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How do Iranian Migrant Women in Brisbane Bypass Iranian ICTs Restriction to Stay Connected with Their Homeland?

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to assess what impact the ICTs restrictions in Iran had on communication of Iranian migrant women in Australia with their kin in Iran. It also sought to investigate how Iranian women in Brisbane overcame the ICTs restrictions to stay connected. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 Iranian women from the Brisbane region who migrated to Australia in the past few years. Results revealed that although ICTs served to maintain transnational relationships, ICTs barriers and restrictions in Iran had a strong impact on the Iranian women. Most participants faced everyday challenges in finding rich communication tools to keep connected. Slow speed internet connection, restriction on free internet call applications, filtering social networks, digital divide in rural areas and generation gap were some effects of ICTs restrictions that affected Iranian transnational communication. Such restrictions turned the Iranian migrant women into pioneers and innovators in finding new internet applications and in updating novel communication means which were yet to be filtered by the Iranian government.

Introduction

'Migration is one of the oldest ways of interconnection between different, distant parts of the world' (Held et al, 1999 as cited in Ros, 2010, p. 20). Changes in communication and interaction between people, the exchange of goods, services, and information among people, however, has transformed 'the nature, meanings, and logic of immigration' (Ros, 2010, p.20). Nowadays, internet free call software, SMS, emails, online communities, chat applications and video conferencing via the telephone and internet have changed the experience of migration with implications for family life, sociality, intimacy, and identity (Madianou, 2011; Ros, 2010).

Communication through ICTs has a demonstrated impact on migrants – it helps to minimize inequality and marginalization, but it can also promote social inclusion of migrants in host countries (Wilding, 2009). Bacigalupe and Cámara (2012) believe that 'ICTs are resources for emotional, moral, practical, personal, and financial support for migrants' (p.1430) and that ICTs have become 'global drivers of migration' (Hamel, 2009, p. 1).

However, geographic location, socio-economic status, gender, age, level of knowledge, ethnicity, and language, are all variables to be considered when assessing communication between migrant communities and their families through ICT. As a result of such variables, migrant communities have varied experiences in using ICTs to enable communication with their homelands. This study is an attempt to focus on aforementioned inequalities as it affects Iranian (categorised as an under-developed country for purposes of this study) migrant's communication with their homeland when living in Australia.

Hamel (2009) believes that:

“ When discussing the impacts of ICTs on migrant’s life, we need to be very cognizant of the disparities and inequalities on access and use that exist between groups and amongst countries. These considerations are especially relevant in the discussion of international migration since the level of development of both origin and destination countries will have significant implications on the availability and use of ICTs (p. 5). ”

As Hamel points out, ‘migration to very high human development countries represents 51% of total international migration’ (p. 5). Therefore, ICTs in developed countries are more readily available to those migrants who want to use these technologies. However, migrants who have come from under-developed countries and want to communicate through ICTs with their homelands may face major challenges. Therefore, it is important to understand how members of migrant communities, especially from under-developed countries, use particular ICTs in their everyday life, and how ICTs facilitate their communication with their homeland.

Research Aim

The main aim of this study was to explore how Iranian migrant women in Brisbane overcame the limitations and restrictions of Iranian ICTs. In contrast to some traditional media, ICTs provide citizens the opportunity to access free information and to gain knowledge about local, national, and global issues. Therefore, such technologies can also be the target of a government’s filtering, censorship, and restriction. Independent institutes such as *OpenNet*, *Freedom House*, and *Reporters Without Borders*, have published various reports about sophisticated monitoring, censorship tools, and content filtering used by states in many countries in the Middle East and North Africa (Shirazi, 2012).

In this study, I attempt to demonstrate the daily challenges Iranian women in Brisbane faced in finding rich communication ways to be in touch with their home country. Hence, the overarching questions that guided this study were:

RQ1: How do Iranian migrant women in Brisbane use ICTs to keep connected with Iran?

RQ2: How do Iranian ICT restrictions and the digital divide affect Iranian migrant women’s communication with families and friends in Iran?

Iranian Migrants in Australia

The 2011 Australian census indicates that 34,453 Iran-born people lived in Australia, with New South Wales having the largest settlement (15,463), followed by Victoria (7,447), Western Australia (3,722), and Queensland (3,562) (DIAC, n.d.). The number of Iranians living in Queensland has tripled in the past decade. Before the 1979 Iranian revolution, most people who migrated from Iran to Australia were service workers, particularly in the oil industry. The next wave of migration began with the revolution and the start of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). In the latter half of the 1990s, many Iranians came to Australia under the ‘Skilled and Family Streams of the Migration Program’ (Jamarani, 2009). In the past 10 years, young individuals or young couples have come to Australia under skilled migration visa programs or with a student visa; this group also consists of middle and upper middle class Iranians (Jamarani, 2009).

