offline lives, and these social spaces should not be artificially distinguished from each other.

Migrant identities in this paper are understood in the context of 'imagined communities'. Anderson (1991) used this concept to demonstrate that a nation is socially constructed or 'imagined' by people who perceive themselves to be part of this particular social group. 'The members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion,' writes Anderson (1991, p. 6). In his account, media are among the elements that create a shared information environment, thus promoting the development of a sense of belonging among the people who experience it. Through their use of various forms of media, migrants too manifest and negotiate their conception of the Latvian community and attribute particular characteristics to it, thus effectively 'imagining' it. However, transnational settings add a new dimension to this process. As argued by Robins (2003), contemporary migrants can inhabit and identify with more than one informational and national space simultaneously.

The processes of maintaining, negotiating and asserting migrants' identities are thus greatly influenced by the 'dual lives' many of them lead (Portes 1997). Migrants are willing to sustain their identification with their country of origin, but living in a host country also requires integration, which means at least partly accepting the norms and customs that dominate there. This dual affiliation with the home and host country can lead to loyalty dilemmas and complications in a migrant's relationship with his or her host country (Alonso and Oiarzabal 2010).

In this regard, a useful concept is that of 'hybrid identity', introduced by Hall (1992). Brinkerhoff (2009, 2010) employs this concept to describe how the members of diaspora combine elements of identity from their host and home countries. Brinkerhoff (2009) stresses that migrant online communities – that is, internet-based associations that provide the foundation of so-called 'digital diasporas' – are especially expedient in reconciling potentially conflicting social norms, customs or other defining elements that a person inherits from societies he or she belongs to, or has belonged to. In online environments, individuals can express themselves more freely and flexibly and conflate or experiment with different facets of their identities (Schmidt 2013). By using the opportunities that online social spaces provide, migrants can make their integration in the host society easier, if other aspects, such as offline-based connections, also encourage this process. Access to online communication spaces where migrants can create and maintain identities around their own cultural heritage thus helps to reduce the feeling of marginalisation in the diaspora and strengthens mechanisms of mutual support (Brinkerhoff 2009).

The identities of migrants are not fixed. They are regularly created and reproduced (Brinkerhoff 2009, p. 33). Brinkerhoff (2009) claims that conditions which help migrants maintain their identities and also deal with everyday situations in the host country reduce social stress and help them incorporate new ideas, values and interpretations in their frames of reference. The adaptation of communication tools and the use of media plays a crucial role in the development and maintenance of shared identities among members of diasporas (Georgiou 2006).

People have a wide range of personal media at their disposal, including cell phones, email, chat applications, Skype and other instant messaging and voice-over-IP services. However, social networking sites, which are widely employed by migrants, have a particularly prominent position in this mix. The use of these communication platforms and the diversity of features available allows migrants to fulfil numerous functions in their social lives, including one-to-one exchanges, communication within a group, dissemination of mass media information and the ability to locate and follow users that may or may not be familiar offline.

These uses of social networking sites have particular implications for transnational migration and the development of migrant communities in host countries. Dekker and Engbersen (2014) write that the use of social networking sites has a profound influence on migrant networks: migrants are able to maintain links with their friends and family members living in other countries, and these media platforms enable access to information and other resources needed to establish one's life in a host country. Such connectivity opportunities support migrant networks and make migration easier (Dekker and Engbersen 2014). Furthermore, Komito (2011) argues that social networking sites allow interpersonal connections to be maintained through the mere following of content published by others. Such monitoring of the activities of fellow migrants promotes an awareness of the presence of others and thus strengthens the sense of belonging to an ethnic community. These processes may facilitate further transnational migration. Unlike Brinkerhoff (2009, 2010), (Komito 2011) observed a detrimental effect that such a connectivity has on migrants' integration in the host society.

Online diaspora groups are one of the spheres of interaction that underpin the articulation, formation and maintenance of migrant identities. Analysis of the social interactions of migrants that take place there can provide insight into these phenomena. In this article, we are interested in the manifestation, contestation and negotiation of such identities as a mediated process within migrant networks.

11.3 Methodology

The main source of the empirical data is 20 semi-structured interviews with Latvian emigrants, which took place during the summer of 2014. Most of the interviewees were recruited on social networking sites used by these people; in many cases from Latvian migration-related groups or pages on Facebook and Draugiem.lv. Since Latvia has a sizeable Russian-speaking minority that does not use the Latvian-dominated Draugiem.lv, social networking sites Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki, which are preferred by Russian speakers, were also consulted. However, the responsiveness of Russian-speaking Latvians was low, thus the majority of the interviewees recruited are ethnic Latvians.

During the last 150 years or so, due to wars, economic struggles and political oppression, Latvia has experienced a number of waves of emigration (Apine 2003; Hazans, Chap. 3, this volume). Emigration during the twentieth century, especially

the flow of Latvian refugees after World War II, has led to the establishment of Latvian diaspora communities, predominantly in the United States, Brazil, Sweden and Australia. However, to conduct interviews for this research, we specifically recruited Latvians who represent the latest wave of emigration. That started after 2004, when Latvia joined the European Union (EU), and intensified during the global economic crisis of 2007–2008. While other new EU member states have also had waves of emigration, a particularly large proportion of the Latvian population has left (Hazans, Chap. 3, this volume; Hazans 2016). More than 9% of the Latvian population has emigrated since the beginning of the twenty-first century, (Hazans 2013).

Being first generation migrants, the participants in this study have direct experience of moving to another country, setting up their lives there and re-establishing interpersonal ties. This also means that the migrant group studied in this chapter is narrower than those described in other chapters of this volume. That was a deliberate choice. The social group studied here emigrated after the emergence of the widespread use of contemporary social media platforms, and they are the first generation of Latvian migrants able to employ social networking sites as part of their migration experience. Furthermore, young people in Latvia, as elsewhere in Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, are more likely to migrate (Atoyan et al. 2016, p. 12; Hazans, Chap. 3, this volume), and at the same time, are more active users of social media (Aptauja.lv 2014).

