CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Facebook groups as transnational counter public sphere for diasporic communities

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Abstract: Mainstream media tend to frame media content from the perspectives of locals and seldom in the interest of diasporic communities. However, the emergence of social media has supported the existence of online diasporic communities. Deploying insights from the concepts of alternative media, digital counter public sphere and hidden transcript, this study explores the use of Facebook groups by Zimbabwean diaspora to form transnational online communities and connect with the homeland. This is a netnographic study of selected Facebook groups of Zimbabweans residing abroad. The study shows that since mainstream media in both home and host countries tend to exclude and marginalise interests of diasporic communities, Facebook has become an alternative counter public sphere for diasporic communities. Due to the affordances of social media, networking sites can be expedient platforms for creating diasporic networks, facilitating information circulation and enabling unrestricted and wide-ranging public debate; however, they can be volatile and susceptible to cybercrime and cyberbullying. The study demonstrates conundrums of online-based communities with regard to issues of trust, legitimacy, accountability and regulation. Research Article; Cultural Studies;

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Presently, there is conspicuous digital presence of diasporic communities on social media comprising members connected by places/countries of origin and residence, as well as language and ethnicity. Since, migrants are often excluded and negatively represented in mainstream media of homeland and destination countries, Facebook groups have become alternative counter public spheres for diasporic communities, where members create networks, circulate and exchange information, and debate issues with some degree of freedom. The study critiques the use of the Facebook’s group function by Zimbabwean diaspora to create online communities and to (re) connect with the homeland. This objective was pursued by analysing conversations in selected groups of migrants. The study shows that while the spaces are fragile spaces and can be prone to cybercrime and cyberbullying, social media can be expedient platforms for creating diasporic networks, facilitating information transfer and enabling free public debate.
1. Introduction
The media and migration nexus, access and representation of migrants in the media, cultural identities and the connection of migrants with home countries are widespread and contested issues in media, cultural and migration studies globally and Africa in particular (Bleich et al., 2015; Hall, 1990; Jha, 2014; Mawadza & Crush, 2010). One major question that arises in this body of literature is the relevance of host and destination countries’ mainstream media content to migrants, as well as their access to and participation in the media. There is worry on the apparent misrepresentation and exclusion of migrants in mainstream media at both ends. The obvious learning is the exclusion and negative representation of diasporic communities in mainstream media (Karim, 1998). This shows problems in the portrayal of diasporic communities and their access to mainstream media in both home and host countries (Hall, 1990; Jha, 2014; Voicu, 2013; Zhang, 2000).

Diaspora is a concept that indicates a dispersed network of ethnically and culturally related people (Baker, 2004). The term suggests notions of migration, movement and dispersion that result in the formation of transnational networks and communities. Due to persistent and waning political and economic conditions, Zimbabwe is one of the African countries whose nationals are scattered across the diaspora (Willems & Mano, 2010). Specifically, unemployment and poverty push Zimbabweans to South Africa due to proximity (Crush et al., 2017; Mawadza & Crush, 2010), and in recent times the United Kingdom, Australia and United Arab Emirates have become popular destinations among Zimbabweans (Maviga, 2019).

Journeying to foreign lands often brings high hopes and excitement, however, the process of migration, living in diaspora, as well as connecting with fellow migrants and the homeland may come with agonising trials, hurdles and disillusionments (Magalhaes et al., 2010; Merry et al., 2017). The challenges revolve around unavailability of appropriate information for migrants in both host and destination countries, obtaining prerequisite documentation to gain entry, residing or working in foreign countries, adapting to foreign cultures, maintaining connections with homelands, as well as failure to attain the hoped for socio-economic progresses. Some of the day-to-day trials for migrants include challenges in accessing official documentation such as work visa/permits, marginalisation, xenophobic attacks, unemployment and accommodation (Crush et al., 2017). Interviews with Zimbabwean acquaintances in South Africa, Australia, Dubai and the United Kingdom corroborated the point that migrants experience stern challenges in their bid to integrate into foreign communities and maintain connections with relatives, friends and developments in the homeland. That is, the question is on how to keep in touch, interact and relate amongst themselves (migrants) in the host countries and how to link up with communities in Zimbabwe. For them to cope with the outlined challenges, communication platforms and networks are key in accessing, debating and sharing pertinent information. This indicates the need for media and communication networks that cater for the needs and interests of diasporic communities both in home and host countries. However, mainstream media expectedly tend to frame media messages from the perspectives of and for the locals and seldom in the interest of diasporic communities (; Conzo et al., 2021). Rarely, do mainstream media in both host or destination countries prioritise communication needs or concerns of diasporic communities. In instances where they are covered, they are often portrayed negatively (Banjo, 2014; Conzo et al., 2021; Mawadza & Crush, 2010). For instance, in South Africa, reports on successes of migrants are scant,
instead the press tends to cover more of the unpleasant activities of the black African migrants (Jani, 2019).

