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Belonging in Geographic, Ethnic, and Internet Spaces

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Abstract

The relationship between online and offline social ties is studied in seven Los Angeles ethnically marked residential areas. Contrary to visions proposing a zero-sum game between the two, we advance a "the more, the more" approach to online social ties. Higher level of belonging to real communities translates into a higher propensity for interaction online. This approach is informed by a social shaping of technology perspective, which proposes that strong anchoring to offline social and cultural groups links, rather than separates, "cyberspace" from people's local communities. Empirical evidence, produced by logistic regression, indicates that the chances of making a friend online increase by 7 percent for each "belonging" index unit and by 32 percent for each neighbor known well enough to talk about a personal problem. "Belonging" is captured through an index measure, combining eight items concerning objective and subjective involvement in residential community. Ethnic differences are less pronounced than expected. However, Asian respondents, particularly those of Korean descent, are more likely to form online ties than "mainstream" white respondents. Focus group data suggest that online ties are established with people of the same ethnicity.

The emergence of the Internet as a communication and social interaction tool was initially met with great hopes (Rheingold, 1993) for revitalizing the faltering sense of community afflicting late-modern

societies (Giddens, 1991; Sennett, 1998). Although this optimistic perspective is still popular, especially in technophile media circles (Katz, 1997; Meeks, 1997), there are fears that the main asset of Internet interaction – "virtual" social connections between people who never meet in person – could, in fact, become a social liability. The greatest fear is that online social ties will substitute for real social bonds, in a zero-sum game; the more we connect online, the more we will abandon our neighbors and families (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kielser, Mukhopadhyay, and Scherlis, 1998), preferring online relationships for their greater degree of freedom (Nie, 2001). Some of the fear is that we'll engage online not with people but just with the online environment, that is, not so much a change of venue, but a change from people to technology.

These fears might be just as unsubstantiated as the hopes they try to debunk. Starting with the telephone (Fischer, 1992), communication technology has been used for reinforcing pre-existing social, political, and cultural patterns (Dutton, 1996; Winner, 1977). More recently, empirical studies taking a social shaping of technology perspective (Ball-Rokeach, Gibbs, Jung, Kim, and Qiu, 2000; Hampton and Wellman, 2000; Katz and Aspden, 1997; Rainie and Kohut, 2000) have provided substantial evidence that people who connect to the Internet are more likely to use it for cultivating their social and cultural proclivities (Mansell and Silverstone, 1994; Silverstone and Hirsch, 1997). This perspective proposes that technology is primarily a cultural and social subsystem of society, through which individuals and groups express and try to achieve their constellations of values, social dreams, and so on. Technology is seen not as an autonomous force with a unique capacity to shape social and cultural arrangements, but as a cultural device utilized for achieving various social and cultural goals.

However, the explanatory models offered by this type of research are often insufficiently specified. They only indicate that there is a relationship between being an Internet connector[1] and the likelihood of being involved in the real world. Although useful heuristic tools, these models do not address the core question of if and how *social relationships* in either space (real or virtual) interact. More important, they are rarely concerned with the way in which particular respondent characteristics (social class or status, marital status, ethnic, or cultural

1 We prefer the term connector to "user," more commonly encountered in the literature, trying to point to the fact that social connections online can be and in fact are more than instrumental.

background) mediate the relationship between online and offline social bonds.

The present study seeks to fill this gap with findings from a multi-year study of communication technology and sense of community in real and virtual spaces that is being conducted at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California. Our research indicates that the best predictor of making friends online is the presence of personal ties in real community. The fact that study samples are drawn from seven different ethnically marked neighbor-hoods in Los Angeles increases the substantive significance of these findings. The relationship between online and offline ties holds after controlling for socio-demographic characteristics (gender, income, age, education) and, most importantly, for respondent ethnic commu-nity/residential area and their generation of immigration to the United States.

Our research also indicates that there are substantial connectivity differences between the Asian study groups and a Caucasian study group closest, in sociocultural terms, to the American mainstream population. The Korean[2] group and, to a lesser extent, the Chinese, included are far more likely to have made a friend online than any of the other groups. We interpret these findings from a sociocultural shaping of technology perspective.

Online Sociability and the "Sociocultural Shaping of Technology" Paradigm

The exponential growth of Internet access since the early 1990s has transformed several means of communication, previously reserved for the corporate and academic elites, into mass consumption goods. This has led some observers to speculate about the capacity of computer communication to generate new social formations, freed from place and traditional institutional constraints (Barlow, 1994; Dyson, 1997; Gates, 1995; Katz, 1997; Meeks, 1997; Mitchell, 1995; Rushkof, 1994; Schuler, 1996; Toffler and Toffler, 1995).