ICTs Restrictions in Iran

Currently, the Iranian community in Australia faces many challenges when trying to connect with their homeland. This problem is directly a result of a) the social and political conditions in Iran, and b) the digital divide between Iran and Australia. While the Iranian government officially encourages Iranian citizens to use the internet, the issue of ‘access’, ‘control’ and ‘content’ remain controversial (Sreberny & Khiabani, 2010, p.67). According to *Reporters without Borders* (2009), Iran has applied severe and extensive restrictions on the internet (Warf, 2011). In recent years, ICTs, and particularly the internet, have become prominent domains for political and social activists in Iran as a source of mobilizing citizens for political change. The case of Iran demonstrates the real potential of new technologies for empowerment of citizens (Sreberny & Khiabani, 2010; Shirazi, 2010; Warf, 2011).

In recent years, the Iranian government has applied various strategies to control and conduct surveillance of ICTs. This has been achieved by controlling internet speed, censoring internet content, controlling blogs and personal websites, hacking websites, blocking social media like *Facebook* and *Twitter*, and monitoring online forums and mobile phone activity (Sreberny & Khiabani, 2010). High-speed internet access is available only to government agencies and is not available to Iranian internet home users or internet cafes. Iranians who are not government employees are restricted from having an internet connection higher than 128 kilobits per second

(Shirazi, 2010; 2012). Therefore, it is not surprising that Iran's internet speed for household use is among the least developed in the world (Shirazi, 2012).

According to the Internet Enemies Report (2012), Iran is now capable of blocking https and the ports used by Virtual Private Network (VPN). This report reveals that for several days in February 2012, censors managed to block access to the secure 'https' protocol that encodes internet communications thus depriving millions of Iranians from being able to access their Gmail and Yahoo accounts. VPN ports are also blocked. Many Iranian citizens use such tools to circumvent government censorship. In addition, by slowing the internet connection speed, the Iranian government makes it impossible to send/receive photos/videos (Reporters Without Borders, 2012).

Numerous reports note that during the 2009 political turbulence, the Iranian authorities unplugged the entire network in Iran. The 2009 turbulence in Iran provided a dramatic and violent illustration of the tensions between centralized state power and the diffused power of online social network like *Facebook* and *Twitter* (Doyle & Fraser, 2010).

Transnational Communication and Migrant Communities

'Transnational families' (Baldassar, 2007; Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding, 2007; Madianou & Miller, 2012) 'connected relationships', 'virtual intimacies' (Wilding, 2006) and 'distributed families' (Wyche & Grinter, 2012) are some major themes that demonstrate the relationship between migrant communities and their families through communication technologies. For example, Gonzalez, Castro and Rodriguez (2009) believe that because they have particular needs, migrants have become pioneers and innovators in the adoption of new communication technologies. Wilding (2006) argues that 'frequency, satisfaction and length of communication' (p. 130) were major reasons causing migrants to use different communication means. In addition, Aguila (2009) shows that 'need for information, unfolding events, and emotional expression' (p. 91) were factors that affected the regularity of migrant communities' communication. Prior to the 1990s, letter writing and telephone communication were the most common ways to contact family members abroad (Hamel, 2009; Wilding, 2006). However, the advent of the internet and email allowed many migrants to stay in faster, improved and 'regular communication' with family members (Hamel, 2009, p. 27).

More recent studies across the globe showed that there were more communication resources available through ICTs. Benítez (2012) mentions that mobile phones, fixed phones and calls through the internet were the most effective communication technologies used by Salvadoran migrants. Benítez (2006) also found that mobile phone use among Salvadoran migrants provided new possibilities of time-space mobility and social integration in everyday life; instant communication was also possible through chat-rooms and video calls through *Skype*. Migrants have also been known to use photographs and videos to keep in touch with their families in homelands, sending photographs of significant events (Wyche & Grinter, 2012), and home videos of family events (Benítez, 2006).

These studies have shown that the mode of communication among migrant communities has changed from traditional to newer, sophisticated and instant modes of communication during the past decades, and that most migrant communities were satisfied with new communication technologies because these provided cost-effective, instant and rich communication.