The emergence of social media supported by new digital and communication technologies has seen the proliferation of various online groups, including diasporic communities. These online spaces have also become an alternative digital public sphere for Zimbabweans living abroad (Manganga, 2012). Using social media and its affordances, diasporans form virtual communities comprising migrants connected by language, ethnicity as well as particular physical location of origin in the home country or place of residence in the host country among other bonding factors.

In these virtual publics, members create, circulate, share and debate diverse economic, political and socio-cultural concerns connected to the homeland and host countries. This indicates the cyberspace’s power in deterritorialising physical locations of nationhood by extending to include online diasporic communities (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010).

Amid a wide array of social media platforms, Facebook is one of the most popularly used among Zimbabweans residing in and outside the country. The diasporans exploit what Kietzmann et al. (2011) call the group functional block to connect with fellow migrants residing in the host country/city on Facebook thereby forming transnational diasporic communities. Among the groups we identified include among others, “Zimbabweans in Dubai”, “Zimbabweans in Australia Community Notice Board”, “Zimbabweans in UAE”, “Zimbabweans in Germany”, “Zimbabweans in Cape Town” and “Zimbabweans in Mzansi Community”. Interested members request to join the preferred groups, and they are either accepted or turned down by the administrators or other group members. Thereafter, they become members of the diasporic communities who can create, circulate, discuss and exchange different forms of content among themselves.

Against the aforesaid background, we explore Zimbabwean diaspora’s use of Facebook to create and buttress connections in host countries and with the homeland. This purpose is pursued by examining posts, comments and rejoinders on pages of prudently chosen Facebook groups of migrants residing in South Africa, United Kingdom, Australia and United Arab Emirates. The study exposes diasporans’ trials and tribulations in foreign lands, as well as their longing to connect with the homeland and appraises the expediency of the diasporic online communities towards resolving the predicaments. The study shows that Facebook communities are expedient transnational counter public spheres that provide diasporans with an alternative space to circulate and exchange information, as well as debating issues in ways that contrast with mainstream media in both homeland and host countries. They also provide a window to the subversive practices and discourses migrants deploy to cope with the frustrating and unfulfilling experiences in destination countries and to connect with the homeland.

2. Migration, diaspora and social media nexus

This section contextualises the existence of diasporic virtual communities on Zimbabwean Facebook by way of reviewing existing studies on the interplay between social media, migration and diasporic communities. Understanding diasporic virtual communities on Facebook calls for solid grounding in theoretical and empirical issues of diaspora, migration and social media. Thereafter, we present and analyse the findings on Zimbabwean diasporic communities’ use of Facebook groups to connect with fellow migrants and to keep in touch with relations back home as depicted in posts, comments and conversations.

The concept of diaspora relates to migration and dispersion; it means individuals residing outside their native country but share a collective memory and have got physical or sentimental link with the homeland among other features of connection (Anand, 2003; Grossman, 2019; Safran, 1991). Anderson’s (1991: 224) conception, diaspora is an “imagined community” of people living abroad but who share a collective memory of the homeland nation. In this study, the concept of diasporic communities refers to online publics who are connected by their membership to
Facebook groups comprising individuals who profess to be living abroad. Alonso and Oiarzabal (2010: 50) terms it “digital diaspora” to refer to immigrant's digital presence on social media.