All the interviewees are frequent users of Draugiem.lv or Facebook, and many of them actively take part in exchanges in migrant online groups on these sites. The recruitment approach, purposely selecting users who are the most active in these groups though either publishing posts or writing comments, allowed us to concentrate on communication practices and considerations in a group that is characterised by relatively uniform patterns of social networking site use.

Most of the interviews lasted between 1 and 1.5 h and were conducted on Skype while the participants were at home. Two of the participants were interviewed in face-to-face settings during their visit to Latvia. The sample consists of 15 female and 5 male participants, aged 22–57. Interviewees live in Norway, Germany (for discussion of Latvians in Germany, see Sūna, 9, this volume), Denmark, Great Britain (for discussion of Latvians in Great Britain, see Kaprāns, Chap. 6, this volume), Ireland, Austria, Australia and the Netherlands. The shortest period spent abroad was half a year and the longest was 11 years. However, most participants had emigrated from Latvia 4–5 years ago. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the transcripts were open-coded to identify the dominant themes, interpretations and experiences with regard to the operation of migrant networks and identity communication. All names of interviewees were substituted with pseudonyms.

We also used data from *The Emigrant Communities of Latvia* survey, which was conducted in 2014 involving 14,068 Latvians living in 118 countries. For details on survey methodology see Mieriņa, Chap. 2, in this volume. Data were weighted by the respondents' host country, age, gender, language and education level so that the results better represent the general population of the Latvian diaspora. The number of responses (n = 4966) from the survey's quantitative data analysed in this chapter

is lower than that in other chapter of this volume ($n = 14,068$). That is because respondents were given the chance to opt out of answering questions about a number of topics, including social media use, which many did.

An additional source of data was observations of social interaction in the most popular Latvian migrant groups on Facebook and Draugiem.lv. These observations took place at the same time as the interviewee recruitment process and provided a more detailed perspective on the communication dynamics in these groups and the most common themes of discussion among participants. Researchers joined the popular groups for Latvian migrants and, for about a month, followed the discussions among the participants and in an unstructured manner registered the themes of conversation and interactional practices, including tone and contents of replies.

The thematic pages and groups are important group communication features on social networking sites – they enable bulletin board-like features. In them, users associate based on a certain topic or theme, for example hobbies, lifestyles or interests. Participants in groups can post their entries or questions about an issue they find important and other users can answer them. In the context of this research project, of particular relevance are groups established and used by Latvian migrants, usually sharing a host country, city or region. These groups thus unite Latvians living in a certain place outside Latvia.

The underlying principles of pages are quite similar, with the exception that the only people who can post on these pages are those approved by an administrator. While groups can be public or closed, pages are always public. To join a closed group, a user also has to be accepted by an administrator. In general, groups usually encourage participants to publish their own posts, but the pages in most cases are established to attract followers and spread information about a certain topic (Facebook 2015).

The social interaction that takes place in these groups – and to a lesser extent on pages – provides important insight into the manifestations of migrant transnational and ethnic identities. There Latvian migrants can exchange information they find relevant, discuss topical issues and share and assert their views. Additionally they can identify compatriots who live nearby and possibly establish acquaintances, either online or offline.

A large number of Latvia-related groups and pages exist on Facebook and Draugiem.lv. More than 430 individual groups or pages have each attracted at least 100 participants or followers. Latvian migrant groups on Draugiem.lv with the largest membership are Anglija • England (32,837 members, as of October 2016), Latvieši Anglijā un Īrijā (*Latvians in England and Ireland*; 11,439 members), and Latvieši Norvēģijā (*Latvians in Norway*; 10,700 members). Among the most popular Facebook groups for Latvians who live abroad are Latvians Worldwide – Latvieši pasaulē: The Embassy of Latvians on Facebook (10,409 members), Latvieši UK (*Latvians in the UK*; 9908 members) and Latvieši Anglijā (*Latvians in England*; 6015 members). Overall, the most popular countries to which such groups are dedicated include Great Britain, Ireland, Norway and Denmark. This corresponds roughly to the list of countries with the largest Latvian communities, formed during waves of migration since the turn of the twenty-first century (Hazans 2011; Hazans and Philips 2010).

11.4 The Media Diet of Latvian Migrants

To answer the first research question, ‘Which media do Latvian migrants use and which of these are the most popular?’ it is important to review information and interaction channels and personal media used by Latvian migrants regularly. In this section we provide an overview of the media diet of Latvian migrants, with the aim of identifying the most popular ones and establishing the specifics of these media with respect to migrant communication.

It is to be expected that online media use is high among Latvian migrants as 77% of the Latvian population use the Internet at least once a week (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia 2016). Of them, 87% use Draugiem.lv (about 49% do so on a daily basis) a site predominantly frequented by Latvian-speakers, but with functions and principles similar to those of Facebook. 77% use Facebook (48% on a daily basis) (Aptauja.lv 2014). Since the Latvian population is about two million, this means that in 2014, around 702,000 people were regular Draugiem.lv users and 688,000 used Facebook. According to data provided by Draugiem.lv, 715,000 unique users logged into the site during June 2014. Of them 85% were from Latvia, 6% from Britain and 1% were from each of these countries: Ireland, Germany, Sweden, Norway and the United States (Buholcs 2014). The geography of Draugiem.lv use encompasses many other countries, but the number of visitors from them is low.

Respondents to the survey were asked to report whether they used any of the listed social networking sites ‘regularly,’ ‘seldom,’ or ‘never.’ The results confirm that social networking sites make up a significant part of the daily communication activities of migrants, and most use at least one such platform (see Table 11.1) The most popular is Facebook, which is used by 82% of respondents, and 68% say that

Table 11.1 The use of social networking sites among the Latvian diaspora (n = 4966)

Online service	Total users, %	Ethnic Latvians, %	Ethnic Russians, %	Other nationalities, %
Use at all				
Draugiem.lv	60	80	28	47
Facebook	82	83	83	83
Skype	91	89	93	91
Twitter	23	26	19	20
Vkontakte	21	11	40	25
Online mailing lists/blogs/ online groups	26	34	14	19
Use on a regular basis				
Draugiem.lv	37	55	6	19
Facebook	68	69	69	68
Skype	68	63	76	74
Twitter	8	10	5	4
Vkontakte	12	6	23	12

Source: The author, based on *The Emigrant Communities of Latvia* survey

they use it regularly. The second most popular site is Draugiem.lv, which is used by 60% of the respondents and 37% of Latvian migrants use it regularly. However, since Draugiem.lv is predominantly a communication platform for the Latvian-speaking population, we broke down these results with respect to ethnic groups.