The Internet and its component technologies (for example, email, newsgroups, chat facilities, on-demand media, homepages) were seen

2   Ethnicity is designated in text, for conciseness, by the shortest label available: African–American, Chinese, Korean, Mexican or Central American, and White. Obviously, these names reflect the ethnic or racial origin. Thus they should be read as "Chinese" or "Korean"-origin groups or individuals.

as eminently democratic tools of communication because they were relatively cheap, compared to the costs of traditional media publishing, and they could enlarge freedom of speech and equality of access to public debates (Rheingold, 1993; Schuler, 1996). Moreover, the capacity to participate anonymously in online conversations was seen as an opportunity for encouraging more authentic dialogue between people who otherwise feel constrained by their social, racial or gender background (Poster, 1997; Turkle, 1995). In essence, the new medium was presented as generative of an open communication environment where access and authenticity of feeling are maximized.

One of the central themes of this vision was that Internet communication creates sui-generis social groups, capable of supplementing and, in the long run, replacing interaction in the real world. The thinking was that online social spaces would ease the burden of ascribed identities and allegiances built into our social, ethnic, and physical communities (Poster, 1997; Rheingold, 1993; Watson, 1997). The net effect would be more freedom, more equality and more creativity (Negroponte, 1995; Rheingold, 1993).

Soon, however, a number of academic and non-academic critics started to question this view. To the claims of ease of access were brought counter-claims of a gaping digital divide (Barbrook and Cameron, 1995; Boal, 1995; Castells, 1996; Downey and McGuigan, 1999; McConnaughey, Lader, Chin, and Everette, 1998). Other critics pointed to the fact that identity switching can weaken social responsibility (Seabrook, 1997; Slouka, 1995). Nie and Erbring (2000) concluded that the Internet leads to social atomization, a finding prominently featured in the American media (Markoff, 2000). Learning that people who spend more than five hours a week online report spending less time with friends and family they announced that the Internet replicates the social isolation effects of television and of the automobile (Markoff, 2000; Nie, 2001; Putnam, 1995). Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kielser, Mukhopadhyay, and Scherlis (1998) similarly infer from self-reported psychological data that those who spend more time online become lonelier and more depressed.[3]

Although a useful corrective factor, some of these critiques (Boal, 1995; Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, 2001) presented the negative social effects

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3 The results were based on a panel study started in 1998. In a more recent working paper the authors, however, report that after one year the effect was in fact reversed (more time spent of the Internet translates into less self-reported loneliness and depression).

of the Internet in no less direct or powerful terms than those of the position they scrutinized (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, 2001). Both perspectives overestimate the capacity of technology to change deep-seated social and cultural arrangements and proclivities.

An alternative to this Manichean fight in the mirror is the position taken by researchers inspired by a broader sociological perspective. They propose that changes in the web of social and technological connections come from the dynamics of general social and cultural forces (Baym, 1998; Fernback and Thompson, 1995; Jones, 1997). Their social-influence vision offers a much more refined explanatory framework for the role of the Internet in mediating social interaction.

Refusing the legitimacy of the claim that the Internet is a medium that affects (positively or negatively) society from outside, social influence analysts view it as a process involving the interplay of social, cultural, and technological factors (Baym, 1998; Carey, 1988; Contractor and Eisenberg, 1990; Fernback, 1997; Fulk, Schmitz, and Steinfield, 1990; Jones, 1997; Mantovani, 1994; Nye, 1997). This view can be synthesized in the proposition that communication technologies are the product of social choices that predate them (Bijker, Hughes, and Pinch, 1987; Dutton, 1996; MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1985; Williams and Edge, 1996; Winner, 1977). The Internet, like many other modern electronic media, is rooted in social and cultural history, and participation in online groups is linked to powerful socio-cultural forces outside the domain of technology per se (Baym, 1998; Beniger, 1987; Contractor and Eisenberg, 1990; Doheny-Farina, 1996; Fernback, 1997; Fischer, 1992; Fulk et al., 1990; Mantovani, 1994; Matei, 1998; Wellman et al., 1996).