There are several reasons why people migrate to other countries. The common push factors are basically economical—lack of employment in the home countries; social—the desire to further education; and political—seeking political refuge (Morris, 1998). With specific reference to Zimbabwe, increased migration abroad has burgeoned due to the prolonged economic and political crisis especially in post-2000 period (Madebwe & Madebwe, 2017; Willems & Mano, 2010).

The rapid growth and impact of digital and social media in Africa, and the world at large has received significant scholarly attention. Watson (2016) describes digital media as platforms that include websites and applications, as well as digitised content including text, audio, video and images. This digitised content is accessed and consumed through different digital devices that also include computers and mobile phones. Digital media have substantially changed the structure and flow of information and exchange among people, groups and across nations. Digital media also provide opportunities for people’s participation in public conversations. The working of digital media has been enhanced by the presence of the Internet, which further triggers the formation of the network society, which in turn promotes the emergence and survival of distinct online communities. In fact, the Internet has created space on which identities and narratives are expressed, explored and strengthened (McGregor & Siegel, 2013).

The growth of digital media technologies has also enabled the creation and growth of social media, especially social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram among others which are collaborative platforms for individuals and communities to share and discuss user-generated content (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Social networking sites exhibit a feature of interactivity among individuals who are connected online (Zervou, 2017). Use of the Internet in everyday life has risen dramatically in recent years, and that has also increased researchers’ interest in how social media such have changed social realities (McGregor & Siegel, 2013). The utility of social networking sites in circulating information and opinions is indisputable. Twitter, for example, is increasingly being used as a channel for circulating information and opinions (Ross & Rivers, 2018). The proliferation of digital media technology, the Internet and social media has promoted the formation of online diasporic communities of Zimbabwean living abroad. These spaces have become veritable transnational public sphere for diasporans to form linkages among themselves, connect with the homeland and cope with frustrating and unfulfilling life in host countries.

The Internet and new media technologies unite dispersed and scattered migrants; and it is in these online networks where diasporic communities re-enact identities, exchange information and culture and create public debate (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010). Digital technologies have resulted in the formation of an alternative digital public sphere which is characteristically counter hegemonic since it promotes alternative discourses to the official public sphere (Sampedro & Avidad, 2018). The new technologies and interactive online social networks have enhanced a sense of collective identity among diasporans (Banerjee & German, 2010). Zervou (2017) demonstrates how the Facebook group function was deployed by striking workers in Greece, where the group became a gathering place for strikers, as well as their relatives and other people who sympathised with them. This virtual group served as a means of communication among people who belonged to the striking community. Similarly, this study critiques the use of Facebook groups as an alternative counter public sphere for Zimbabwean migrants in the context of exclusion and negative portrayal in mainstream media in home and host countries.

With specific reference to the interface of social media and migration, existing studies demonstrate social media's role in facilitating social ties between individuals and migrant networks (McGregor & Siegel, 2013; Obi et al., 2021). Social media play a critical role in creating, strengthening and sustaining connections among migrants. It is also a rich source of useful knowledge on migration. Thus, social media can provide migrants with information about the destination country
and facilitate the retaining of connections between migrants and their countries of origin. This indicates the role new communication technologies play in improving connections and relationships between transnational activities and communities (Hugo, 2005).

Home is an evocative concept among African migrants. Transnational migrants live a dual life across national borders (Banerjee & German, 2010). After having been raised in the homeland culture, it is arduous for migrants to integrate into the new community and to keep connected to homeland life. Waldinger (2007) maintains that migrants always maintain some kind of connection to their native country through different transnational activities that may include among others, regular trips home, sending remittances and regular communication with relatives back home through different channels. There are challenges in travelling, communication, acquiring the necessary documentation and sending money home. This study, therefore, explores diasporans’ alternative transnational activities through reading conversations on Facebook.