Among ethnic Latvians, both Facebook and Draugiem.lv are popular, with 83% using Facebook and 80% Draugiem.lv. 69% say that they use Facebook regularly while 55% regularly go to Draugiem.lv. Among ethnic Russians from Latvia who participated in the survey, Facebook is also the top choice: 83% say they use it and 69% are regular users. At the same time a considerable number of them – 40% – also use Vkontakte, and 23% use it regularly. Similar to Facebook, this general use social networking site is widely used in Russia and among Russian-speaking people in other countries, but it is not preferred by Latvian-speaking members of the Latvian diaspora.

The data suggest a considerable overlap in the use of the most popular social networking sites, which means that many migrants use more than one such site. 69% of the regular Draugiem.lv users and 72% of the regular Vkontakte users say that they also use Facebook. Moreover, 38% of the regular Facebook users also are on Draugiem.lv. 48% of the Latvian migrants say that they regularly use only one social networking site, 34% regularly use at least two, but 18% do not use any at all.

According to the survey data in this study, 26% of respondents take part in online groups, subscribe to mailing lists or maintain blogs. These activities are considerably more popular among ethnic Latvians than Russians: 34% and 14% respectively. Thus, participation on social networking site groups and pages may be related to migrant ethnicity. This supposition is consistent with our observations in social networking site groups used by Latvian migrants, which demonstrated that ethnic Latvians are much more active than ethnic Russians in joining diaspora groups based on a shared affiliation with Latvia.

Table 11.1 shows, that Skype is also a popular means of communication among Latvian migrants. It is used by 91% of the respondents, and 68% use it regularly. During interviews, participants mentioned also making phone calls and, less frequently, using mobile phone apps such as WhatsApp and Viber. Clearly, social networking sites have a special significance in identity communication and negotiation among Latvian migrants, fulfilling functions that other personal media do not provide in this regard.

The chat, voice-over-IP and video call service Skype differs fundamentally in its functionality from social networking sites, especially as in most cases Skype is used to maintain contacts between individuals that already exists. Many people use Skype to talk with people they know personally. The use of social networking sites, on the other hand, is considerably more diverse. In addition to following the activities of familiar people and friends, users can employ these sites to find relevant information sources, join thematic groups, identify people with shared interests and establish online or offline contacts with them. Importantly, they can engage in activities that facilitate interaction with people outside the user's immediate social network.

The diversity of one's media diet is explained by the media multiplexity principle, according to which those individuals who are connected with strong ties not only communicate with each other more intensively but also use more varied media (Haythornthwaite 2005). According to the responses of interviewees, the choice of a particular medium in each situation is determined by its ease of use and features. In this regard, migrants and other people who maintain long distance relationships appreciate that Skype allows conversation partners to see each other, provided their computers are equipped with a camera. An additional factor of the choice of media is the ability for all interaction partners to access the particular medium and the knowledge of all involved as to how to use it. For example, a number of migrants reach their older relatives by phone calls or even letters through the regular mail, because many among the older generation do not use computers. Another determining aspect is cost. If, for example, phone calls are expensive, then people will look for cheaper alternatives.

Social networking sites have a prominent role among Latvian migrants themselves. Their widespread adoption is promoted by the availability of internet and communication devices, as well as the distinctive features of such sites, which facilitate establishing contacts among people who did not know each other before but share ethnic or national belonging and an interest in fellow compatriots. Social networking sites thus provide spaces for interactions among migrants that fulfil the functions of public forums. There they can form or extend their local diaspora communities, share information and express and negotiate their identities. One-to-one communication tools such as Skype, email and telephone are less suitable for such modes of communication.

11.5 Media Content as a Tie to Latvia for Migrants

One type of communication media cannot be discussed in isolation from another, as all types of media, including mass media, make up the information and communication diet for migrants. Thus, in this section, we explore how the use of different media, including mass media and social networking sites, contributes to the preservation of links with Latvia in general and friends, relatives and acquaintances in particular. This allows us to answer the second research question, 'How are media, including social networking sites, being employed to maintain migrant transnational networks and express the migrants' sense of belonging to the Latvian community?'

The interest of respondents in mass media content is uneven. According to *The Emigrant Communities of Latvia* survey, 63% of respondents regularly follow events in their host country, but the interview results show that interest in local social-political processes through mass media is quite limited. In these cases, they access information from local media sporadically or by accident. Lilita, who is 28 and lives in Great Britain, is one such person:

I do not follow [the British] media much, only occasionally. [...] I may read a newspaper distributed in an Underground station. If it is free, I grab it. I also sometimes watch the news on TV, about once a week or so. But many things are posted by my friends on Facebook.

Regarding the Latvian mass media, the situation is different. Interview results suggest that following Latvian media – usually by watching television channels online and visiting news sites – makes up most of the participants' overall mass media consumption. Most of the interviewees have a considerable interest in what is happening in Latvia. This interest in many cases is closely related to the lives of their friends and relatives, although they also want to maintain links with Latvia in general. Information that Latvian migrants get through transnational information flows may also influence their possible decision to return to Latvia, as seen in the experiences of Augusts, who is 31 and lives in Norway, and Knuts, who is 34 and resides in Germany.

Augusts: Well, I need this connection. I have to know what is going on there [in Latvia], because my parents, my relatives live there. I want to know about the environment they live in.

Knuts: When I speak with Latvians in Latvia, often it goes like this: I ask how they are doing and so on and what if I returned to Latvia, but very often they're like: 'You'd better stay in Germany, because there are no prospects in Latvia'... Those who live in Latvia seem to think that we are so much better off here than they are in Latvia.