Communication scholars dissatisfied with the ideological poverty of early theorizing on the "social effects" of Internet technologies have tried to offer more dynamic scenarios about the role of computer-mediated communication in society (Ball-Rokeach, Gibbs, Jung, Kim, and Qiu, 2000; Ball-Rokeach and Reardon, 1988; Baym, 1998, 2001; Beniger, 1987; Fernback, 1997; Fernback and Thompson, 1995; Mantovani, 1994; Wellman, 1997, 2001). Some have, even if tacitly, embraced a social shaping of technology perspective, proposing that computer-mediated communication creates social spaces that are quite similar to those we encounter in everyday life (Parks and Floyd, 1996). Others have rejected the idea that online groups, by being "virtual," will also be more open or free (Mantovani, 1994). Computer networks can strengthen human connections when they carry strong communal

values, but they can also weaken them when the values transacted are individualistic (Jones, 1997).

This theoretical approach has fueled a number of studies that provide empirical support for the idea that virtual and real spaces are interconnected. Parks and Floyd (1996) have documented the strength and similarity of online and offline personal relationships. The Pew Internet studies suggest that Internet connectors are increasingly using the medium to maintain and reinforce their existing offline social networks (Rainie and Kohut, 2000). Howard, Rainie, and Jones (2001) report that online experience does not replace other forms of social interaction; instead it complements and extends them. Controlling for socio-demographic characteristics, they found that people who have been online at least once are more likely to have called a friend or relative yesterday. Also, they found that people, and especially women, feel that the Internet has improved the way they manage their social lives. Email was found to be an important communication tool for improving intra-family communication.

An early 1995 social effects of the Internet study concluded that experienced Internet users compared to those less experienced maintain stronger connections with their friends and families, and are more likely to be members of community organizations and to be involved in community affairs (Katz and Aspden, 1997). A study conducted in a highly Internet connected exurban Toronto neighborhood found that Internet-access households are more likely to establish both strong and weak (in network analysis terms) social ties in the neighborhood than households unconnected to the Internet. Connected residents know three times as many local residents, talk with twice as many, and are more likely to invite their neighbors to their homes than their non-Internet connected neighbors (Hampton, 2001; Hampton and Wellman, 2000).

Some early "cybertown boosters" now argue that the technical advantages of the medium can be maximized only in social contexts, including geographic communities, which take full advantage of the social commitments of their users (Rheingold, 1998).

These findings should come as no surprise, since studies of "old media," like the telephone, have revealed the localizing effect of telecommunications. A number of important studies (Fischer, 1992; Pool, 1983) conclude that telephone diffusion in the United States did not end up making the distant more familiar, as initially expected, but in strengthening local social ties.

Thus, the social "effects" of Internet technologies should not be seen as a "pure" media problem. Computer-mediated communication and communicators should be researched as part of everyday social life (Ball-Rokeach, Gibbs, Jung, Kim, and Qiu, 2000; Ball-Rokeach, Kim, and Matei, 2001). Forces similar to those operating in non-networked groups – cultural, social, ethnic – will most probably affect online groups as well (Baym, 1998). Visions about, and value-orientations toward, online and offline spaces are, in fact, similar because they originate in people's minds, not in cyberspace itself. They are influenced by all those things that have an impact on the way people think: education, social class or status, gender, ethnic background, residential location, and so on.

The larger theoretical corollary of this proposition is that the social "effects" of the Internet should be placed in the framework of people's socio-structural connections, including cultural, ethnic, social and local-physical circumstances. The methodological implication is that real and virtual space cannot be studied in isolation. Since offline ties and values precede online connections historically – both at a social and at an individual level – the strength of virtual ties can be expected to reflect those of real ones.

Hypothesis and Research Question

The core assumption of this study, that people take with them their social propensities wherever they go – that is, that "belongers" belong everywhere – is explored through one central hypothesis and a related research question. The hypothesis advances the proposition that online and offline social ties are related. The dataset utilized includes a wide array of ethnic groups living in an urban setting. Thus, the present study is also informed by a concern to detect how ethnic specific social and cultural characteristics shape or mediate the link between online and offline social ties. This concern springs not only from the nature of the data but also from the paucity of research on ethnically diverse environments. To our knowledge, this study is the first quantitative assessment of the way in which specific ethnicities (e.g., Chinese or Korean versus "Asian" racial category) incorporate the Internet in their daily lives. Previous studies took an ethnographic, case-study approach (Cisler, 1998; Mitra, 1997; Zurawski, 1996), with rare exceptions taking a comparative approach (Gibbs, Matei, Mandavil, and Yi, 1997).