Memory is the faculty that permits humans to have consciousness of personal or collective selfhood or self-identity (Assmann, 2008). It is memory that enables people to be reminiscent and nostalgic of their historical identities and experiences. In particular, cultural memory is a form of common memory where individuals share the same identity and live in groups or as communities. The existence of diasporic Facebook groups demonstrates reawakened cultural memory of Zimbabwean migrants. Using the transnational space of social media, migrants form nostalgic and sentimental connections with fellow migrants and with people in the homeland.

In terms of media coverage, diasporic communities are generally not prioritised in mainstream media in both host and home countries; they are often prejudiced in terms of access and representation (Banjo, 2014; Conzo et al., 2021; Mawadza & Crush, 2010). Mawadza and Crush (2010) maintain that South African media reporting on immigration tends to be negative and unanalytical. It is characterised by homogenising discourse, which puts migrants into all-embracing negative categories such as illegals and foreigners. The classification of migrants as foreigners has got damaging connotations as it suggests a negative group of people who survive at the cost of the locals. Banjo (2014) also contends that South African newspapers give little attention to stories that relate to African migrants, and they routinely associate them with despicable activities. The binaries of locals versus foreigners (migrants) usually involve a relationship of power, inclusion and exclusion with one of the pair (locals) being empowered with a positive identity and the other side (migrants) becoming the subordinated other (Baker, 2004). Jani (2019) also says that black African migrants in the studied South African newspapers are presented using negative metaphors that revolve around illegality, drug dealing and crime. This body of literature is revealing and shows the problems in media coverage of migrants and their access to mainstream media. Therefore, there is a need for alternative media spaces such as social media that can be used to challenge xenophobic media discourses in host countries and provide relevant information to migrants.

Migration from Zimbabwe is widely professed to be a reaction to the persistent socio-political and economic crisis (Crush et al., 2017). Though there is a long history of Zimbabwe to South Africa migration, other countries, such as the United Kingdom, Australia and the United Arab Emirates, have become popular destinations in recent times (Madebwe & Madebwe, 2017). While use of social media by diasporic communities has not received particularised consideration, the importance of the Internet to Zimbabweans living abroad has been studied and underscored (Manganga, 2012; Mutsvairo, 2013; Willems & Mano, 2010). Willems and Mano (2010) and Manganga (2012) highlight that the Internet has become an important space for disseminating and receiving news about the home country. Focus is on the growth of diasporic online media such as Zimdailly and New Zimbabwe that largely serve diasporic communities and to some extent readers in the homeland who are interested in critical news as opposed to state media news. Brooks (2019) studied the use of digital media by Zimbabwean diaspora in Botswana to engage in political commentary and debate about their homeland, and noted the existence of a vibrant and multidimensional network of activists.
communicating about political issues. In the context of a repressive media environment in Zimbabwe, diasporic communities opt for online platforms to express themselves and imagine “Zimbabweaness” in the virtual space (Brooks, 2019; Ndlela, 2010; Willems & Mano, 2010). This indicates that the Internet has emerged as a vibrant alternative public sphere for Zimbabweans within and outside the country (Manganga, 2012). Therefore, this study is a timely addition to the burgeoning literature on the use of alternative digital public sphere by Zimbabwean migrants.

3. Alternative media, digital counter public sphere and hidden transcript

Given that migrants are routinely marginalised, excluded and undermined in mainstream media, this study deploys strands of the concepts of alternative media, digital counter public sphere and hidden transcript. Alternative media denotes media that do not belong to formal mainstream media (Ndlela, 2010). According to Fuchs (2010) alternative media analyse domination and express standpoints of the excluded. This is synonymous to the concept of counter publics—a communicative platform for people without access and representation in the public domain (Dahlberg, 2011; Fraser, 1990). These spheres emerge in response to exclusions of people’s representations in public spaces. Counter public spheres are vital sources of information that provide counter discourses to the dominant public sphere. As a result, these spaces are characteristically counter hegemonic (Ndlela, 2010). These are the arenas where members of subordinated groups create and circulate counter-discourses, in ways that express opposing dominant representations, interests and needs (Fraser, 1990).