This interest in current events in Latvia is not only instrumental, which means a process of acquiring information that can be useful in future, but it is also one of the ways that migrants maintain an emotional connection with their native country. While the interviewees stress that they read Latvian news and follow links shared by their compatriots because they want to remain knowledgeable about the events in their country of origin, their motivation also seems to be a need to assert their affiliation with Latvia or the Latvian community, and simultaneously to satisfy their human interest about them. Migrants read the news not just for the factual reports but because of their own subjective associations or according to self-selected preferences, so they can receive particular kinds of news about Latvia.

This process is explained by Silva, who is 27 and lives in Denmark and Laimdota, who is 29 and resides in Australia.

Silva: I read [the news] if something good has happened. [...] I try not to get into politics. I follow the headlines, but mostly that's about it. [...] No news. I don't like the news.

Laimdota: I am interested in seeing some positive developments and not that the IRS has come up with a gibberish plan about how they're gonna rake in more tax cash. Such news kills my desire to return to Latvia someday. As I told my Mum, after reading that piece about taxes on [the online news site] Delfi, my potential plans to return were pushed back for another six months.

Consumption of mass media has previously been associated with higher levels of integration, and Reis (2010) has found links between the migrants' own ethnic media consumption and more successful cultural adaptation. However, while researchers have noted the diversity of Latvian diaspora media (Lulle et al. 2015),

these do not seem to be very popular. None of the interviewees said they followed ethnic media issued in their host countries.

Sometimes not following the media, or doing so sporadically, stems from the interviewees' overall lack of interest in socio-political matters. In these cases, some of the functions fulfilled by the media are substituted with regular exchanges with friends and relatives in Latvia and compatriots in the host country, and discussions in social networking site groups. The content and themes in these groups focus mostly on practical issues and, to a lesser extent, organising social events. Arguably, this demonstrates the needs and interests of a certain section of the Latvian migrants. This will be discussed in detail in the next section.

Interviewees note that social networking sites provide a convenient, casual, non-binding and resource-effective way of keeping in touch with people who are familiar but with whom they do not actively communicate. In this case the interpersonal contacts are maintained by following and reacting to the information that is shared by others online. In addition to such communicative activities as exchanging letters or having phone conversations that require considerable determination and motivation, people can maintain connection with members of their social network by commenting on other peoples' entries, 'liking' and sharing their posts. At the same time, social networking sites also provide opportunities for richer communication with close friends and relatives. These practices are illustrated by Sandra, who is 22 and lives in Norway, and Lilita, who is 28 and resides in Great Britain.

Sandra: I try at least once or twice, or three times per month to write to them, 'Hi, what's up?' so that my link with those who remain in Latvia doesn't disappear. I've got some good friends there. [...] Usually I send them a message on Facebook and Draugiem.lv, or, if they have WhatsApp, then I use that.

Lilita: I keep in touch with my acquaintances through Facebook. These people can be divided in two groups: those to whom I write direct messages and those whose posts I 'like' and leave comments on.

This diversity of the available kinds of online interaction, characterised by the lower transaction costs of social media (Ellison et al. 2011), allows users to maintain larger networks of interpersonal connections. The ease of connecting and following various sources of information increases the willingness of migrants to establish or activate ties with others, including their compatriots, and to exchange information and other kinds of support.

Moreover, the presence of Latvia-related content on the timelines of migrants' social networking site accounts can itself serve as a form of connection to users who have shared the information about Latvia in general. The next section describes the experiences of Latvian migrants in maintaining their connections to Latvia through online ties.

11.6 Transnational Communication on Social Networking Sites: Us and Them

Having examined how both mass media and social networking sites allow migrants to maintain their ties with fellow Latvians and remain in the Latvian information sphere, we turn specifically to analysis of the use of social networking sites. This is the users' interaction with a wider, personally unacquainted public that takes place through interaction in groups and on pages within social networking sites. This process fundamentally influences the dynamic of the ties within the Latvian diaspora and sets social networking sites apart from the other types of personal media that migrants use.

It is hard to isolate the role of social networking sites in the complex flow of transnational information, which is why we are discussing the use of these communication platforms in the context of the general media diet of Latvian migrants. However, they are clearly significant channels through which considerable interaction between diaspora members takes place, since these sites are so closely incorporated into the everyday practices of gathering information and communicating used by most of the participants.

Besides their other activities, users can make use of the interactive features of these sites and share links to publications from other media. In this way, they can influence the kind of information being circulated among compatriots who live in different countries. Laimdota, who is 29 and lives in Australia, characterised the significance of social networking sites in this way:

These social networks filter what is important from what is not. They show what the majority is interested in, what is important for the majority, and what [is important] for those who have moved here. In this way, they [the social media] approve or reject an opinion that a migrant may have developed about what is going on Latvia.

The ability to maintain regular, even constant contact through social networking sites and the mutual interaction possible through its audio-visual features (that is, the ability to see and hear each other and to follow the changes in people and places through time), can serve to strengthen emotional ties and reduce subjective perceptions of geographical distance. Komito (2011) has claimed that passive monitoring of posts published by other compatriots on social media reminds users of the presence of others regardless of the physical distance of their separation and promotes the sense of belonging to their ethnic community, and this might discourage them from developing contacts with the host society. However, such a perception of the closeness of compatriots is not necessarily associated with the unwillingness or inability to integrate. For example, Laimdota is married to an Australian-born citizen; her husband has Latvian ancestry but does not speak Latvian. She explains how the stream of mostly online-based information from Latvia keeps her open to the idea of a return to Latvia:

Those in Latvia are telling others what is happening there, how the social life is developing. [Through these updates] I see that many sorts of cafes have appeared in Rīga. There are now many new things to do: it wasn't like that when we left Latvia. Sometimes I'm sitting here at home watching it ... and I want to go back.

