



MOROCCAN DIASPORA IN FRANCE: COMMUNITY BUILDING ON YABILADI PORTAL

Abstract :

Over the last decade, social networking sites emerge as an ideal tool of communication that facilitate interaction among people online. At the same time, in a world which is characterized by massive waves of migration, globalization results in the construction of the diaspora who seek through new ways to build communities. Within this framework, while traditional media have empowered diaspora members to maintain ties and bonds with their homeland and fellow members, the emergence of social media have offered new opportunities for diasporas to get involved in diasporic identity and community construction. The creation of several diasporic groups on social media like Yabiladi.com and WAFIN.be, respectively in France and Belgium, emphasize the vital role they play in everyday lives of the diaspora. To study the importance and implications of these online communities for diaspora members and investigate their online practices, this article carries out a virtual ethnography of the Moroccan community on *Yabiladi* portal in France. By means of the qualitative approach of interviews, this article aims at justifying whether the online groups of diasporic Moroccans in France can be defined as communities, and whether social networking sites can be considered as an alternative landscape for the diaspora to create links with other diasporic members. This article, through users' experience, provides deep understanding of Yabiladi members' beliefs about the "community" and their online daily practices which enable them to "imagine" it as a community.

Key words : Moroccan diaspora, community, social networking sites, Internet, ethnography

Introduction

In general terms, migration is not a new practice for humanity, nor is the investigation of migration a new area of research for academic studies. Nevertheless, over the last decade, the emergence of new information and communication technologies (ICT) have led to a review of migration literature. Thanks to these new technologies, transnational identities have emerged and, thus, have affected the traditional theories of migration. They have emerged as the ultimate tool to provide the appropriate conditions for migrants to strengthen ties and bond with fellow citizens and re-root in a common sense of community their cultural placelessness. (Appadurai, 1996).

While in the past migrant communities always demonstrated interest in exploiting traditional media (newspapers, radios, and TV) to keep themselves tied with their homeland, the advent of the World Wide Web has established a new decentralized and egalitarian platform for diasporans to build communities. Bernal argues that the web 2.0 applications strongly enabled diasporic communities to overwhelm geographical distance and barriers to re-enact their cultural heritage to create transnational, virtual diasporic spaces. (Bernal, 2006). Contrary to the traditional mass-communication sender-receiver models, Internet in general and web 2.0 in particular have given rise to a participatory privilege in cultural consumption, production and community building.

In fact, over the last ten years there has been a considerable proliferation in the construction and use of the social networking websites (SNS), especially Facebook, the most popular social networking site with the number of users which exceeds 1.71 billion monthly active users¹. This increasing number is a strong indicator about the significance of this medium, which has led to a great transformation in the way people communicate, build and maintain virtual friendships. Because these websites were basically built with the younger demographic as the target, a large part of the scholarship has targeted young peoples' use of SNS.

According to digital diaspora studies, one of the most significant sections of the people using SNS include those in the diaspora. In an era of globalization, characterized by increasingly intense population movements, has led to the appearance of diasporic communities. Covering a time period of two years, I observed that Yabiladi website is appropriated by Moroccan diasporic groups for their community communication. This site has

become a highly busy space for Moroccan diaspora that is using it for discussing topics

¹<http://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/numb-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>

ranging from the burden of finding a job and accommodation in a new country to ceremonializing religious festivals ; from the challenge of living in a new country to the concerns of their belonging, their identity and what they can do to maintain their homeland culture. Consequently, Yabiladi website has become a virtual space of diasporic discursive animation and introduces itself as an area of research for studying the subtleties of diasporic communication, the expression of ethnicity in the new media and the way this space empowers the Moroccan diaspora to negotiate its new identities and realities.

Unfortunately, the Moroccan diaspora whose number increases year after year and constitutes the so-called Moroccans residing abroad (Marocains Resident à l'Étranger (MRE)) has received very modest attention. Loukili's (2007) article, a unique work carried out on Moroccan diasporic cyberspace, shed some light on Moroccan migrants' use of cyberspace to give voice to their Moroccan identity.