New digital technologies have ushered in a new form of alternative media—an alternate digital public sphere or a counter public sphere that creates new spaces characterised by interactivity (Ndlela, 2010; Sampedro & Avidad, 2018). Against the backdrop of a repressive media environment in Zimbabwe (Ndlela, 2010) and diasporans’ lack of access to mainstream media and negative portrayal of migrants (Jani, 2019), we conceptualise Facebook groups as alternative media and digital counter public spheres for migrants. The conception of digital counter public sphere is augmented by Scott’s (1990) hidden transcript concept. Hidden transcripts are often contrasted with what Scott calls public transcripts. Public transcripts entail descriptions or perspectives of the dominant, while hidden transcripts symbolise discourses performed outside the public space, which is controlled by the dominant. The argument is that the public transcript does not narrate the whole story; instead hidden transcripts take place in what Scott calls the “offstage”, that is, away from the guarded space of the dominant. In this study, hidden transcripts refer to discourse in Zimbabwean diaspora’s Facebook groups often overlooked in mainstream media of both home and host countries.

4. Methodology: a netnographic study of diasporic communities

This article is a netnographic study of selected Facebook groups of Zimbabweans residing in Dubai, South Africa, United Kingdom and Australia. Netnography is a research strategy that is basically an online adaptation of ethnography. It involves methodical ethnographic study of online communities by combining observation, participation and archival work among other methods (Kozinets, 2015). The online space, in this case Facebook is the site of research.

Data was collected through mining of digital content from the Facebook group pages using the Facebook Application Processing Interface (API) that provided historical data. The study purposely focused on Facebook since it is the most popularly used social networking site among Zimbabweans, including those living abroad. More so, there is obvious digital presence of diasporic communities on the social media platform in form of groups. We studied six purposively selected Facebook groups of Zimbabweans living in South Africa, the United Kingdom, United Arab Emirates and Australia. These groups are “Zimbabweans in Dubai”, “Gweru Zimbabweans Living in the UK”, “Zimbabweans in South Africa platform”, “Zimbabweans in South Africa and Beyond”, “Zimbabweans in Western Australia Network” and “All Zimbabweans in Cape Town”. We considered the diversity of diasporic communities that may reflect different experiences, expectations and online engagements. For that reason, we selected Facebook groups of migrants that represented four destination countries which are South Africa, the United Kingdom, Australia and United Arab Emirates. Presently, these countries are some
of the popular destinations among Zimbabwean migrants (Crush et al., 2017; Maviga, 2019; Mawadza & Crush, 2010), and also there is a discernible digital presence of diasporic communities of Zimbabweans in these four countries.

Just like what is done in traditional ethnography where the researcher systematically observes a community, we followed and in some cases joined the groups and studied posts, comments and conversations by group members for a period of 6 months. In carrying out this study, we considered the differences that exist in communication strategies between people in the home country and diasporic communities. Migrant communities develop particular cultures of communication, which are very complex and which cannot be reduced to a continuation of trends in the country of origin. This is even more complex on online platforms that are characterised by free entry and exit, as well as the ability to remain anonymous (Chibuwe & Ureke, 2016). For that reason, we validated the findings by in-depth interviews that we conducted with six conveniently selected acquaintances who were living abroad at the time the study was conducted, and at the same time were members of the studied diasporic communities. Data was also collected using data analytics. Data analytics allowed researchers to observe the presence of migrants on Facebook groups, as well as the occurrence of posts, shared information, discussions and type of discourse. The collected data was analysed using thematic and discourse analysis approaches. Inductive thematic approach was employed to identify and analyse themes strongly linked to data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Discourse analysis allowed us to analyse different patterns and meanings of language deployed in conversations in the studied Facebook diasporic groups.

5. Encounters with diasporic communities on Facebook
This study was set out to explore the use of Facebook groups by Zimbabwean diaspora to form linkages with fellow migrants and connect with the homeland. This purpose was pursued by analysing posts, comments and conversations in Facebook groups of migrants purportedly staying in South Africa, United Kingdom, Australia and United Arab Emirates. The study was meant to expose Zimbabweans’ struggles in foreign lands, and evaluates the convenience of the online communities towards circumventing the challenges.