Off-line social anchoring is considered from a sociological perspective. That is, offline social ties are considered under the rubric of "belonging," a measure that captures two dimensions of community insertion. The first dimension concerns the ties we directly construct with other people in daily communication and interaction. The second and related dimension refers to images and social perceptions that contribute to community cohesion. This "belonging" measure is synthesized into an index score, which incorporates both *subjective appraisals of neighborliness* and *actual interaction* in real communities (see "Method" section).

This measure is central in testing the central assertion of this study, that is, that the likelihood of making social ties online is stronger when people have stronger social ties in physical neighborhoods. This, once again, is based on the assumption that both types of ties are reflections of a more general orientation to social life that predisposes individuals to community involvement. Because this predisposition is acquired and developed in physical communities, we test the hypothesis that belonging to local community is a predictor of social interaction online:

Hypothesis: The higher the level of belonging to local community, the higher the likelihood of making new personal bonds online.

Our multiethnic study samples live in seven distinct urban-residential areas. Differences in social connection on and offline can be influenced by social contexts and by value orientations reflected in ethnic/residential background. Thus, we are able to assess the mediating effect of ethnic background/residential area. Since there is little research or theoretical work on which to base predictions about such inter-ethnic differences, this is formulated as a research question:

Research question: Do residential/ethnic differences mediate the relationships between offline social bonds and online social ties?

Method

Data collection

The data analyzed in this chapter were provided by the "Metamorphosis" project. Individual and group-level information about com-

munication technology and community attachment in a large American city was collected through a multi-method strategy, including telephone and mail surveys, a media census, focus groups, mental mapping and structured interviews. The core of the study is a random telephone survey of selected Los Angeles neighborhoods.[4] The ethnicities represented in the study samples constitute 90 percent of the Los Angeles county population (Matei, Ball-Rokeach, Wilson, Gibbs, and Gutierrez Hoyt, 2001).

The response rate to the telephone survey was low, 31 percent, calculated by dividing the number of completed interviews by the number of *theoretically* eligible phone numbers. Despite the fact that the phone interview was relatively long (40 to 45 minutes) the cooperation rate – percentage of eligible respondents contacted who completed the survey – was relatively high, 62 percent.[5] While there are sample biases due to the response rate, they appear to be within the normal range for a survey of this complexity (Keeter, Kohut, Groves, and Presser, 2000). The sample overrepresents females, higher income earners, those with higher education and older residents (Matei et al., 2001). Our unusual multilingual data collection procedures include non-English-speaking persons often excluded in survey research. Hence, our study has relatively large numbers of ethnic minorities and new immigrants who live in homogeneous residential areas.

Instruments

The bulk of the data presented in this study was collected through the telephone survey, focus groups and the mail survey. They were all

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4   Westside, White; Greater Crenshaw, African–American; East Los Angeles, Mexican–American; Pico-Union, Central-American; Koreatown, Korean; South Pasadena, White; Monterey Park, Chinese (Allen and Turner, 1997). From each neighborhood only respondents of the target ethnicity were recruited for the study.
5   The main reason for the low response rate is inability to determine eligibility for 40 percent of the phone numbers introduced in the sampling frame, due to no response, despite five callbacks. These phone numbers had to be kept in the sampling frame, as "theoretically eligible" and were used in determining the final response rate. A full discussion of the response rate can be found in the Metamorphosis study technical report, available at
http://www.metamorph.org/vault/techreport.zip.

made accessible to non-English speakers in their native languages (Chinese – both in the Mandarin and Cantonese dialects, Korean, and Spanish). The telephone interviews include measures of (1) participation and level of social interaction in online groups; (2) a "sense of belonging" to the community or neighborhood, measured by integration with the community or neighborhood; and (3) socio-demographic information (for example, age, education, income, generation in the United States).

In addition to participating in the telephone survey, Internet connected telephone survey respondents and their children were invited to participate in focus groups and a supplementary mail survey ($N = 115$). Focus groups revealed how Internet social relations are integrated into the life of each participant's family and community. The mail survey provided information about the types and scope of social online connections, such as websites most frequently visited and their location (country).

Measures

Social involvement in physical communities was measured through a belonging index specifically developed for this study, building on pre-existing literature (Chavis and Wandersman, 1990; Hui, 1988; McLeod et al., 1996). This eight-item measure captures subjective and objective attachment/involvement with the neighborhood (Chavis and Wandersman, 1990; Hui, 1988; McLeod et al., 1996).