Despite the fact that the above mentioned research on Moroccan diaspora conveys the idea that Internet offers the opportunity for setting up a new communication platform, none of the researchers up-to-now has attempted any



exploration of the practices on social networking sites in the context of the Moroccan diaspora. Therefore, it is significant to bring social networking sites inside the research area and shed light on the diasporic members' use of the SNS.

In order to start this article, I consider the Moroccans on Yabiladi in France as a case study and pay a particular attention to the daily practices of its members. By means of this case study, this article investigates the practices of the Moroccan diaspora members on Yabiladi and how they perceive and experience 'community' on Yabiladi forum.

Mythodology :

In this article I explore Yabiladi as a social networking site which provides a setting for everyday interactions. This theoretical framework is borrowed to comprehend the complexities of the interactions taking place on Yabiladi forum and the awareness of its participants about Yabiladi as a community. By adopting Christine Hine's (2007) definition of 'virtual ethnography', this is an attempt to explain how participants of an online discussion on forum perceive this technology and use it to communicate and negotiate their identities. Based on this, it is reasonable to adopt an ethnographic approach thanks to the fact that it permits researchers to deeply understand the full picture of a certain community and to grasp the connotations which the community associates to their social world (Bryman, 2001). Just like in the case under study, Yabiladi allows for the technological setting of interaction as well as the social context of members' diasporic status as Moroccans in France, an ethnographic approach permits investigating the meanings that Yabiladi users socially build through their interactions on this portal.

Because this research focuses on the practices through which Yabiladi portal is used and understood in every day settings for the construction of community and identity by diasporic Moroccan members in France, a virtual ethnography of the social networking site Yabiladi seems thus to fit best as an adequate methodological foundation and Yabiladi portal becomes the ethnographic substance for this research. This ethnographic research is carried out to investigate the long-lasting practices through which Yabiladi community becomes meaningful to its members. Christine Hine argues that 'ethnography is a way of seeing through the participants' eyes : a grounded approach that aims for a deep understanding of the cultural foundations of the group (Hine, 2000 : 21). It is attractive in a sense that it helps provide deep description and offer very close comprehension to the ways which people interpret the world (ibid :42).

Yabiladi is a rich source of information about Moroccans as a community. Data collection took about two years, hence experiencing many important moments in the life of the community. Another important feature is that on the forum, identity is revealed naturally, like in every day life, through stories and experiences. Before starting the discussion of the social networking site under study, a brief description is introduced.

Yabiladi Portal :

Yabiladi² was launched in 2002 by Mohamed Ezzouak, a second generation Moroccan migrant. Launched from France, Yabiladi is the most visited online diasporic site by Moroccan migrants. The reason behind creating Yabiladi portal was that Mohamed Ezzouak wanted to create direct link between Moroccan diaspora members and provide them with the

² My country in Arabic

new ways of communication, information exchange and to develop the feeling of belonging (Loukili, 2007). According to Afrik.com, the key reason behind creating Yabiladi portal was that to 'federate all Moroccans in the world. Internet is a powerful tool to meet, have contact, learn get informed and entertained' (Afrik.com, 2002).

According to lavieeco.com, Yabiladi portal managed to have an active diasporic community on a regular basis with 40000 visits per day and more than 1 million per month in 2008 (lavieeco.com, 2008). Statistics provided by the webmaster of Yabiladi indicate that 50 percent of Yabiladi users live in France, 25 percent in Morocco and the rest of users are based in different countries.

As a portal site. Yabiladi is designed in terms of several sections which serve both nationals and migrants. It provides a wide range of administrative information like Moroccan embassies and consulates contact information, as well as local and international news. Yabiladi contains sections about religion, food recipes and updated Morocco-related political and cultural events in Europe and Morocco. It also guarantees access to Moroccan TV and radio. In addition, Yabiladi contains interactive applications like video and photo sharing, a chat room and a forum. Generally, participants observation and interview data show that it is specially the forum section that is used by Moroccan diaspora members for their community interactions and thus I will deal with this section for pertinent data collection and analysis.

Moroccan Immigration : General View

During the second half of the twentieth century Morocco was one of the prime sources of labour migrants for several countries in Western Europe such as France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Thousands of unskilled Moroccan workers were recruited to compensate for the labour shortages, especially in sectors like industry, mining, housing, construction and agriculture.