Firstly, findings revealed online diasporic communities of Zimbabweans living in various parts of the world sustained by Facebook groups. In these groups, migrants organise themselves in different cohorts following different criteria for enlisting membership. The labels of the groups reflect particular locations (towns, cities or regions) in homeland and host countries. “Zimbabweans in Dubai” and “All Zimbabweans in Cape Town” depict clusters of Zimbabweans migrants living in the cities of Dubai and Cape Town, respectively. In some cases, some groups’ labels represent names of countries of origin and countries in which the migrants currently stay as in “Zimbabweans in South Africa and Beyond”, “Zimbabweans in Western Australia Network” and “Zimbabweans in Mzansi Community” (South Africa). Also, the groups’ labels specifically denote specific places (cities or provinces) in Zimbabwe and those in host countries as in “Gweru Zimbabweans Living in the UK”. The presence of diasporic communities on Facebook is an indication that Zimbabweans living abroad exploit the group function to form linkages among themselves and with people in the homeland. This is testimony to social media’s role in facilitating a wide transnational network (McGregor & Siegel, 2013). Hence, the Zimbabwean diaspora’s use Facebook supports the development of what Anderson (1991) refers to as an imagined community, where Zimbabweans living abroad use the online space to share a collective memory drawn from the homeland nation.

In each online diasporic cluster, there is an administrator, or administrators who founded and are the managers of the groups. Among other roles, the administrators approve or disapprove requests to join the group, as well as regulating the content posted in respective groups. They can block, reprimand or in extreme cases remove disruptive members. The members can freely exit the group whenever they decide to terminate their membership.
The post and comments in the studied groups demonstrated dynamism and interactivity which is typical of digital platforms especially in the sharing and exchange of information among migrants. This was reflected by posts and comments observed on the selected groups’ pages. Members shared diverse information among themselves and with people in the homeland. The shared and circulated information included travelling procedures, permits/visa requirements and processing, employment opportunities, accommodation, news in home and host countries, as well as the challenges encountered in destination countries. For example, the post:

Makadini vadikani inini ndinogora mu South Africa ndirikudawo link yekuenda kuDubai, ndi-batsireiwo hama dzangu, mari ndinayo (Facebook group- ‘Zimbabweans in Dubai’).

(How are you beloveds, I am currently living in South Africa, I intend to relocate to Dubai please assist. I have enough funds).

The ensuing responses from the members following post provided the relevant and important information useful to those intending to relocate to Dubai as economic migrants. This shows the expediency of Facebook groups in information sharing for those intending to move abroad and among individuals living abroad. Since diasporic communities are not a priority in mainstream media in both host and home countries (see, Banjo, 2014; Mawadza & Crush, 2010); obviously information needed by migrants may not be readily available in United Arab Emirates and Zimbabwe’s mainstream media. Interestingly, some posts, comments and conversations uncover unorthodox survival strategies deployed by migrants such as acquiring travelling and working documents. For example:

Ukunetseka kuvhura bank account usina mapopa here. Ndibate panumber dzinoti … (Facebook group- ‘Zimbabweans in South Africa platform’).

(Are you facing challenges opening a bank account without required documentation? Get in touch on the following number …)

Tinogadzira magwara ekuts vagisa basa nemutengo uri pasi, maasiramu, tsambayepaunogora, zvese tinokusotera (Facebook group- “All Zimbabweans in SA”).

(We sort out documents for use in job applications on cut-price … asylums letters, proof of residence, we sort out everything).

