

LEBANESE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

The Virtual Diaspora:

The Case of The Lebanese Diaspora After the Civil War

By

Nicole Georges Maamary

A thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts in Migration Studies

School of Arts and Sciences

October 2018

THESIS APPROVAL FORM

Student Name: Nicole Maamary I.D. #: 200600009
Thesis Title: The Virtual Diaspora: the Case of the Lebanese
Diaspora after the Civil War
Program: MA in Migration Studies
Department: Social Sciences
School: Arts & Sciences

The undersigned certify that they have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis and approved it in Partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:

Master degree in the major of Migration Studies

Thesis Advisor's Name	<u>Paul TABAR</u>	Signature		DATE: <u>23 / 10 / 2018</u> <small>Day Month Year</small>
Committee Member's Name	<u>Sami Baroudi</u>	Signature		DATE: <u>23 / 10 / 2018</u> <small>Day Month Year</small>
Committee Member's Name	<u>J. Skute- Quais</u>	Signature		DATE: <u>23 / 10 / 2018</u> <small>Day Month Year</small>



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Dedication Page

To my loving family, my friends and most importantly to my fiancé, thank you for being a constant source of support and encouragement during the challenges of graduate school and life. I am truly thankful for having you in my life.

To my wonderful supervisor, thank you for your guidance and for believing in me!

Acknowledgment

This project would not have been possible without the support of many people. Many thanks to my advisor, Phd Paul Tabar who read my numerous revisions and helped make some sense of the confusion. Also, thanks to Andrew Denison for editing and proofreading the thesis and to my committee members, Phd Jennifer Skulte-Ouais, and PhD Sami Baroudi, who offered guidance and support. And finally, thanks to my parents, my fiancé and numerous friends who endured this long process with me, always offering support and love.

The virtual Diaspora: The Case of Lebanese Diaspora after the Civil War

Nicole Georges Maamary

Abstract

International migration is attracting increasing attention among governments and hometown associations in particular because of the positive implications it can generate on the development of both sending and receiving countries. Continuous communication between the migrant and their hometown is a crucial factor for strengthening national belonging and supporting this mutually beneficial relationship. Today, communication is dependent on time-and-space compressing mediums; the fastest of which being the Internet, the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), and the emerging social media platforms. Hence, the use of online tools has become increasingly popular among migrant communities and their hometowns for the purpose of reinforcing these links.

Lebanon has a long history of migration, and the Lebanese diaspora is widely dispersed across the globe. Migration flows from Lebanon have differed in reasons and periods, however, the homeland's attachment to its migrant community has led numerous hometown associations to spare no effort in reaching out to the Lebanese diaspora and tapping into new forms of media to stay in constant coordination with members of the diaspora. How is the connection being made from Lebanon and in what spatial context?

In my thesis, I will be introducing the concepts of a Third Virtual Space and Virtual Diaspora, and how it has been utilized as a platform for Hometown Associations to communicate with the Lebanese diasporic communities in order to foster the development of Lebanese towns and villages.

Keywords: Diaspora, Internet, Third Virtual Space, Virtual Diaspora, Hometown Associations, Migration, Settlement, Remittances, political remittances, social remittances, Lebanese Diasporax

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Overview

Lebanon has long been a country of migration with a diasporic population exceeding that of those residing in Lebanon. According to the World Lebanese Cultural Union (2017), 12 to 15 million Lebanese migrants reside abroad and exceed the current 4 million Lebanese residents living in Lebanon. The exact number of Lebanese migrants is still debatable mainly because of transnational diasporic members who have been persistently on the move across national borders and whose movements are untraceable. But what remains sure is that migration has long been a remarkable occurrence in Lebanese history.

1.2 Background

From Lebanon's independence in 1943 up until the beginning of the civil war in 1975, Lebanon was referred to as the "Paris of the Middle East," and more often, financial prosperity won over sectarianism. When the civil war broke out, it was estimated that over 900,000 Lebanese fled Lebanon between 1975 and 1989; an alarming number which amounted to approximately 40% of the Lebanese population. After the civil war, and moving beyond political instability, many Lebanese migrated for either professional or economic reasons in the hopes of seeking better opportunities in all parts of the

world. Migrating Lebanese mainly migrated to North and South America, Australia, West Africa, the Gulf, parts of the Middle East and Europe where they established their own communities. Even though the decisions to move to different countries differed throughout history; identity and imagined communities remained sentimental to the Lebanese diaspora commonly in the host societal context. Migrants have stayed in touch with their families and friends back home and with other diaspora niches around the world through “new immigrants, familial connections, and through larger cultural organizations” (Lebanese Diaspora, 2016, para. 32). The most important link that the diaspora maintained is the link to family members. This is because of the rooted importance of family ties in the Lebanese culture. “These connections have allowed many Lebanese in the Diaspora to remain connected to their culture and homeland” (Lebanese Diaspora, 2016, para. 32).