Social Impact of ICTs on Migrant Communities

Communication through ICTs affects migrant communities and their families in many ways. Bacigalupe and Camara (2012) reveal that social technologies helped Salvadorian migrant families in Massachusetts (U.S.) to find resilient ways to confront the difficulties of immigration. Also, Benítez (2012) points out that ICTs helped maintain family ties and interactions, strengthened cultural values and forms of expression, and provided affective support to the family. Video conferencing, for example, reinforced migrants' national identities and increased their socio-cultural awareness (Gonzalez, Castro & Rodriguez, 2009). This communication technology gave migrants the opportunity to have both visual and audio meetings and share group events or special occasions— the experience of seeing relatives or friends was seen to be a unique experience of mediated interaction (Benítez, 2006).

In addition, ICTs reduce the tensions of migration. Ros (2010) indicates that for many Senegalese immigrants in Spain, communication with families back home through ICT was an advantage that produced satisfaction, and the feeling of proximity via such communication helped avoid depression.

Digital Divide: Barrier for Transnational Communication

However, some studies have assessed the effect of the digital divide on transnational communication between migrants and their families. A 'generation gap' (Gonzalez, Castro & Rodriguez, 2009; Benítez, 2006), unequal

distribution of ICT infrastructures among different countries and communities (Hamel, 2009; Wilding, 2006; Wyche & Grinter, 2012; Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding, 2007), and lack of computer knowledge (Wilding, 2006) are some significant issues that affect transnational communication.

Studying Kenyan migrants living in Atlanta, Georgia (U.S.), Wyche and Grinte (2012) found that the high cost of ICTs in Kenya, lack of internet connectivity/access, low computer literacy skills and infrastructural differences like speed of internet between U.S. and Kenya, affected the decisions families and their extended members made when using ICTs. Similarly, in a Mexican study, Gonzalez, Castro and Rodriguez (2009) found that due to the lack of broadband internet access and the high cost of technological facilities in many communities, some families did not have new communication technologies like 'virtual phone lines' and 'videoconferencing' – this was a challenge for families wanting to being touch with their migrant family member(s). In the Iranian context, Wilding (2006) notes that many parents in Iran lived in very insecure circumstances and did not have telephones in their homes. According to this study, over half the families with relatives overseas did not adopt the internet or email for communication purposes as many parents did not see the point in purchasing a computer and/or getting internet access because they had low/nil computer literacy.

Although the aforementioned studies have focused on effects of the digital divide and its various dimensions on migrants' communication, this exploratory study attempted to go a step further to assess the role of ICT restriction on transnational communication between Australia and Iran. While other studies mainly focused on the digital divide between developed and developing countries, and infrastructural inequality in internet access and use, they did not examine governmental restrictions on ICTs that exist in countries like Iran. The next section briefly outlines some theoretical concepts that underpin this study.

Media Richness Theory

Internet and computer mediated communication technologies (CMC) are, for the majority, used to expand and enhance relationship networks, specific relational bonds, and, in many cases, the quality of relational interaction. Kraut et al (2002 as cited in Spitzberg, 2006) believe that the increasing use of the internet correlated positively with indicators of social network size and familial involvement. CMC has become an important resource for developing and maintaining familial, friend, romantic, and co-worker relationships.

There are multiple theories associated with CMC, however, the most relevant theory for new media, particularly ICTs, is media richness theory (MRT). This theory was proposed by Daft and Lengel (Dennis, 2009) and began as a theory of media use, not media choice. It argues under what conditions each media would be most effective; that is, how users should use media, not how users actually choose media (Dennis, 2009; Dennis, Kinney & Caisy Hung, 1999).

According to MRT, four factors influence media richness: a) The first element is the capacity for immediate feedback which refers to the speed and quality of common interpretation transmitted through the medium, b) The second factor is the capacity to transmit multiple cues that included, voice inflections, body gestures, words, physical presence and numbers, even graphic symbols this characteristic facilitated conveyance of interpretation information, c) The third factor is language variety meaning the level of concept convection, and lastly, d) the fourth factor is the capacity of the medium to have a personal focus, referring to either the conveying of emotions and feelings, or the ability of the medium to be tailored to the specific needs and perspectives of the receiver (Lan & Sie, 2010). Based on these criteria, compared to traditional media, ICTs provide some form of richness like 'simultaneous use of video, audio, graphics, and text; capacity for accessing and retrieving saved messages and data; and 24-hour a day availability' (Illia & Lawson-Body, 2007, p. 172).