This form of maintaining connections does have limitations, though. Despite the fact that migrants have a wide range of media and diverse information sources at their disposal, this plurality itself does not completely compensate for their lack of direct, first-hand experience of events in Latvia. The interviewees acknowledge that since they left, it has become harder for them to understand the political and social issues in Latvia in detail. Ance, who is 28 and lives in Ireland and Laimdota, from Australia, describe this as follows:

Ance: When I had just moved to Ireland, I was very motivated to know what was going on in Latvia. But now I find it very difficult to be interested in the politics of one country, when you live in a completely different one. And also you don't have enough time for that, and so the interest gradually fades.

Laimdota: I do not really follow [Latvian] politics any longer. I cannot follow it anymore, because I don't understand what is going on there. (*laughs.*) But I am still interested in what people are doing there. For instance I like Dienas Bizness [the Latvian daily business newspaper and website], which shows me that something is indeed happening; that people are doing business and are being recognised internationally.

This effect of alienation through distance is even more pronounced if emigrants have faced hostile views about emigration and life in a different country. A number of interviewees, including Silva, 27, who lives in Denmark, and Daina, who is 44 and resides in Great Britain, shared such experiences:

Silva: When I go to visit Latvia, they point fingers at me, because everyone has read [in the media] just how terrible we [the emigrants] are. [...] It's almost like I should feel guilty just for living in another country. Then I must explain to them that it's not me, not me. I only met my husband [while I was abroad].

Daina: Sometimes it seems to me that perhaps at one point an awful split has happened. We are on one side, and the people who stayed in Latvia are on the other. And then there is communication... Say, an article about emigration gets published in Latvia, and then you read the online comments and see how negative they are. It seems that it's never going to be good enough for both sides, and we don't know how to communicate: those of us who live here, and those who live there. Many people who live in Latvia and haven't worked abroad are discussing things they don't understand at all.

Another dimension of the articulation of national identity is demonstrated by these clashes of ideological and moral positions and differing interpretations of emigration and, by extension, views of what a 'decent Latvian' should and should not do. A considerable number of people who live in Latvia display critical attitudes towards emigrants. In the Latvian public discourse references exist to emigrants as people who are self-interested or misguided – even 'traitors' (Lulle 2007).

Latvian migrants, naturally, do not see themselves as traitors, and stress that those who criticise them are ignorant of the different motivations and choices they have made. Most of the interviewees nevertheless perceive themselves as Latvians – at least partly – and this rift illustrates a key characteristic of the distinct national

identity of Latvian migrants. Rather than being tied to Latvian geographical territory, they emphasize the maintenance of informational and emotional links to their home country, its people and culture.

The experiences of migrants also reminds us that the availability of information channels and the diversity of information does not in itself lead to increased concord. Although online interpersonal media are indeed important in keeping in touch, the principle of homophily must be taken into account when explaining the formation and functioning of social networks. According to this principle, individuals establish and maintain ties based on similarities, and thus social networks tend to be homogenous. In other words, people attract those who have similar demography, background, behaviour or other characteristics (McPherson et al. 2001). However, the availability and effectiveness of the media employed is only one of a variety of elements that influence communication, conflict and mutual understanding among people. If people are able to contact each other and talk, it does not necessarily mean that they will – or that they will be willing to reconsider their own views in the light of new information.

11.7 Migrant Identities on Social Networking Sites

The third research question deals with the manifestation and contestation of the identities of Latvian migrants in online discussion spaces, which they have established on social networking sites.

As demonstrated earlier, most of the interviewees keep in close contact with Latvia and with people living there. Latvia – mostly in the sense of the land and culture, rather than the state (Kēšāne 2011) – constitutes a crucial part of their identity, and while living abroad, their interest in other Latvians and their willingness to establish or maintain ties with them is promoted by shared ethnic or national belonging. Consequently, their use of social networking sites is related to their expression of ethnic and transnational identities.

An important factor to consider is the heterogeneity of the membership of the online group. The interviewees in our sample illustrated this diversity. They differed in their professions and jobs, their education and the ties they have developed with people from the host society. Some of them are surrounded by other Latvians or people from other Central and Eastern European countries on a daily basis, while others work in international companies or alongside 'locals' – or have established a family with a partner from the host country. These backgrounds contribute to the diversity of the identity behaviours and opinions that can be observed in these online groups. Correspondingly, the self-identification and the level of association with other Latvians differ greatly among participants. Some of the interviewees imply that the reason they follow the activities of other compatriots on social networking sites, including in groups and on pages, is to follow the events and topicalities in the local Latvian community so that they can be 'informed' and 'connected.' Others say explicitly that they do so to assert their national belonging.

Thus, for some, these online activities satisfy general interest. Participants enjoy following groups, pages and profiles because they see that activity as a way to interact with or – passively and resource-efficiently – to follow other people, regardless of whether they are familiar or not. Information published there allows them to look into other peoples' lives and socialise based on that. Sarma, who is 57 and lives in Ireland and Nauris, 44, who resides in Norway, described their motivations in using this information.

Sarma: I just read how everybody is doing in the world. [...] What do I get from that? Information, I guess. Information and entertainment.

Nauris: On Draugiem.lv, I have only two kinds of activities; either direct communication through private messages or goofing around in the site's groups. [...] When a topic appears about which people have things to say, like from the heart and soul, I jump right into it. Or sometimes into nonsense.

Ance, who is 28 and lives in Ireland, explained that she does not use the online group to search for particular information or solve various issues. Her purpose in registering in the group for Latvians in Ireland was to 'declare that I am a Latvian in Ireland – that I actually am somewhere.' Knuts, who is 34 and lives in Germany, stressed that it is important for him to be informed about local cultural events and also visits by Latvian officials to his host country, even though they usually take place too far from his home and he is unable to participate or witness them in person.

Somewhat similarly, Daina, who is 44 and lives in Great Britain, said: 'I am an educated person after all. I have to know what is happening in Latvia and in the world, and also what the topicalities here are: for example, the changes in the local legislation that affects us.' She highlighted both instrumental and emotional aspects, while adding that she follows information in Latvian migrant online groups and elsewhere and considers it important. The reason, she said, was that 'I am one of them.'

The articulation of national affiliation and expressions of attitudes are not tied exclusively to online communication, of course. However, they are expressed in this way as part of the social interaction of Latvian migrants on social networking sites.