According to statistics provided by the Organisation of Economic Co-operation for Development (OECD) 'Morocco remains a major sender of migrants with annual flows estimated at 140,400 individuals.' This continued till 1980s after some migration restrictions which had been put by the traditional receiving countries in Western Europe. Oil crisis in 1973 caused very drastic economic stagnation and resulted in low demand for unskilled labourers in Western Europe. Since



then, Moroccans have tried new destinations like Lybia, for temporary contracts, but, recently, the United States and the French-speaking Canadian province of Quebec have attracted an important number of Moroccans, especially the well-educated. The second wave of migrants to Europe are students. The majority of them have been leading a good living and decided to settle there. While the reasons of migration for the first group of migrants were economic, to help the household, for the second were political and socio-cultural. According to Reniers (1999), socio-cultural reasons can be translated in terms of an urge among young Moroccans to get rid of the Moroccan model where religion and family restraints are widespread. Another motive which strengthens the desire of Moroccan youth to migrate is the use of information and communication technologies such as internet and satellite receiver that diffuse tantalizing images of western societies.

Moroccan Diaspora and the Use of Electronic Media :

The majority of scholarship on media and diaspora agrees that Internet opens up many opportunities for people to participate in the discussions which take place in the public sphere. For migrants, Internet is an ideal tool to keep in touch with their fellow compatriots all over the world and maintain their bonds with their homeland. By the same token, Moroccan migrants, especially in Western European countries have set up a number of diasporic websites. Generally, according to statistics provided by the webmaster of these diasporic websites, they indicate that Moroccan migrants are especially active on the Internet. Today, thanks to modern electronic media, Moroccan diaspora members have compressed space and geographical barriers to get involved in transnational activities.

Still, not all people have equal access to Internet. Many scholars point out that factors like social status, geographical distribution (urban or rural), gender and ethnicity determine the access to the World Wide Web. This is typically relevant to Yabiladi users. Yabiladi users are mostly young. According to Yabiladi figures, 72 percent of them are between 18 and 40 , and 67 percent are well-educated. Early Moroccan migrants, especially unskilled labourers, have less access to the Internet vis-à-vis the second and third generations. Generally speaking, Yabiladi can be perceived as a symbolic space that is part of the Moroccan diasporic community, a platform for expressing the feelings of belonging and maintained ties with the country of origin.

Data Analysis :

To address the key research questions on community, the qualitative approach is used for data analysis. First, the data gathered from interviews is analysed in terms of narrative analysis and interpretation. Then, discussion of my observations is undertaken about the shared practices and system of meaning produced by Yabiladi users.

To address the key research question, participants were asked about reasons for joining Yabiladi and their perceptions about Yabiladi community. The responses include sub-themes that appear in the 8 interviews. Schroder et al indicate that 'the analysis is thus, to some extent framed by pre-given set of codes or categories, but proceeds with an open mind by adding new codes as warranted by the transcript' (Schroder, 2003 : 168). This technique of getting results through generating themes from the interview guide and then from interview transcripts is illustrated in the table below.

How do users experience and perceive community on Yabiladi ?	
Reasons for joining Yabiladi	Perceptiopl of Yabiladi community
.looking for information	.doubt about how strong are members' commitment
.exploiting benefits from membership	.community is genuine for some members
.enjoyment and socializing	.unlikely alternative for offline community

Seven interviews out of eight willingly looked for a community on diasporic portal of Yabiladi. This practice of looking for other diasporic members highlights the importance of the property of 'searchability' a property of social networking sites. In justifying the reasons why diasporans join Yabiladi, interviews pointed out to the strong appeal for the community thanks to its name and massive membership. Informant 1 made it clear when he revealed 'actually being a Moroccan and in France ... I just had to join the Moroccan community ... especially with that number of members in the community ... you can obtain enough information.' Similarly, informant 2 wanted 'to get some important information which migrants might need for settling down for good in