Digital Divide in Iran

ICTs restrictions in Iran, which is mainly related to citizen's access to free information and other potential 'misuse' of the internet, increases the digital divide between Iran and other countries and causes Iran to significantly lag in development of ICTs infrastructure. According to Van Dijk (1999), the digital divide is not only limited to computer access, but that other aspects such as uneven usage opportunities are equally important in understanding the multifaceted and true nature of existing barriers to information access. Sreberny and Khiabani (2010) believe that:

“ Digital divide is mainly related to the quality of access, models of engagement, and the diversity of content. The problem of access and participation in ICTs is the main problem in Iran and the recent ICT restrictions means that Iranian citizens don't have equal opportunity to engage in social and political issues on the internet and are unable to freely access information (p. 7). ”

In addition, ICTs policies in Iran restrict citizens, particularly the elderly, from enhancing and/or updating their computer literacy. So older Iranians still suffer from lack of skills and knowledge about new communication

technologies, and mostly rely on their young children or grandchildren to use computers.

Method

Data for this qualitative study were collected via semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is based on series of predetermined but open-ended questions. This qualitative method gives participants the opportunity to have multiple voices to express their lived experiences and diverse perspectives (Brennen, 2013).

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited through contacts within the Iranian Queensland Community *Facebook* page, snowball sampling via *Facebook*, and by word-of-mouth amongst the local Iranian community in the Greater Brisbane region. Through this process, 18 Iranian migrant women, aged 26-36 years, who were living in the Brisbane region, volunteered to participate. These women had migrated to Australia in the past three years on either a student ($n = 4$) or skilled migration visa ($n = 14$). This criterion was purposely applied, as I wanted to interview relatively recent migrants.

I also wanted to focus on women, as in many migration studies, migrant women are subjectively positioned as either 'members of families' or as a 'generalized category' of immigrant. However:

“ ... postcolonial feminist perspective on migration makes significant the condition of migrant women. Unlike feminism in general, postcolonial feminism deals with the gender issue of non-white and non-western women. It pays particular attention to ethnic women rather than a generalized woman issue (Jamarani, 2012, p. 151). ”

Hence, I wanted to give them voice to express their lived experiences.

Data Collection

Participants were interviewed by the Iranian female researcher between August-October 2013. All interviews were conducted in Farsi at public locations and at a time and place of the participants' choosing. The interviews lasted an average of 35-40 minutes and were audio-recorded for transcription purposes (with permission).

All interviews began with demographic questions (e.g. age, occupation, education level). This was followed by questions about the communication means that they regularly used to keep connected with their homeland, how Iranian ICT restrictions affected their internet-mediated communication with Iran, and what kinds of solutions they used to bypass restrictions. All participants' names were changed to protect their anonymity.

Brislin's back translation method was applied (1970; 1986) to translate interview questions as well as the interview transcripts into English. This method is a well-known method of preparing valid and reliable tools for cross-cultural research. According to this model, one bilingual expert translates the instrument from the source language (in my case Farsi) (SL) into the target language (i.e., English) (TL), and a second bilingual expert blindly (without access to the original language version) back-translates it to the source language (i.e., Farsi). If an error in meaning is found in the back-translated version when compared to the original, the terms in question are re-translated and again blindly back translated by another bilingual expert. This iterative process is repeated until no error in meaning is found (Jones, Lee, Phillips, Zhang & Jaceldo, 2001).

Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews were analysed by open coding. Open coding refers to the initial phase of the coding process in the grounded theory approach to qualitative research. Open coding is the process as the 'opening up' of the text in order to uncover its ideas and meanings (Benaquisto, 2008). It is the preliminarily process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorising data (Silverman, 2006). Both the researcher and the academic supervisor individually coded the data into themes and then met to discuss the overarching themes. Given that there was a clear overlap in the themes, the themes were finalised.

Findings

Iranian Migrant Women's Transnational Communication

Making everyday communication with kin in Iran, especially with parents and siblings, was a vital issue for all women in this study. Most participants preferred to have daily connection with their parents/siblings in order to check on the wellbeing of elderly parents and other members of family.

For Foruozaade (35 years, married, chemical engineer), communicating with her parents in Iran was critical, and

if unable to connect with them, she would seriously consider returning to Iran. Some women even spent more money to have routine communication with their parents in Iran, and the higher cost of communication did not dissuade them.

Most of the participants preferred to have communication with their parents only through phone calls. Not surprisingly, the major reason for making phone calls as a traditional communication was due to the internet problems/restrictions in Iran. According to MRT, the condition of internet services in Iran restricts migrants from having a rich connection and hence, communication through phone was the most effective choice for most participants in this study. Even Faranak (35 years, married, environmental engineer) preferred to have only phone call communication due to the limitation of the internet in Iran.

For all participants, however, if given a choice, making calls over the internet was the first option, with landline phone calls being the last resort. The women believed that slow-speed internet and many disconnections during internet phone calls due to Iran's ICT restrictions, led them to prefer making direct phone calls; however, most mentioned that if their parents had good quality internet, their first option would be to make internet phone calls.