Such manifestations of identity and the meanings attached to them can best be observed when participants in a group defend a certain moral position or decision on the grounds of national or ethnic self-image. People like Sarma, who is 57 and lives in Ireland, and Silva, 27, who lives in Denmark, turned against the morally or legally questionable actions of their compatriots because they believe that such actions have a negative impact on how Latvians as a community are perceived in the host country.

Sarma: We had a terrible fight in the group recently... Some of the participants believe that the local social security system should be abused as much as possible. But others, myself included, think that it is shameful if Latvians do things like that, and also [shameful] that people are not looking for a job for more than five years, ten years even. They just cash in benefits from the state and have no intention of changing anything about it.

Silva: Sometimes quarrels start about whether or not taxes should be paid, or whether to live from unofficial income or not. From these fights you can see who has just moved here and who doesn't have the Danish mentality yet [...]. On the other side of the line, there are people like me who have lived here for years and who know that such behaviour can't last.

These online and offline incidents may be interpreted as illustrations of the 'dual lives' many transnational migrants live (Portes 1997), supplemented by their individual opinions as to how they and their fellow Latvians should resolve this duality. For some of them, it involves adopting what they perceive as the honourable traits (the 'mentality') of the local population and opposing behaviour that clashes with them. For others, it involves treating their host country as a practical resource, as opposed to having an emotional attachment to it (Gustafson 2005; also see Koroļeva, Chap. 4, this volume). The extent to which a migrant accepts the local customs and expects others to do the same also becomes a contested identity issue.

These positions echo what some interviewees said about their unwillingness to reveal in offline settings that they are Latvians, because they experienced unpleasant situations when 'down and outs' of Latvian origin have recognised them and attempted to start a conversation. Interviewees who shared such stories explained that they have felt ashamed by encounters with those whose lifestyles and behaviour did not meet the standard at which they wish Latvians were perceived in their host country. Conflicts about whether Latvians should have a certain level of manners and good behaviour demonstrate how the subjective concept of 'being Latvian' is expressed in various environments.

Even though some manifestations of identity may meet resistance in others, ethnic or transnational affiliation does involve interest in compatriots and a general willingness to associate with them – at least in online-based format, which gives them more control over the extent to which they are exposed to other compatriots. In this regard, social networking sites may serve not just as sources of information for many migrants, or as a platform on which interpersonal exchanges with fellow Latvians becomes possible, but also as a cultural space in which they can express sentiments and define their positions against the statements from others.

11.8 Themes Discussed in Social Networking Site Groups as Markers of the Affiliation

Groups for migrants on social networking sites serve as forums or bulletin boards. The themes discussed in these groups and the ways in which interviewees describe social interactions that take place there can be interpreted both as manifestations of the identity of participants and conditions that have to be accepted in order to gain or assert membership in any of the groups for Latvians.

Interaction in social networking groups for Latvian migrants online allows them to solve various, mostly practical issues; for example, where to find a place to work

or live, how to buy and sell things, where to find providers of various services, how to complete paperwork correctly, and so on. Shared national or ethnic ties provide the necessary solidarity and trust that enable such transactions among people, many of whom do not know each other personally.

Explicitly political discussions are not frequent in these groups and on these pages. This observation refers especially to Draugiem.lv, which is used mostly by people living in Latvia and those who have left Latvia during the past couple of decades. On Facebook, Latvians who emigrated during World War II and their descendants also join similar groups. These users are more eager to discuss political themes related to Latvia and are not devoted to issues encountered by the recent emigrants. The migration experiences and topicalities of the recent emigrants are different, and their use of social networking sites is hard to compare. Because of these difficulties of comparison, this paper does not cover these older Latvian migrant communities.

The presence of people from earlier migration waves from Latvia is one reason why diaspora communication on Facebook tends to include social, cultural and possibly political themes. Additionally, Facebook is more popular than Draugiem.lv among representatives of various diaspora organisations, which include Latvian societies, choirs and social event organisers. However, pages and groups maintained by such organisations serve mostly for information purposes rather than as forums for discussion, and occasions when recent Latvian migrants set up discussion spaces for political exchanges are rare.

The dominance of mundane, practical issues is explained by the fact that these are related to some of the migrants' basic needs. However, if these needs are met it does not mean that an individual will move on to formulate and achieve more abstract and political objectives. Augusts, who is 31 and lives in Norway, was quite critical towards the qualities of other local Latvians and gave a general description of the participants in one online group as follows:

Well, there are people who are oriented towards some kind of personal development, and then there are those whose interests will always remain at the same level. For example, the interests of building workers will never rise above how to avoid the television tax and where to get cheap smokes.

When participants in these groups have settled in their host country and become acquainted with the prevailing arrangements there, they either start helping others and/or simply follow the discussions – or lose interest in the activities of Latvian migrant groups altogether. Others may also set up new groups on specific themes or activities their compatriots may be interested in; for example, groups that promote face-to-face contacts among fellow Latvians.

One of the interviewees manages a Facebook group called 'Latvian Parties in Oslo,' which connects people who come together regularly for social events. Other groups or pages mentioned during the interviews were book clubs, knitting circles, choirs, etc. Such groups – both those that focus on practical issues and those formed to promote offline social activities among Latvians – unite differing people, including those of varying views and lifestyles. Even though these groups are based on

shared ethnicity or nationality and in some cases serve as manifestations of these ethnic or national ties, it does not necessarily mean that participants have similar ideas about what being 'a Latvian' means.

Although participants in these groups do not touch on political themes frequently, national identity itself is intrinsically political, and a migrant's sense of belonging to Latvia is still one of the elements that facilitates social interaction among them. Some instances of explicitly political discussions do occur occasionally. Participants mentioned such topics as the Latvian parliamentary elections, the war in Ukraine, the 2012 referendum on introducing Russian as a second official language in Latvia and the Latvian government's *Return migration support action plan 2013–2016*. However, more often than not participants in these groups are not motivated to express their views about these or other similar themes. The issue has to be of exceptional significance to prompt them to discuss it. Alise, 28, who lives in Norway, and Knuts, 34, who resides in Germany describe the general attitude in migrant groups towards political discussions as follows:

Alise: I don't know how many people are actually interested in elections if you do not live in Latvia. OK, when the referendum regarding Russian as the official language was about to be held, everybody was interested in that because everybody was against granting such status to the Russian language. But if this is just another regular election, I don't know how many will pay attention to it.