1.3 Research Question

The Lebanese migrant community, also referred to as the largest group of Arab immigrants (Abdelhady, 2011), can be found in all corners of the world since the mid-nineteenth century until today. In spite of all the potential that this diaspora maintains, the Lebanese government had never seriously taken the initiative to form a “policy framework to govern relations between Lebanon and its expatriate communities, nor a clear socio-economic plan to seriously involve the diaspora in the development of their homeland” (Hourani, 2007). As a result, the need for a reliable platform which would encompass effective tools to bridge the gap among the scattered diaspora and Lebanese Hometown Associations (HTAs), and that could be easily constructed and accessed, is

of significant relevance. A platform that can pave the way to more collaboration, more interaction, more patriotism and more involvement in different Lebanese developmental projects.

With the increasingly growing importance of the Internet, social media services, and real-time information, the concept of a “Third Virtual Space” reveals itself as a powerful medium that allows HTAs to reach out and attract the attention of Lebanese migrants around the world; and with the click of a button.

Before raising the question of “What difference does the Internet make to the ‘third space’?” and “How has social media intensified the usage and growth of this ‘third space’?”, it is mandatory to question the importance of the research in the future of social media and the Internet in the growing number of the diasporic communities around the world. This is especially important when many of the achievements and accomplishments are being registered in the Lebanese HTAs. While looking at actors inside Lebanon seeking to affect the ‘third space’ through HTAs, I will focus on defining what the Third Virtual Space is for those inside and outside Lebanon through the use of multiple examples. Conversely, is this ‘third space’ going to be a different space than the one immigrants live within when they are outside? Is it the space that they left behind? Is it none? Or, is it the space resulting from the interaction between outside and inside? It is significant then to give this space an empirical meaning based on research done previously and build upon it by investigating more into the connotation of the “third space.”

1.4 Objectives

This thesis aims at redefining the concept of diaspora in the light of a new emerging virtual space that will be referred to as the “Third Virtual Space;” a space that is independent from the geographical spaces of both the sending and receiving states (this will be elaborated on later). Moreover, it presents a method that involves the social media platforms acting as a tool to group the online diaspora under the title of a combined digital community. It also highlights major HTAs in Lebanon and how they are using the Third Virtual Space as a platform to conduct development projects with the support of the targeted diaspora.

1.5 Thesis Outline

Chapter 2 will target research-based definitions of the terms “Third Virtual Space” and “Virtual Online Diaspora.” The key terms will be used throughout the whole thesis to clarify that the functionalities of these groups rely heavily on the Internet and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) within the context of Computer-Mediated Communication.

In Chapter 3, historical events and dispersions of the Lebanese immigrants will be studied to target their locations, numbers and aspirations. I will then continue to list the new emerging HTAs that are interested in the well-being of Lebanon through the guidance of the Lebanese migrants into new projects of awareness targeted for economic and political goals.

Chapter 4 will analyze the importance of the Internet in creating operations in the Third Virtual Space among the online Virtual Diaspora. Moreover, the analysis will shift to study the future of the Lebanese HTAs and how the Virtual Diaspora are being used through this Third Virtual Space and for what purpose.

Chapter 5 will conclude my thesis and will open new doors to future recommendations and policies that should be implemented in the usage of the Third Virtual Space by the virtual communities and the HTAs in parallel.

1.6 Methodology

As stated previously, this study aims at exploring the HTAs in Lebanon by utilizing the Internet and social media to connect with the Lebanese Virtual Diaspora for a multiplicity of reasons now that the Internet has made it much more efficient. I will begin by presenting two new concepts that will be referred to as the “Third Virtual Space” and “Virtual Diaspora” based on qualitative analysis from collected published data. I will then elaborate on how to utilize this space and this community in the form of a platform. This platform will be essential for HTAs to communicate with the Lebanese diasporic communities in order to foster the development of the Lebanese towns and villages.