Participants also stated that while they preferred to have video chat to see their parents because parents sometimes hid illnesses and the ageing process from them, and video chat overcame this issue, the internet restrictions in Iran did not give the man opportunity to have an effective communication. Therefore, they are always searching for a rich medium that gives them 'sense of presence' in their home country.

Having access to the internet improved the level of computer knowledge of parents. In addition new technologies like iPad, tablet and smart phones, facilitated Iranian transnational communication. Some Iranian families even bought new technologies and/or installed new applications on their laptops/mobile phones to keep their communication with their daughters in Australia. Marjan (35 years, married, architect) stated:

“ When I migrated to Australia, it was a new issue for my family to connect me via internet or online applications. However, after three years, they adapted themselves to use these kinds of online opportunities because they find this way cheap and easy. ”

In addition, the need to use technology to stay in touch encouraged computer illiterate parents to begin using technology for their communication – some parents started to learn how to use computers and improved their technology skills right after their daughters migrated to Australia. As Zahra (26 years, married) stated:

“ My mom hated technology. She didn't have a good relationship with technology, but I bought smartphone for her and taught her how to use it, and now she has learned to use the mobile applications. ”

Similarly, some participants like Samaneh (32 years, single, Ph.D. student) motivated their parents to attend computer classes resulting in their gaining of basic computer and internet skills.

The participants also used ICTs for communicating with their younger siblings. Having younger siblings in Iran was an added benefit as there was a good chance for Iranian families' transnational communication through ICTs. Some Iranian migrant women mentioned that their younger siblings were great educators for their parents in terms of ICTs. As some older Iranians did not have enough knowledge about computers and the internet, often there was generation gap in using new technologies and they needed someone to facilitate communication through ICTs. Mona (26 years, single, Masters student) mentioned that her younger sister was a big help for her mother and if their internet system had a technical problem, she was able to fix it.

Also due to the restriction and filtering of Iranian ICTs, the young generation in Iran are always up-to-date with recent/new anti-filter software, and they facilitated communication among their sisters and parents because in many cases, parents did not know how find and/or install anti-filter tools like VPN. Dena (35 years, married, cost engineer) believed that without her brother's assistance, her parents would not be able to make communication through new applications, and she stated that her brother introduced Dena to novel communication applications too.

Some participants said that their parents were too old and they could not learn to use new communication technologies or did not have the required facilities. Maral (32 years, married, M.D.) mentioned that her parents did not have computer/internet facilities in their home, so when they wanted to communicate over the internet, they had to go to their other siblings' home to connect online with her in Australia.

The other interesting issue that arose in terms of Iranian transnational communication was that some participants had friends/siblings living in other countries and these participants made comparisons between

their communication with Iran and other countries. Participants who had friends and siblings in other countries like Japan, England, U.S., Germany, Italy, Poland, and Ukraine, used *Skype*, *Viber*, and *Facebook*, easily to keep in touch with them and they did not have problem in enabling communication with them. However, participants like Elahe (35 years, married, housewife) whose sister lived in China, had similar problems in video chat communication, because China's national internet and video chat applications do not have good quality and some communication applications are filtered or restricted as in Iran. Lastly, low speed internet in Iran also meant that the participants had to reduce the file-size of photos and/or length of their videos to send through email because sometimes, their families could not be able to open their photos or download them in normal size files.

Iranian ICTs Restriction and Transnational Communication Barriers

Online Video Conferencing

ICTs act as channels for emotions and intimacy – they provide opportunity for audio and visual meetings – and despite the geographical distance, migrants and their families can share group experiences that are difficult to share through other conventional communication tools (Panagakos & Horst, 2006). As discussed before, online video conferencing has the capacity to transmit multiple cues like voice, body gestures, words, physical presence, and even graphic symbols; also, it is the most effective online media in conveying emotions and feelings by providing a synchronous communication. However, participants in this study had negative experiences of communication through video chat applications with their kin in Iran including low speed internet, disconnections during video conferencing, immobile, and blurry/bad quality video. Alaleh (32 years, married, environmental engineer) who had negative experiences about her visual communication with their parents in Iran said:

“ When we used webcam [via *Skype*], instead of seeing them and enjoying of being together I should try to call them again and again and it took long time, and it was frustrating, and made me sad and angry. I don't like to continue this kind of video communication at all. ”

Some participants mentioned that they did not have rich communication through *OOVVOO* or *Yahoo Messenger*, and due to slow internet speed in Iran, they had to stop their video chat and use only voice chat because video and voice chat simultaneously was impossible.