Knuts: It seems that few members are active [with respect to political themes]. Interest in Russia's latest [international, political] activities is not very high, either. Maybe some users share some articles from news sites about that. Occasionally a discussion that's a bit harsher than usual may start here and there. But in general, I think that on such issues they [the participants] are more like passive observers.

However, only a few interviewees said that they are keen to express opinions about politics and other arguably more sophisticated themes on Facebook or Draugiem.lv. Few could recall examples of online discussions about a migration-related political issue in their host country.

Such indifference to politics can be partially explained by the general lack of interest in mass media that is a characteristic among a significant percentage of the interviewees. As highlighted previously, many migrants do follow Latvian media, but at the same time, they have a relatively passive attitude towards what is being reported. In other cases, they may have a genuine interest in political and social developments in Latvia and elsewhere but prefer not to discuss their views publicly. Thus, these migrants satisfy their need for information by simply following media content and possibly talking about it with friends and relatives. They do not feel the need for discussions in social networking site groups. Some of the interviewees, for example, Eduards, who is 35 and lives in Germany, and Krista, 28, who resides in the Netherlands, went so far as to say that political discussions were divisive, and thus do not suit the groups. They did not feel that such discussions serve the purposes of the migrant online groups well.

Eduards: This topic [politics] shouldn't be discussed there. Politics, along with religion, is taboo. Everyone has a different opinion about that, and I don't think this should be posted there at all. Otherwise it's like imposing something on others.

Krista: I avoid discussing 'big' issues. Ukraine is a no-go, and so is Russia. Too many Russians are on Facebook, so it's too risky. [...] I think it's better not [to discuss it]. I avoid these topics when talking with Russians, because I want to stay friends with them. And I know that their views will not change anyway.

Those interviewees who were open to discussion of socio-political topics stood out because they demonstrate a higher level of social activism than the rest. For example, they may be active in charitable organisations or write a blog about Latvian cooking traditions with the aim of sharing this information with people interested in Latvian cultural heritage.

11.9 Hybrid Identities

While Latvian migrants maintain close ties with people from their native country, about two-thirds of survey respondents say that they also have friends among the local population, and about 50% say that they have three or more such friends. This suggests that Latvians integrate in the host country quite well (Mieraņa and Koroļeva 2015). Thus, they maintain multiple national bonds, which are experienced variously in terms of their significance to their wellbeing and emotional attachment to a country (Lulle 2011).

The interview results illustrate in detail that an emigrant can feel integrated into the host society and identify primarily with it rather than with Latvia. However, they can still reject some aspects of the society they live in and choose Latvian 'alternatives' instead. Such situations arise because migrants have to balance between identities associated with different countries. By doing this, they combine, apply and re-interpret elements associated with these multiple identities. The concept of migrant hybrid identities (Brinkerhoff 2009) explains this phenomenon.

Among the interviewees were Latvians who have purposely restricted their face-to-face contact with the local Latvian community. They may have some Latvian friends but in general, their interest in the activities of the local Latvian community is limited. The reasons for such decisions can be either their critical views of Latvians as a group and their perceived unflattering traits, or because such migrants maintain that limiting contacts with Latvians and strengthening their ties with the locals improves their personal development opportunities in the host country. Nauris, who is 44 and lives in Norway, says:

My wife and I are trying to limit our hanging out with other Latvians. [...] Because of all that Latvian envy, malevolence and all that. [...] They [Latvians] mostly stay in their own environment, but that hinders growth. If one develops contacts with the locals that opens up new opportunities, new acquaintances.

At the same time people with such views, regardless of their criticism of compatriots, are active in social networking site groups for Latvian migrants. Some pro-

vide advice and other kinds of informational support to other group participants, and they also follow events in Latvia. Thus, they are combining their everyday lives in the company of local people with online interaction with Latvians – but on their own terms.

A vivid example of the development of hybrid identities is the experience of Silva, who is 27 and lives in Denmark. During the interview, she claimed that 'currently, I feel more like a Dane than a Latvian' and that she has accepted 'the Danish mentality.' At the same time, while expecting a child, she visits online discussion boards for Latvian mothers. Despite identifying with the Danish culture, she stresses: 'Regarding child upbringing, I am very Latvian. Denmark is very feminist in this. Our views don't match.'

Contemporary individuals can adapt a variety of social roles and switch between differing relationship networks (Wellman 2002). This allows individuals, including migrants, to develop and maintain multi-faceted identities and enables the co-existence of different, seemingly conflicting identity markers ('a Latvian'; 'a Dane'). Interview results and observations in social networking site groups demonstrate that these sites and other information sources and social interaction platforms increase the flexibility of identification options available to migrants and also provide them with places for experiments and feedback.

11.10 Conclusions

Social networking sites are closely incorporated into migrants' everyday communication practices. According to our data, most of the people who have emigrated from Latvia during the latest wave of migration use at least one such site. Along with the migrants' consumption of mass media, their visits to the homeland and the remittances and goods they send home, the use of social networking sites can be added to the set of transnational practices (Christiansen 2004).

The social networking sites have a twofold function. Firstly, along with phone calls, Skype, email and other interpersonal communication media they are used to maintain contacts with relatives, friends and acquaintances, both in Latvia and other countries. The ability to follow other peoples' lives without much effort, which includes commenting on posts, browsing photo galleries and engaging in phatic exchanges (Malinowski 1923) – for example, asking 'How are you?' – reduces the detrimental effect that long physical distances have on interpersonal relationships.

Secondly, thematic pages and groups devoted to Latvians living in different countries or cities promote interaction between people who share national or ethnic affiliation but are not known to each other before. Relationships based on such traits facilitate access to information, allow Latvians to find others living nearby and encourage a willingness to widen one's social networks. These groups are successful in serving as communities for support and self-help.

