

## Social media and the migrant experience

In an age of pervasive technology and 24/7 internet access, the old adage of “home is where the heart is” may never have been more true according to the latest research from Dr Lee Komito, senior lecturer at the UCD School of Information and Library Studies. Dr Lee Komito talks about his latest research on the social media habits of migrants in Ireland and explains how web 2.0 platforms like Facebook and Skype serve to maintain a strong bond to loved ones back home in a way that earlier communication technologies could not.

In his paper titled ‘Social Media and Migration: virtual community 2.0’, recently published in the *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, Dr Komito builds a new picture of how migrants maintain distance relationships, interact in an online space and integrate into their new geographic community.

This was compiled with interview data from sixty-five Polish and Filipino non-nationals in Ireland and funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

“One of the first things to emerge from the study was the extent to which social media was being used differently from email and phone calls. The concept of ‘passive monitoring’ came out very early on in the research,” explains Komito. “Interviewees would tell us that they didn’t use social networking sites like Facebook and Friendster to communicate so much as to see what was happening within their network.”

Essentially these social networking sites are serving as a kind of local noticeboard that can be skimmed passively for information in order to see what friends are up to. When a one-to-one conversation is required, this is where video chat technologies such as Skype come in.

“In a way this use of social networking sites is analogous to how people began to use answering machines. They would sit back and listen to their messages to hear what was going on. In this case these websites are being visited very frequently for short periods of time.”

Another significant observation that arose from the study was the importance of the visual element of social media: “There is a great sense of authenticity from seeing images. A lot of other research has been done on how important it is to see people; it makes it more interactive.

“I thought the visual was trivial until I saw someone I knew who was able to see their grandchildren in US for the first time. When you look at their face, you can gauge the emotional significance of an experience like this.”

Social media also seemed to change the nature of friendships maintained. As Dr Komito explains, when someone emigrates it is natural that the people they will keep in contact with most frequently are family members and some close friends. It is likely that they will fall out of touch with former classmates or colleagues. Were you to pick up the phone years later you would probably have nothing in common left to chat about.

Sites like Facebook change everything. Seeing the marriage of an old school friend, watching holiday photos flick past in your news updates or observing conversations between mutual friends gives a sense of what is going on back in your home community.

The bond of social media takes previously weak ties and keeps them within your sphere in the same way that being physically located in your hometown might.

“One funny thing in terms of my own research was that I spent a number of years rubbishing notion of ‘virtual community’. It has its uses but there was little evidence that actual community in the real sense was happening. With social media it looks as though patterns of communication are emerging,” says Dr Komito.

“Everyone knows everyone’s business. It’s passive monitoring not dissimilar to the experience of sitting in a café or pub. You are always aware of who else is there and that background buzz is an important thing. You are aware of the peripheral noise.”

This is not to say that a migrant community in any particular country is now at risk of not integrating properly because of a dependence on social media. In this sense social media can be seen like the training wheels on your first bicycle. Without these training wheels it would be very difficult to learn to cycle on your own. In the beginning they are essential but left on too long and you may be reluctant to ever remove them.

“The research found that migrants use social media to maintain a social life within Ireland, however it is largely within their own particular nationality as well as people they’re not going to see on a daily basis,” Dr Komito points out.

“Regarding implications for long-term participation I don’t know for sure but one possibility is that distant contacts provide an emotional support for people as they adjust to new countries. From research I conducted in Canada it shows that use of social media doesn’t stop migrants from feeling integrated.”

It would be interesting, says Dr Komito, to apply this research to the Irish migrant community. Social media has made people more mobile thus making it easier to relocate because the risk has decreased. “My sense is that if young Irish people maintain contact with their friends they could just as easily be living in Boston, Berlin or Bermuda. It could also be less likely that they put down roots wherever they are.”

Dr Komito explains the push and pull of social media for a generation of young people who are considering immigration. On the one hand being able to video chat to family every day and Facebook your friends greatly decreases the risk of isolation or loneliness but this delays the settling in process.

“Compare Irish immigrants now versus ones going back 100 or even 50 years ago. It used to be that if you got a call from abroad it meant that somebody had died. Now people can chat on a daily basis.

We take for granted the current Irish American community but would it have evolved in the same way in a world of social media? “The Irish diaspora has the ability to be every bit as informed and committed as anyone living here. They can read the papers online or listen to Pat Kenny live on air over the internet.”

Social is only the tip of the iceberg says Dr Komito. Information storage is cheap so we can host images and video online. Connectivity is fast and inexpensive. Services like Gmail are free. The internet defines us both at home and abroad.

*Dr Komito spoke to Marie Boran (BSc 2002), a freelance science and technology writer.*



*Dr Komito pictured here in front of a popular internet café on Dublin's Talbot St. Photo Fred Reilly*