Sanaz (31 years, married, software engineer) whose brother lived in Poland, stated that when she wanted to use video conferencing to communicate both with him and her mother in Iran, her mother did not receive video from either of them, and she could not use video chat with both of them simultaneously. In addition, some participants like Dena whose family in Iran did have good quality internet, still had a problem with ICTs restrictions, and such limitations caused Denato communicate via *Skype* or *OOVVOO* just three or four times a year.

In relation to the ICTs restrictions being directly related to the social and political context in Iran, most participants mentioned that during Iranian election time, they were unable to use video communication because the applications were restricted/filtered by the Iranian government. Most participants also said that either their internet communication with Iran was completely disconnected during days of the Iranian 2013 election or the internet speed in Iran slowed down significantly on those days. Samaneh, who had daily internet communication with Iran, gave a complete picture about the internet connection during election days. She said:

“ In times of presidential election, that internet speed in Iran was slow, my parents couldn't make connection via internet with me.’ ”

Using anti-filter software that required Iranian citizens to open filtered applications or websites in Iran caused another problem for Iranian transnational communication, as the anti-filter software made the internet speed so slow that families could not use videoconferencing. Therefore, most participants explained that online video conferencing, which provides rich communication by simultaneous use of video and audio, could not satisfy the communication needs of the Iranian migrant women, and most participants in this study did not experience rich and desirable communication through this medium.

Circumventing ICTs Restrictions to Enable Communication

Due to the ICTs restrictions, the women used various other communication ways simultaneously to circumvent the restrictions, and most had backup plans for their communication. Roshana (35 years, married, electrical engineer) stated that,

“ I always have other available options. For instance, if their [family in Iran] OOVVOO isn't work, I email them or I call them, they always have a problem with internet speed so I used to have, and I used to use other communication means. ”

Most women used/tried various internet phone call applications such as *Viber*, *Tango*, *Vitel* and *Kakao Talk*. However, some of them had problems making connections through these applications as the Iranian government also restricted such free internet call applications inside Iran. Some women had varied experiences with free internet calls and sometimes they changed applications and tried other free internet call applications. Some also found relatively new and unknown applications to keep connected with their kin in Iran. *Kakao Talk* was one such Korean free internet call application that two participants used and they were both satisfied with this application because the Iranian government was yet to restrict it. As Zahra explained:

“ *Viber* was restricted in election times and I changed it to Korean free internet call application that is called *Kakao Talk*. The interesting thing about this application is that it is Korean and Iranian government doesn't know this application and cannot filter it. I was in Iran in election time and those days all free internet call applications were restricted except *Kakao talk*, that time I understand that they cannot restrict it. It is very popular in Korea, but not in Iran! ”

Social Networking

Filtering social networks like *Facebook* in Iran also limited the women's communication with their kin in Iran. Also, restrictions on tools such as VPN and other anti-filter applications meant that Iranian migrant women were unable to communicate through this social media. In addition, restriction and filtering of social networks like *Facebook* caused some women to cease communication with their friends in Iran. Saghar (26 years, married, childcare educator) stated that:

“ Some of my friends have *Facebook* account, but having *Facebook* account is a crime in Iran, so they didn't put their real picture on their *Facebook* profile so I couldn't recognize them and find them on *Facebook*. In addition, some of them did not have *Facebook* account because they work in governmental organizations and it is illegal issue in Iran so I missed my communication with them. ”

However, some participants believed that in recent months, and especially after the 2013 election in Iran, the internet connection improved as their friends and relatives were more active on *Facebook* and they were able to communicate through this social network medium.

Digital Divide in Rural Iran

The quality of internet in rural Iran was the other challenge in enabling communication through the internet due to the lack of broadband services in rural areas. Most participants' family members lived in the capital city, Tehran, they all had ADSL in their homes. However, when their family members travelled to rural areas, they were unable to have internet-mediated communication with their daughters in Australia. Some women whose families lived in other small Iranian cities believed that the internet condition in those cities was not of good quality as compared to the quality of service in Tehran. A few stated that their family members could not access the internet easily. Rana (36 years, married, housewife) believed that:

“ I have some friends in Tehran that I could see them [through video chat applications] better than my family in city of Khoy so I think internet connection in Khoy and speed is slower than Tehran and I can realized it from video chats that I have with my friends through *Skype* or *Yahoo Messenger*. ”

Hence, as some participants mentioned, the 'speed' and 'quality' of internet –the main elements in media richness –especially in rural areas of Iran, did not allow them to have the immediate feedback in their online communication requiring their reliance on traditional phone call communication.