Participation in these groups is also important in the manifestation, assertion and negotiation of transnational and ethnic identities. The development of identity is a

communicative process and, as pointed out by Handler (1994), the very act of talking about 'who we are' influences identity. Thus, by communicating one's identity, that identity is being constructed simultaneously. In this regard, the communication of Latvian migrants on social networking sites promotes these identity processes by enabling and facilitating contacts among the compatriots – and, of course, other people – providing a space where users can express themselves and negotiate access to information they want.

A core element of these transnational communication flows between Latvians living in different countries is information that is being exchanged about Latvia, including facts, interpretations and attitudes. The Latvian migrants interviewed often said that one of the basic motivations for them to follow events and topics related to Latvia in the mass media, on social networking sites and in groups is to maintain and assert ties with their country of origin. It is important for them not only because they do not rule out entirely the possibility of returning to their homeland but also because this allows them to strengthen their sense of belonging to Latvia. However, most of them are not considering relocation in the foreseeable future, and at this point willingness to maintain ties with Latvia particularly highlights the aspect of emotional rather than instrumental associations regarding their ties to their homeland.

The migrants' perceptions of events in Latvia are affected by a variety of information sources. These include information that is picked up and shared by users of social networking sites, reported by Latvian online news media and discussed in their comments sections and also through direct communication with friends and relatives in Latvia and elsewhere. These information flows are not shaped by a single medium or communication platform. At the same time, the prominent place that social networking sites occupy in the media and the communication diet of migrants confirms that interpersonal relationship networks that are maintained and developed through such means are one of the elements that facilitate interaction among migrants, which also includes the development and maintenance of their shared identities (Georgiou 2006). However, under such conditions, these identities can both converge and diverge.

Ascribing normative characteristics and values to the community of Latvian migrants, some members of the online groups deplore certain behaviour traits or condemn the actions of certain individuals because they do not comply with the moral qualities they feel that 'a Latvian' should possess. In cases where this is not possible, they may try to disassociate themselves from Latvians whose behaviour and moral judgments differ radically from theirs.

These conceptions of being part of a community also manifest differing views among Latvians regarding which activities or attitudes can be discussed openly on a social networking site group, which are self-organised social spaces that exist without explicit supervision by the state authorities. These differences may lead to arguments and quarrels, which are one of the ways participants express and notice differing views and negotiate group norms. Additionally, differences of opinion on the issue of migration between those who have emigrated and people living in Latvia suggest the existence of differing perceptions of national identity. Migrants

represent an identity that can also be based on an imaginary space (Ghorashi 2004), while Latvians who criticise migrants for leaving the country are more likely to perceive the state of 'belonging to Latvia' as requiring someone to be physically present there.

The results of the present study are a reminder of the somewhat deceptive allure of 'community', a term overused through numerous and loose applications to both offline and online environments (Fernback 2007) and diaspora (Hage 2005). Latvian migrants who join online groups based on shared ethnicity or national belonging in order to exchange information and other kinds of support indeed invoke the sense of participation in communities. However, their actual attachment to these groups varies; as do their backgrounds, their attitudes towards other Latvians and their competing concepts of what 'being a Latvian' means. These variations illustrate the large differences among the members of such groups.

This provides one way of interpreting the concept of 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991) in the context of transnational migration. As noted by Sökefeld (2006), the sense of being part of a community does not necessarily mean that the ideas of identity among community members are similar. However, the disputes about these ideas reaffirm the fact that the members of the group do believe in the existence of a shared identity that forms the basis of a community they call their own (Sökefeld 2006).

In their analysis of Latvian diaspora media, Lulle et al. (2015) observed the existence of a constructed idealised conception of Latvia as a united nation across borders. However, in practice, a 'unifying diaspora consciousness' does not exist. Diversity is an integral feature of a diaspora. In this regard, migrant interactions on social networking sites do not necessarily promote homogenisation of Latvian diaspora identities, or the development of these identities in a certain direction. Such online communication platforms do facilitate the exchange of information and the maintenance of contacts, but this does not mean that the abstract 'Latvian identity' that unites such different people would become more homogeneous because of the mere fact that communication takes place at this level. Instead, online and offline-based social circles in which migrants engage may increase the number of choices and identity elements available to migrants as they settle and integrate into their host country.

Ultimately, while participation in an online group for Latvian migrants may itself be an identity statement that does not change dramatically over short periods of time, the connection of participants to individual group members is much more ephemeral (Bucholtz 2018). As such, the manifestation and negotiation of transnational identities on social networking sites as a collective process is highly fragmented. While participation in online groups and the maintenance of connections with fellow compatriots allows the migrants to remain in the language and cultural space of their homeland, their actual benefit from this connection may vary greatly. Although there may be occasional clashes and differences of opinion about what constitutes Latvian identity, the general unwillingness of the participants to touch upon political issues in their discussions indicate that many of them recognise that such discussions or quarrels are not likely to lead to more unified or coherent views

among group members. Instead, they may be more willing to express their political and ideological views to people with which they have strong connections and ties, who are more likely to share and support these views.

In the context of this fragmentation, the emergence of hybrid identities (Brinkerhoff 2009) is a notable outcome of the wide range of online and offline-based opportunities that are at the disposal of migrants and which allow their diverse social networks to be combined. Some of the interviewees who feel integrated into their host societies still purposely maintain identity elements; namely, some customs and norms commonly found in Latvian society. In these cases, social networking sites are among the venues that serve as an instrument of articulation and appropriation of such identity elements. Additionally, the online social spaces provide communicative flexibility that allows users to maintain ties to Latvia and Latvians in various degrees. Some seek to extend their online and offline ties with compatriots while others may have reservations about the Latvian community, but are still willing to take part in groups for Latvian migrants online – they just do it on their own terms. For those who have limited their offline contacts with other Latvians living in their host country, this approach allows them to keep in touch with the Latvian community and to maintain the level of ties they prefer with their homeland.

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