The above conversation cannot be done in mainstream media of any country, whether in Zimbabwe, South Africa, United Kingdom or United Arab Emirates. It reveals that it could be possible that some migrants fraudulently find their way into host countries without proper documentation especially Zimbabwe to South Africa migration. After finding their way into South Africa illegally, they find ways to regularise their stay again through illegal means. Though this information cannot be used as evidence to prove such practices, it is enough cue to show that such practices do happen. However, as shown by members’ comments, it is unfortunate that some are duped by fraudsters who promise to resolve migrants’ problems through nonconformist means. Thus, while the discourse in the studied online diasporic communities gives the impression that social media can be expedient platforms for information exchange among migrants, study findings also revealed that they largely circulate unfiltered news and material incongruous for mainstream media. Therefore, Facebook is an alternative digital public space for diasporans who often misrepresented and excluded in mainstream media. The posts, comments and conversations uncover challenges faced by migrants in host countries, and some of the unconventional strategies they adopt to survive in the foreign land even though they may not have the requisite credentials. In Scott’s terms (1990), the discourse exposes the “hidden transcripts”, which are a window to understand diasporans’ aspirations, tribulations and experiences.
The study findings also show Facebook as convenient in creating and consolidating migrants’ connections with fellow migrants in host countries, and with friends and relatives in the country of origin—Zimbabwe. In the studied groups, migrants exchanged information about sending remittances or items to or from the homeland, Dubai, South Africa, United Kingdom or Australia. The posts and comments demonstrate that migrants sometimes evade mainstream third party transnational channels of sending remittances back home as a way of cutting costs and expediting the process. As conversations in the groups show, the most prevalent method is exchanging of currencies among members with equivalent amounts in the homeland. Thus, in cases where migrants intend to send money to Zimbabwe, they do it amongst themselves without the involvement of a third party organization. We also noted that, before travelling home, some members inform other group participants in case there could be someone with a parcel that needs to be sent home. Using this method, members evade formal methods of sending remittances and other items back home. This is presented in the posts below:

Please inbox, anyone with US$100 dollars in Zimbabwe in exchange with AED here (Facebook group- ‘Zimbabweans in Dubai’).

I am going to Zimbabwe tomorrow, in case you want to send something, just buy me a drink. (Facebook group- ‘Zimbabwean in Mzansi Community’).

The posts above suggest that, using networks created by Facebook groups, migrants evade conventional methods of sending remittances and parcels home by deploying “community” and “peer” based methods. However, this does not necessarily suggest that the methods are absolutely free. The phrase “buy me a drink” in the above stated post indicates a token of appreciation to be given to the traveling colleague. Nevertheless, in most cases, it remains a cheaper and faster method than third party agents since it is a peer-to-peer arrangement and not an official charge. Sending remittances and items through personal contacts is one of the most common practices among many Zimbabwean migrants. Facebook groups, therefore, function as alternative spaces deployed by migrants to evade conventional and sometimes costly means of sending remittances money and other items to friends and relatives.

However, other posts reveal that sometimes migrants lose money and other items in peer-to-peer arrangements. The migrants are repeatedly duped of their hard earned money in fraudulent activities executed through diasporic community connections. This is evidence that online diasporic networks are susceptible to problems and crimes associated with the cyber sphere. Posts, comments and conversations that reveal occurrences of cyber-crime and dishonest posts and promises such as fake advertisements and news are commonplace. For instance:

_Kune vanotumirwa zvinhu kana kutumira musape murume uyuhameno ndomuti tsotsi here kana kuti haagone baso but andigarisamudish … akapiwa macertificates angu nemabirth records angu-ndaakungoudzwa mastories … (Facebook group- “Zimbabwean in Dubai”)

(If you intending to send something home, never give it to this man (picture provided). I do not know what to say about him, he could be a criminal or just incompetent, he was given my credentials to bring them here but now he is telling me unending stories).