The qualitative method of analysis is the social research method of Document Analysis, “often used in combination with other qualitative research methods as a means of triangulation - ‘the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon’” (Bowen, 2009, p.28). It is based on reviewing, analyzing and examining

documents for systematic evaluation of a study. The research method adopted is the qualitative research methodology of document analysis and available data works in triangulation with Grounded Theory Qualitative research method. This is a research method that enables the development of a theory which relies on time, place, and people” (Glaser, 2002, p.6) offering an explanation on the main concern of a certain population, its substantive area and how that concern is resolved or processed (Glaser, 2002, p.6).

Analyzing documents allows for the coding of present data in the form of public records such as the ongoing records of an organization, personal documents such as social media and blogs, data available online and physical evidence such as posters and flyers. The data collected is linked precisely to my research question and based on previous literature published on this field of study in the social sciences. The results will be listed in the form of narrated content analysis.

Choosing this methodology was based on the availability of information obtained from existing data and documents previously published by contemporary social scientists in different papers, videos, interviews, websites and government records which were obtained online. The data will reveal a great deal about the Virtual Diasporas, the Third Virtual Space and HTAs in Lebanon concerned with the Lebanese diaspora. The significance of this method as stated by Karagiorgi (2011, p.51) is that the applicability of this particular method in the analysis of educational documents, since documents are not affected by the fact that they are used, resemble unobtrusive measures.

In my research, I will rely on gathering multiple definitions of social media, diaspora,

and the virtual space to redefine them in the new era of an ever-shrinking world. I will then analyze the importance of the definitions in contributing to the effects of diaspora on the HTAs in Lebanon. The methodology limitations are based on the lack of reliable numeric data of accurate information on the Lebanese diaspora in addition to the lack of prior research conducted on this topic in Lebanon. The available data is not measurable however analyzed.

Chapter 2

Virtual Diaspora and Third Virtual Space

This chapter will examine the definitions of key terms that are essential for the purpose of this thesis research. The terms that will be redefined to serve the purpose of the study are Diaspora, bridgespaces, Computer-Mediated Communication (along with Information and Communication Technology) and Hometown Associations. From these definitions, new terms will emerge throughout the analysis and will be referred to as the “**Third Virtual Space**” and “**Virtual Diaspora.**”

2.1 Diaspora and its Virtual Aspect

The different definitions of the diaspora and the definition of social media will be interlinked in this section to clarify what Virtual Diaspora really means. According to Cohen (1996, p. 507), “The notion of diaspora, used first in the classical world, has acquired renewed importance in the late twentieth century. Once the term applied principally to Jews and less commonly to Greeks, Armenians and Africans... Many retain or have acquired dual citizenship, while the consequences of globalization have meant that ties with a homeland can be preserved or even reinvented.” Brubaker (2005), on the other hand, mentioned that Armstrong’s view of “mobilized diaspora” in “Mobilized and Proletarian Diasporas” in 1976 was built on the model of the experiences of Jewish, Greeks and Armenians, similarly to what Cohen said, and “Chinese, Indians, Lebanese, Baltic Germans and the Hausa of Nigeria are among those

often mentioned as trading diasporas” (Brubaker, 2005, p. 2). He argued that diasporas are treated as “bona fide actual entities” and cast as unitary actors (Brubaker, 2005, p. 10). Brubaker (2005, p. 10) further elaborated by explaining that the diaspora “are seen as possessing countable, quantifiable memberships,” and that they are, in fact, counted. Furthermore, we learn from the “first attempt to estimate the *real numbers* of the main historical, modern and incipient diasporas’ that among ‘historical diasporas’... the Lebanese (Christian) diaspora reached 2.5 million” (Brubaker, 2005, p. 10-11; Sheffer, 2003). Rahman (2011), on the other hand, states that diaspora is a critical term linked to citizenship and cultural identity. Hossein and Veenstra (2017) added that the diaspora moves beyond the migration process to include notions of socio-economic, political, cultural and developmental effects on society in a transnational world where media and telecom opened up opportunities for a more complex condition. They also claimed that “the notion of diaspora is used to refer to different types of migrated people. As immigrants live with a duality and sometimes struggle to be accepted by host societies, the influence of their home culture can remain strongly with them. On the other hand, immigrant people also must be a part of the host culture. As a consequence, the experience of living in a cultural duality or multicultural society is an integral part of the diaspora community” (Hossein and Veenstra, 2017, p. 4-5).