Negative Impact of Iranian ICTs restriction on Iranian Migrant Women

Being able to make a connection with those in their home country, made the Iranian migrant women feel happy and relaxed; it gave them positive energy and peace of mind. Overall, being able to connect had a positive effect on their mental health, and helped them overcome the geographical distance and emotional separation. Some participants believed that when they saw their parents through *Skype* or other video chat applications, they felt

that they were in Iran. As Marjan said:

“ When I saw my parents and my sister via webcam, I feel that I am there and with them. Visual communication gives me good feelings and positive energy. When I see them, especially when I see 'space of home' in Iran, it is very enjoyable for me, and it has very positive effect on me and on my nostalgia. ”

However, as mentioned previously, some women did not have the opportunity to have rich communication through ICTs with their families and friends in Iran, and they always had challenges in connecting with their kin. Some participants experienced hardship when their communication with Iran was disrupted as Roya (30 years, single, Masters student) explained:

“ I spent very hard times when the internet connection in Iran was blocked for some months. I was very 'emotionally sensitive'; I missed my parents very much because I could not see them. I had phone call with them but it was very short (10 minutes) because it is very expensive to them to call me every day. ”

Similarly, Saghar also said:

“ Near 2013 presidential election days that Iranian government decided to make national internet in Iran and all applications like *OOVVOO* was restricted, we spent very hard and stressful days and my family and I had concerns about this limitations. We have tolerated this long distance only because of online communication and I remember *OOVVOO* was filtered in Iran and my family tried to find new anti-filter software and I tried to find new application to bypass this limitations. ”

In addition, some participants did not continue their communication with Iran through internet because of the restrictions. Alaleh believed that restrictions annoyed her and she preferred to discontinue her communication through ICTs. The Iranian ICTs restrictions also meant that the women felt quite distanced from Iran, more so than some other migrants as Rana stated:

“ I should wait for one week to make communication with them [family members] and this communication didn't satisfy me and my family and in those time I felt that how I am far from my home and felt long distance and isolation more. ”

Discussion

In line with some previous studies (e.g., Gonzalez, Castro & Rodriguez, 2009; Wilding, 2006; Ros, 2010), this study revealed that there was a strong desire among Iranian migrant women to communicate with their kin in Iran and different types of ICTs could partly facilitate such communication. New communication technologies have undeniably become the tools in the life of migrant communities and CMC is able to overcome the physical and social limitations of other communication types and therefore allow the interaction of migrants who are not physically sharing the same space. However, the ideal form of communication is still face-to-face interaction, so enabling 'rich' and 'effective' communication for migrant communities who are far from their kin and who do not have daily and face-to face-communication, is a crucial desire and they are searching for a rich medium which gives them 'sense of presence' in their home country.

However, the restriction on ICTs in Iran such as slow speed internet, filtering on video chat applications like *OOVVOO* and *Skype*, restricting social networks like *Facebook*, limitations on internet free call applications like *Viber* and *Tango*, along with a generation gap in access to ICTs and the condition of the internet in rural areas, caused significant challenges in enabling such effective communication. In fact, ICTs restrictions in Iran did not allow Iranian migrants to have 'rich' communication, and the results of this study illustrate that due to the above restrictions, ICTs have not yet created a world in which an Iranian family is able to become a 'virtual family'.

The results also showed that the use of ICTs complemented, rather than replaced, old technology such as phone calls to landlines. All participants used/tested various types of ICTs to keep connected with their kin in Iran, however, using internet applications to make connection was not a satisfying experience. Most participants believed that communicating via landline was the most convenient and best way to communicate with people back home. However, they paid a high price for this and finally were not satisfied with this mode of communication either because as migrants, they wanted rich communication to transmit multiple cues and reveal their feelings. Therefore, audio connection via traditional phone calls did not fulfill their emotional needs.

According to MRT, new ICTs are richer than traditional media, they provide simultaneous use of video, audio, graphics, and text, and provide immediate feedback. By transmitting body gestures and physical presence and conveying emotions and feelings, they therefore enable rich communication and provide a unique opportunity to construct a 'co-presence' in spite of distance to migrant communities, making the process of migration easier. Nevertheless, as discussed above, Iranian migrants do not have this rich medium to have perfect visual communication and take part in their family's events or special occasions like *Nowruz* (Iranian New Year celebration) due to ICTs restrictions. Some participants in this study mentioned that video chat applications, like *OOVOO* and *Skype*, were filtered by the Iranian government and that during the last *Nowrouz* (2013), they could not virtually take part in the family events and/or have virtual meetings with their kin.