Four items capture the subjective dimension of belonging to the neighborhood: "Do you strongly agree, agree, neither agree, nor disagree, disagree or strongly disagree with the statement(s)": (1) You are interested in knowing what your neighbors are like (55 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree); (2) You enjoy meeting and talking with your neighbors (73 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree); (3) It's easy to become friends with your neighbors (67 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree); (4) Your neighbors always borrow things from you and your family (32 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree).

Four other items capture the objective dimension of belonging, asking: "How many of your neighbors do you know well enough to ask them to" (respondent can specify any number equal to or greater than 0): (1) Keep watch on your house or apartment? (mean = 3.5; stan-

dard deviation = 5.8); (2) Ask for a ride? (mean = 3; standard deviation = 5.6); (3) Talk with them about a personal problem? (mean = 1.4; standard deviation = 2.8); (4) Ask for their assistance in making a repair? (mean = 1.9; standard deviation = 3.4).

The "number of neighbors" items were capped at "10 or more," due to skewness. They were further divided by 2, to be brought to the same metric with the "agree/disagree" (subjective) variables. To reduce missing cases in the final belonging index score, all missing cases were replaced with the variable mean. The belonging index was created by summing all eight items. The Cronbach alpha test for the eight-item index scalability is a high 0.78.

South Pasadena/white respondents and Crenshaw/African–Americans had the highest mean level of belonging, 19.5 (standard deviation = 5.81; N = 251) and 20 (standard deviation = 6.5; N = 252), respectively. The lowest scores are for the Greater Monterey Park/Chinese, 15.7 (standard deviation = 3.8; N = 321) and Greater Koreatown/Korean respondents, 16 (standard deviation = 5.4; N = 238). In the rest of the study areas, the mean belonging scores were: East Los Angeles/Hispanic–Mexican, 18.8 (standard deviation = 5.7; N = 250), Westside/white, 17.68 (standard deviation = 5.6; N = 250), and Pico-Union/Hispanic-Central-American 16.6 (standard deviation = 5; N = 250).

Social connectedness online

This was measured by asking if the respondent has "ever met someone online that you consider a personal friend?" Of the 350 respondents eligible to answer this question – that is, those who participate in online activities that include other people – 22.3 percent answered "yes." Raw likelihood of making friends online varies widely across ethnic groups. While 44 percent of the qualified Koreans and 31 percent of Chinese respondents have made a friend online, only 19 percent of the whites from Westside, 16 percent of the African–Americans from Crenshaw, 15 percent of Pico-Union Hispanics, 13 percent of South Pasadena whites, and 7 percent of East Los Angeles Hispanics respondents did the same.

The mail survey provided information about the scope of new media connections. That is, respondents were asked to indicate the five worldwide web sites they visited most frequently. Sites were then categorized according to the location of their main target audience: local (Los Angeles), national-ethnic (country of origin), in the United States,

and "placeless" (for example, addressing a world audience, such as Yahoo, or Hotmail).

Analysis

Dataset preparation and statistical models design

Data were first inspected for normality and the "number of friends" variables were recoded to reduce skewness. Analysis was performed by logistic regression due to the categorical nature of the dependent variable, which is a "yes"/"no" response indicating whether or not the respondent has made a friend online. Belonging and residential location are treated as main predictor variables. Community location was operationalized as a series of dummy variables. All locations were compared to South Pasadena study area respondents (middle-class Protestants) as they are considered to be the closest to the American "mainstream." Since only one ethnicity was sampled from each area, the location variable also represents ethnicity.

Age, income, education, gender and generation of immigration to the United States were employed as control variables.

Findings

We hypothesize that attachment to local neighborhood, measured as "level of belonging," positively influences likelihood of making personal bonds online. The expected result is that stronger subjective and objective anchoring to local community increases the likelihood of making friends online. Logistic regression produces a significant relationship. A model predicting chances of having made friends online indicates that firmer anchoring to one's neighborhood (higher "belonging" score) is associated with greater chances of making personal friends in "virtual" (online) environments (see table 14.1). For each unit increase in "belonging" (i.e., number of people known in the neighborhood and assessment of spirit of neighborliness), the chances of making a friend online are augmented by 7 percent ($B = 0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, Wald $= 4.66$, $p < 0.05$, $\exp(B) = 1.07$).

Thus, the results are consistent with our hypothesis. People's basic community orientation is equally strong on and offline, after controlling for socio-demographic and area characteristics. This finding supports the main point of our study: belongers belong everywhere.