³ Italicised words indicate themes

France.' Informant 6 explained, 'I love conversation to go on ... members share much found in all transcripts. Furthermore, the responses showed the informants' expectations for *exploiting benefits from membership*, a theme that exists in the eight interviews. In addition, information ... information about jobs, housing, etc.' These responses clearly illustrate the informants attempts for *looking for information* ³ appeared as a central theme that can befor respondents 2, 3 and 4 it was obvious that their need was just to find new friends in a new country. That was their decisive factor for joining Yabiladi. As respondent 4 put it, 'the time I left Morocco, I didnt want to feel alone ... and I think this was the best way to find friends...', and respondent 5 explained, 'I noticed all the posts were new (1min or 2 min) and I decided to be part of this busy community ... and to obtain some help when I need especially from intelligent Moroccans with different backgrounds



and who live in France.' For informant 2, socialising was a crucial factor for joining Yabiladi, as he explained, 'when you are single and working in a foreign country ... it's good for you to make friends and enjoy their company.' These responses indicate another aspect of Yabiladi membership, that of *enjoyment and socialising*.

Therefore, 3 themes (*looking for information, exploiting benefits from membership and enjoyment and socialising*) were generated from the responses to the question that illuminated the groups' reasons.

The answers by the informants for the question about their perception of Yabiladi community and if they saw it as a real community stressed the fact that he could easily find people with the same interests so as to feel at home. He explained, 'yes for me it's a community ... generally we Moroccans living in France are part of it and we belong to it. Yabiladi is good for making friends and socialising ... if you have just come to France then Yabiladi is the place where you can get information, help and even you can plan for a trip to discover the place where you live ... it is also a good place for finding people with similar tastes and opinions to feel home.'

Likewise, respondent 4 explained that, 'I believe it is a community ... sometimes I feel that I belong to it more than to Paris ... in 2010 time of crisis I still remember I could find people who were ready for help ... not all people, but they exist...'

Informant 3 argued that, 'yes it is a real community, real people and real events... a group with almost the same interests ... personally I don't harbour strong connexion to Yabiladi ... because I believe that in the end it is just a virtual community.'

In the time the above responses demonstrate high dependence on Yabiladi, some others are doubtful about members' commitment. Respondent 1's belief 'it is community although some people who know each other just ask questions and get answers and leave' indicates that participation in the community for some members happens just when there is a need. This explanation discloses two important things about some of Yabiladi members: *uncertainty about members' commitment and the community is real only for some*.

To account for how Yabiladi members create a community and maintain it, new themes came to view from the interview answers: 'high traffic on Yabiladi' and 'diversity in community'. Respondents 1 and 2 revealed the central topics that make the forum interesting.

Respondent 1: interesting topics catch your attention ... the reason for coming in big numbers is that there are knowledgeable people who are ready to give hand. Terrorism/culture/religion/science/bled⁴/religious events/wedding ceremonies/Moroccan cinema and sports ... these topics keep me in the forum ... they make everyone participate...

Respondent 2: return back to Morocco, investment in Morocco, education, housing, jobs, ramadan, Eid lekhir⁵, electoral elections in Morocco, summer holidays in Morocco, festivals, wedding ceremonies ... and in case someone needs help people respond immediately ... that is the best place.

Conclusion :

In order to address the key research question 'How does Moroccan diaspora perceive and experience community on Yabiladi? Two umbrella themes were identified: *the reasons for joining Yabiladi* and the *conceptions of Yabiladi community*. Following this, six sub-themes

⁴ B'led refers to Morocco in Moroccan Arabic

⁵ Eid lekhir is an Islamic religious ceremony commemorating the Abraham sacrifice, it takes place once a year.

were generated through informants' responses, which introduce their perception and experience on Yabiladi. While the themes for *looking for information, exploiting benefits from membership and enjoyment and socializing* reveal the reasons for joining Yabiladi by Moroccan diaspora users, the themes of *doubt of how strong are the members' commitment, community as genuine for some members and unlikely alternative for offline community* appear as the central point that attract Yabiladi members about the community.

Despite the fact that online diasporic congregations such as Yabiladi platform appear like a substitute landscape for community building, it is equally important, however, to acknowledge that members' skepticism about the ties and relationships established on such public space. Sceptical members see it as a community which is characterized by temporary relationships and involves no sense of commitment, and thus in these members' perception it is unlikely to be an alternative for the offline community.

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