Overcoming ICTs Restrictions

The findings of this study also backup recent research (e.g., Gonzalez, Castro & Rodriguez, 2009) which shows that often, migrant communities are pioneers and innovators in the adaptation of new ICTs which provide them with immediate feedback, transmit multiple cues like voice, physical presence, words etc. and convey emotions and feelings. Because of ICTs restrictions in Iran, the women in this study and their families struggled daily with finding new communication technologies that was not filtered and yet still provided rich communication.

In some cases, they succeeded and were able to find novel internet applications such as free internet calling (e.g. *Kakao Talk*) yet to be restricted by the Iranian government. I found that the women in the study were quite resourceful and adaptive as they always had backup options to guarantee their connection with Iran because they were aware of Iranian ICTs limitations. For example, they installed different video and voice communication applications like *Vchat*, *Google Talk*, *Whatsapp Messenger*, *OOVOO*, *Skype*, *Yahoo Messenger*, *LINE* and *VoIP*, internet free calls applications like *Viber*, *Tango* and *Kakao Talk*. They also bought different low cost international calling sim cards like *Lycamobile* or increased their mobile phone international cap to maintain their relationship with their family and to overcome the Iranian ICTs restrictions and limitations.

In addition, some participants purchased new communication technology gadgets such as iPads or smartphones and sent them to their parents to enable rich communication and thereby hoping to bypass ICTs restrictions. On the other hand, most Iranian families resorted to improving and/or changing their home technologies (such as changing from dialup to ADSL) to enable better connection with their daughters in Australia. Despite such attempts from both sides to overcome the restrictions on ICTs, unequal distribution of ICTs infrastructure between Iran and Australia still continues to be a big challenge for Iranian migrant women in Brisbane as previous studies have shown.

Some participants bypassed slow the internet connection in Iran by using voice chat through *OOVOO*, *Skype* or *Yahoo Messenger*, however, they stated that this mode of communication was not satisfying as it did not enable rich communication and that only audio communication through applications that provided sufficient rich communication for other users. Thus, some participants resorted to making daily phone calls instead of using internet audio/visual chat applications because of slow speed internet in Iran or other limitations, albeit at a heavy cost.

Socio-political Context

Hamel (2009) believes that when discussing ICTs and migration, one should consider the social and political context of host and home countries. This study has shown that Iranian ICTs restrictions are directly related to the social and political situation in Iran, and that participants believed that the internet speed in Iran, particularly before and after elections, became very slow and that their connection through ICTs was totally restricted. Findings also revealed that internet free call applications were also restricted at those times when the Iranian government tried to curtail the flow of information. However, some participants believed that after 2013 presidential election, the internet speed in Iran was faster than before and that their friends could use anti-filter tools easily, and be active on *Facebook*.

Iran's new administration, which came to power in August 2013, has since then taken to social media, using it as a diplomatic tool to engage with the rest of the world. The new Iranian president and Minister of Foreign Affairs appear to be quite active on social media like *Facebook* and *Twitter*, and they are trying to interact with their audiences via these virtual spaces. However, this social media is still filtered for ordinary citizens in Iran who need to use anti-filter tools to access these platforms, but the presence of member of the new Iranian in online spaces could heralds new hope of unrestricted internet access for its citizens.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study was bound by a few limitations. It was difficult to recruit more participants for this study as some potential participants may have had reservations about perceived political nature of the research topic. This may also have impacted the narratives of those who did take part. However, after assuring them anonymity, they

spoke openly about their problems of connecting with Iran with regards to the impact of governmental restrictions on ICTs. This study was also limited only to those residing in Brisbane, and therefore, the findings may not be generalised to represent the opinions of all Iranian migrant women in Australia.

Future studies may examine the use of ICTs among Iranian families in Iran and assess Iranian families' ideas about the impact of Iranian ICTs restriction on their communication with Australia. In addition, more women from other regional places in Queensland and/or Australia could also be interviewed, and by such evaluation, a broader picture of ICTs conditions in regional/rural Australia could be obtained.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Iranian ICTs restriction and the digital divide on the part of the Iranian government resulted in significant challenges for Iranian migrant women wanting to communicate between Australia and Iran. The findings of this study revealed that Iranian ICTs restriction not only affects citizens inside Iran, but it also had significant impact on the Iranian migrant community in Australia. Iranian migrant women in Brisbane struggled daily to find and install various internet applications that would work in Iran and thereby satisfy their communication needs. In trying to overcome restrictions, they were pioneers and innovators in finding new internet applications and in updating novel communication tools. New ICTs that reduce communication costs and decrease travel costs have been a miracle for most other migrant communities. However, enabling rich communication through new channels is still a dream for Iranian migrants who wish to continue and to keep their relationship with their homeland.

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