Table 14.1   Variables predicting likelihood of making a personal friend online

Independent variables	B	SE	Wald	P	Exp(B)
Education	0.18	0.12	2.45	0.12	1.20
Age	−0.01	0.01	0.43	0.51	0.99
Income	−0.10	0.09	1.42	0.23	0.90
Gender (male)	0.54	0.30	3.20	0.07	1.71
Immigration generation	−0.14	0.13	1.10	0.29	0.87
Belonging index	0.06	0.03	4.66	0.03	1.07
Koreatown resident	3.21	1.33	5.80	0.01	24.69
Crenshaw resident	0.22	0.57	0.15	0.70	1.25
East LA resident	−1.21	0.89	1.84	0.17	0.30
Monterey Park resident	0.58	0.58	1.00	0.31	1.79
Westside resident	0.13	0.54	0.06	0.80	1.14
Pico Union resident	−0.56	0.82	0.46	0.50	0.57
Interaction Koreatown residency /belonging	−0.12	0.07	3.07	0.08	0.88

Model df = 321, χ^2 = 31.47, p < 0.01.

The special case of Korean connections

The model providing this result, however, required us to introduce among the independent variables an interaction term between being Korean and "belonging." This was demanded by the fact that an initial model, using as independent variables only belonging, location and socio-demographics, failed to provide significant results for belonging or for any of the residential areas/ethnic group variables.[6]

Our introduction of an interaction term into the logistic regression equation was directed by the observation that Koreatown respondents who have made a friend online score disproportionately low on the belonging scale. Dividing Koreans into three groups, in terms of belonging "low," "medium," and "high,"[7] indicates that while 56 percent of those in the bottom category have made a friend online, only 44 percent of the top category have done the same. This is even more surprising upon finding that Koreans living in Koreatown have a 25 times greater chance of making a personal friend online than the "mainstream" whites living in South Pasadena (see table 14.1).

6   Belonging B = 0.04, SE = 0.03, Wald = 2.41, p = 0.12, exp(B) = 1.04.
7   The "medium" category includes scores +/− 0.5 deviations from the mean; "low," scores below 0.5 deviations; and "high," scores above 0.5 standard deviations.

Post hoc analysis interpretation

We suspected that Koreans' irregular behavior in terms of belonging and online social ties is due, at least in part, to the characteristics of the area in which they live rather than to individual-level social inclinations. Koreatown is one of the poorest, crime ridden and most ethnically diverse study areas (Ball-Rokeach, Gibbs, Gutierrez Hoyt et al., 2000). Lower level of belonging among Koreatown online interactors was believed to be produced by lower assessment of neighborliness, not by lack of personal ties in neighborhood. To explore this alternative, a post hoc logistic regression model was generated using one of the components of the belonging measure as the main predictor. This is the item that captures the most intimate neighborhood connections: "number of neighbors known with whom a person can talk about a personal problem." This is highly correlated with the whole index ($r = 0.65$, $N = 1,746$). The model includes the same control variables and no interaction term. The rationale behind this model was if number of strong personal ties in the neighborhood predicts, in absence of any interaction terms, likelihood of making online friends, then the problem we faced in Koreatown came from the items left out (weak interpersonal links and strength of neighborliness).

The results indicate that the variable "number of neighbors with whom one can talk about a personal problem" predicts more directly (that is no interaction terms were used) likelihood of making friends online. For each extra person known in this way the chances of making a friend online increase by 32 percent ($B = 0.27$, $SE = 0.13$, Wald = 4.45, $p < 0.05$, exp(B) = 1.32, Model $df = 311$, $\chi^2 = 27.19$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, respondents from all groups (including Koreans) are equally likely to form personal ties online, when they know a greater number of people in the neighborhood to talk about a personal problem.

Research question: the role of ethnicity in general

The logistic regression presented in Table 14.1 also provides the data necessary to assess the more general role played by ethnicity in mediating the relationship between online and offline ties. These results were supplemented by information collected through focus group discussions. The findings suggest that the role of ethnicity is weaker than expected. Only for one community, out of the seven studied – that of Koreatown Korean residents – did we detect an effect for

ethnicity/residential area above and beyond social connection and control variables.