The above stated post confirms the dynamics and conundrums of community-based transnational activities in terms of legitimacy, accountability and regulation. This is because online migrant communities are very complex and cannot be conflated with the “offline” diasporic communities. The complexity of digital diaspora is necessitated by the ambivalence of online platforms which are characterised by free entry and exit, and the ability to remain anonymous (Chibuwe & Ureke, 2016). The problem is that these groups can be easily penetrated by people who may not even part of the migrant communities.
It is also important to note that though they have relocated, Zimbabweans residing abroad remain very much interested in the political and socio-economic developments in the homeland. In actual fact, as the Facebook conversations suggest, diasporans appear to be more fascinated about news from home than those currently based in the homeland. Therefore, news about Zimbabwe of different kinds and in various formats is shared and deliberated in the online diasporic communities. As a counter hegemonic platform, opinions shared in these wired communities of migrants display a higher degree of freedom of participation and speech than what possibly happen in mainstream media. They are not restricted by any gatekeeping mechanism and afraid of the incumbent hegemonic political power both in either the home country or host countries. Hence, the groups are alternative platforms that can provide insights into the migrants’ attitudes on the politics in the homeland. This discovery corroborates existing views in present literature which show that for Zimbabweans living abroad, the Internet is an important space for distributing and receiving news from home, as well as contesting issues concerning the nation (Manganga, 2012; Mutsvairo, 2013; Willems & Mano, 2010). While previous studies focused on the development of diasporic online media, such as New Zimbabwe and Zimdaily, this study shows Facebook as a vital Internet-based platform where news about Zimbabwe are circulated within online diasporic communities.

The study also established that Facebook groups are used by Zimbabwean diaspora to reminisce and satisfy their cultural cravings. In the context of the new environment with a different language, migrants join online communities made up of netizens from the homeland where they converse in home languages. It is also an online market place for home products especially food items such as sausages, cereal, fish, peanut butter and beverages. It is in the groups where culture, music and entertainment shows by home artists are organised and publicised. The groups are dynamic platforms for reliving memories and performing other nostalgic discussions. Through these groups, netizens “live” as a community to the extent of contributing resources for funeral and repatriation of the deceased’s bodies. Through these groups, migrants attempt to live homeland culture away from home. However, while the study presents Facebook groups as instrumental in integrating dispersed Zimbabwean population together, we noted resurfacing of politics of language, ethnicity and the nation in migrants’ conversations in ways that replicate “offline” communities in the homeland. As shown in previous studies, language and ethnicity are volatile factors in Zimbabwe, and the marginalised linguistic minorities reaffirm identities and resist marginalisation using ethnolinguistic online communities on Facebook (Mpofu, 2019; Mpofu et al., 2018).

Discourses on Facebook capture the reality about life of and experiences of Zimbabwean migrants. The digital counter public spheres for migrants where they circulate and access information that relate to them and yet may not be suitable or available in mainstream media. The existence of Facebook groups of Zimbabwean migrants, as well as the posts, comments and interactions, proves its role as an alternative channel for migrants to interact and relate with each other in spite of physical distance separating Zimbabwe and host countries. The groups function as places of withdrawal from the foreign environment and platforms to reconnect with fellow nationals.

6. Concluding remarks
The study was set out to explore the use of Facebook by Zimbabwean diaspora to create online communities and to connect with the homeland. This goal was pursued by analysing posts, comments and conversations in purposively selected Facebook groups of migrants residing in South Africa, United Kingdom, Australia and United Arab Emirates. Due to obstinate and waning political and economic situation in post-2000 Zimbabwe, its nationals are scattered across the diaspora, with the aforesaid four countries being some of the popular destinations. Using social media platforms, diasporans have virtual communities of participants connected by place of origin in the home country, language and ethnicity as well as location/place of residence in the host country. Given that mainstream media in both home and host countries tend to frame media
content from the perspectives of and for the citizens, and seldom in the interest of diasporic communities, Facebook groups have become alternative counter public spheres for Zimbabwean diasporic communities. In these spaces, they create and build online networks, access, share and debate subjects of interest relating to their experiences and aspirations in both the homeland and host countries. The study shows that due to the affordances of social media, social networking sites like Facebook can be expedient platforms for creating diasporic networks, facilitating information circulation and enabling unrestricted and wide-ranging public debate; however, they are volatile and susceptible to cybercrime and cyberbullying. This demonstrates the conundrums of online-based communities with regard to issues of trust, legitimacy, accountability and regulation. This study is an apt addition to the emergent body of scholarship on African virtual communities, specifically literature on existence of wired diasporic communities on social media.

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