The data indicate, however, that before controlling for basic socio-demographic variables, not only the Korean but also the Chinese study group displays a higher propensity for forming online ties than the white comparison group. We took the difference between the Asian and the white mainstream group to be phenomenological, that is, to be a key element of what it means to be a Korean or Chinese immigrant in Los Angeles – for example, relatively low income, but higher educational attainment and higher Internet connectivity. In the following discussion we seek a fuller account of these ethnic differences in online connections by examining our qualitative focus group data and data gathered through the mail survey.

Korean and Chinese focus group insights

A consistent theme that emerged during the focus groups was that online connections link our respondents to people or institutions of similar ethnicity or from countries of origin: 36 percent of the websites visited by most of the Koreans and 24 percent by the Chinese focus group and mail survey participants were in Korea or China, respectively. Except for a few (4 percent of total) Central American websites visited by Latino Internet connectors from Pico-Union, no country-of-origin websites were visited by the Mexican, Caucasian, or African-American respondents.

Focus group discussions also reveal that new online social connections are mostly made within the ethnic group. Korean respondents indicate that they have met or know of friends who have met mostly other Koreans online. A Chinese respondent believes that "making friends on the Internet is like making friends in the real world,"[8] the assumption being that ethnicity plays the same important role. During the discussion, a Korean woman said that she found it difficult, when she first came to the United States, to make friends. Email was for her a natural way to contact friends who live far away. In her own words, through email "It seems like they live close to me."

Compared to the white samples, the Asians seem far more cautious when it comes to online interaction. Although expressing their own reservation toward Internet encounters, especially when involving

8   Citations are from the focus group transcripts.

their children, some white respondents from the Westside and South Pasadena do show interest in meeting people online. One respondent from South Pasadena, for example, declares that she loves making friends from other countries online or participating in French chat rooms. Respondents from the Westside seemed to be relatively more open to business virtual relationships. Yet, in general terms, Asian and white respondents converge in using the Internet for reinforcing ethnic ties. For the white respondents this takes a family, rather than an ethnic twist. They indicated that the Internet is a good tool for reconnecting with lost friends and distant relatives.

The budding home-country or US-based ethnic community online environments seem to be two factors that have particular importance in shaping the online experience of our Asian samples. The diffusion of the Internet in South Korea has been rapid and widespread. South Korea is the country with the highest Internet penetration in Asia, the number of Internet users increasing by five times between 1999 and 2000. Three of the top ten most popular sites on the entire worldwide web are Korean (Terazano, 2000). Korean respondents indicated that many of their social connections online are facilitated by the fact that their friends use the Internet and email.

The Chinese respondents seem to be surrounded by a similarly sophisticated socio-technical environment. A Chinese respondent told us that although her computer does not support Chinese characters, her friends in Taiwan have enough technical skill to send their messages as pictures so that she can read them.

Thus, pre-existing social networks organized along ethnic lines support the two Asian groups' propensity for making friends online. These are seen as natural environments for meshing "real" and online social networks. The importance of these pre-existing environments is highlighted by the general apprehension both Chinese and Korean respondents manifest toward making anonymous online relationships. A Chinese respondent told a relevant anecdote: "People may cheat you. In Taiwan there was a woman who cheated lots of guys to mail her money by sending out beautiful pictures. But she's actually ugly and fat." Another Chinese respondent is weary of the licentiousness of some online environments. "People can say everything including shameless stuff. I was in a chat room once. There were some shameless guys there. I felt bad about it and never tried chat rooms again."

The Korean respondents resonate with these opinions. They believe that online relationships outside one's in-group are shallow. One man

declared that what turns him away from online relationships with people met randomly on the Internet is that: "people talk about happy things, but not about sad things. Sad stories are not usually shared via Internet." A woman continued his thought: "On-line friends are just for fun, not for serious relationships." In conclusion, focus group information suggests that Asian respondents have an "in-group" social orientation when building ties online. These are seen as a continuation of their offline social networks, created largely through ethnic affiliation.

Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter investigated the relationship between online and offline social ties in an ethnically diverse urban environment. Contrary to visions proposing a zero-sum game, our research advances a "the more, the more" approach to online bonds. Rejecting overly optimistic perspectives (Anderson, Bikson, Law, and Mitchell, 1995; Harasim, 1993; Kiesler and Sproull, 1992; Meeks, 1997; Rheingold, 1993; Sproull and Kiesler, 1991) or those overly pessimistic (Boal, 1995; Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, 2001), we propose that a higher level of belonging to real communities translates into a higher propensity for interaction online. The inclination to form and maintain lasting ties on or offline derives from social and cultural resources and the proclivities of people acting in context of their real communities, rather than from characteristics of the medium, per se.

Our findings support the social shaping of technology perspective in that strong anchoring to offline social and cultural groups links, rather than separates, "cyberspace" from people's local communities. In concrete terms, after controlling for basic socio-demographic characteristics, individuals are more likely to make friends online when they have a relatively high level of "belonging" (i.e., if they know more people in the neighborhood and believe that they live in an area characterized by neighborliness). These findings confirm a growing body of research looking at the online sociability phenomenon (Hampton and Wellman, 2001; Haythornthwaite, 2001a, 2001b; Howard, Rainie, and Jones, 2001; Katz, Rice, and Aspden, 2001; Wellman, 2001).

The present findings are also consistent with parallel research about the role more traditional communication channels (from interpersonal to print and electronic media) play in boosting or hindering belong-

ing in the same seven ethnic neighborhoods of Los Angeles (Ball-Rokeach, Gibbs, Gutierrez Hoyt et al., 2000). In essence, the Internet adds a new layer of communication opportunities and competencies to pre-existing communication environments, shaping our social lives through reinforcement rather than through displacement.

Korean residents of Koreatown, however, present a deviant outcome. Those more likely to make friends online are slightly less, although not statistically significant, likely to belong. Controlling for location and socio-demographics, Koreans are also the ones most likely to have friends in cyberspace. The Chinese respondents are also more likely than non-Asian groups to be connected to other people online. Focus group data indicate that the propensity for online interaction among these Asian groups may represent a tendency to migrate their ethnic social networks online, rather than to create entirely new "cyberspaces." Asian focus group participants seemed to be quite skeptical of random online relationships, seeing them as a form of entertainment rather than as community experience. Nonetheless, the tendency of the two Asian samples to create ethnic patterns of Internet association makes even more intriguing the finding that Korean respondents are less likely to belong to their Los Angeles neighborhood when making online ties.

On the basis of the observed interaction effect between being a Korean Koreatown resident and belonging we suggest that this reflects residential area, not ethnicity characteristics. Koreatown is culturally and socially fragmented. The overall level of belonging for Koreans in Koreatown, both for Internet connectors and non-connectors, is one of the lowest among our study samples. In addition, most middle-class, educated Koreans are spread throughout wealthier Los Angeles suburbs. Relatively educated Internet-connected Koreans residing in Koreatown may feel isolated from their residential environs compensating for the social shortcomings of the area by extending their connections to other Koreans in South Korea.

The particularities of the Korean sample point both to the limitations and the advantages of our research design. Our samples are slices of urban-metropolitan areas defined in terms of ethnically-marked social experiences. This allows, on the one hand, investigation of the particularities of community life in context of associated communication webs. On the other hand, the sensitivity of our strategy to the individuality of each specific place, limits generalizations.

Most generally, our analysis is limited because we surveyed only one ethnicity per study area. Thus, a multilevel analysis procedure, to

more clearly distinguish between ethnic-group versus area character-
istics effects was not possible. However, post hoc analysis has shown
that the density of residential community ties more uniformly predicts
the likelihood of making friends online than the complex measure of
"belonging" (that is, number of neighbors known and assessment of
neighborliness in the community). This circumstantial evidence sug-
gests differences between simple ties and complex "belonging" in
their effects on online sociability. A more conclusive analysis awaits
future research in which we sample multiple ethnicities from the same
residential area.

   Until then, the potential significance and strength of our findings is
in the substantial convergence of these case studies. Across seven dif-
ferent neighborhoods, three races and multiple national origins, the
best predictor for online ties is the presence of offline personal con-
nections or belonging.

   This tells us a story about neighborhoods in one American metro-
politan environment. Does this account apply nationally, and does it
apply to the patterns of social interaction and communication in the
home countries of our study samples? These issues are also on our
research agenda. We hope, however, that our current results will
inform community and communication technology policies of local
officials or community organizers in Los Angeles or other metropoli-
tan areas populated by similar ethnic groups.

   Our findings suggest that technology/community building inter-
ventions should be dual track. Efforts to build community locally
should have payoffs for Internet community – what we call a "mag-
nifying glass" effect. People who contribute social capital to their res-
idential places can also be expected to lend their "social capital" to the
online groups they inhabit. Put another way, unless social connections
online are supported by pre-existing social and cultural networks
offline, their long-term prospects are probably not that great. Contin-
ued efforts to understand the linkage between the two social spaces
can help us to more effectively foster stronger and more viable ties
between people in both worlds.

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