Carter (2005), in his article “The Geopolitics of Diaspora,” states that “diasporas can reproduce the essentialized notions of place and identity that they are supposed to transgress” (p. 54). In other words, these diasporas are fighting the notion of territory while maintaining a connection with the based community and creating a third space.

Faist and Ozveren (2017) defined diaspora as a group of people dispersed from their homeland sometime in the past either due to a traumatic experience or specialization in long-distance trade. They have a common memory of a lost land and create an imagined one to maintain a collective and ethical cultural and political autonomy.

Hiller and Franz (2004) stated that the term “diaspora” has implications of real and imagined relationships with scattered people, who in return, sustain this link with the Internet which is the fastest form of communication and contact. On a larger scale, what seems to be the outcome of the Internet linking diaspora together can more broadly be described as connections of people from different countries under the umbrella of common interests and identities without taking into account whether or not these people have any previous knowledge or relationships with each other. The main element is the common original location and the time and space that makes them interact together. “Thus place is an active factor in cyberspace that is based on a physically-defined community of origin, but which operates more like an interest community” (Hiller, Franz, 2004, p. 73).

Androutsopoulos (2006), similar to Cohen and Brubaker, referred to the term diaspora as originating from the Jews living outside Palestine and the term itself representing “a group of people dispersed from their original place” (Barnard and Spencer 2002, p. 601). Androutsopoulos continues with the recent definitions of the diaspora being an ethnic minority with a sense of difference and that are marginalized in their host society. Furthermore, the diaspora has a desire to preserve links with its homeland and rejects assimilation in their receiving country. The diaspora also have “a constant negotiation

between identities and cultures which is captured in the ‘master metaphor’ of hybridity” (Androutsopoulos, 2006, p. 520; Sinclair & Cunningham, 2000).

The most recent definition of diaspora by Hossein and Veenstra (2017) which includes the use of social media and telecommunications to connect the diaspora scattered in different parts of the world is connected to this study by paving the way for the Virtual Diaspora. However, before proceeding, it is mandatory to define social media in our fast-evolving world.

2.1.1 Digital Diaspora, Virtual Diaspora and Social Media

The superlative definition of social media was presented by Fuchs in 2014. In his book entitled “Social Media: A Critical Introduction,” Fuchs analyzed social media, the meaning of the term and what it implies in the modern world. According to Fuchs (2014), social media means networked information services designed to support in-depth social interaction, community formation, collaborative opportunities and collaborative work. The web introduced a shared place where people can share their own media culture on multiple social media platforms and blogs instead of the traditional media of TV and printed press. As Fuchs (2014) further describes, the concept of moving the social interactions of people between the offline and the online involves a unique social dimension that connects people around the world; the social and physical world.

Social media then is made of a set of different internet-based communication networked platforms. The database is built by the users whereby they can convey their public and

personal communications. These are mainly Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Reddit and many others which feature the options of profile creation, shared information, contacts and interaction. Social media also has the ability to blur the distinction between communicating with one person and broadcasting a public message to not one individual in particular. To be more precise, the two separate terms of social and media imply that the different platforms are centered on the usage of users facilitating “communal activities” that promote “connectedness as a social value” (Fuchs, 2014). In fifteen years, social media has become an environment in which information is transferred from person to person which snowballs throughout multiple social connections to eventually grow into a thriving community. Fuchs (2014) also refers to social media platforms as the “new coffee houses” where ideas travel through networks of connected people by social bonds.

The reality of the digital diaspora is that it is becoming a global phenomenon. The multitude of people involved are sharing similar concerns, hopes, dreams and experiences across borders in receiving and sending states. The use of social media and telecommunication technologies enable diasporas to maintain these links across time and space which further reinforce the notions of such collective identities (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010). The term of digital diaspora is different from the term Virtual Diaspora because the word “digital” means that it is internet-based while the term “virtual” works in parallel with the word “reality.” The aim here is to create the Virtual Diaspora that will symbolize the connection between diaspora and the virtual reality. To clarify the definition more, virtual reality is a system that uses “software and hardware to create and manage a virtual, interactive... environment that includes

visual and sometimes audio and tactile elements” and it includes “various types of display, sensor, and user-tracking and navigation technologies. The systems can either simulate a real environment... or create an imaginary one” (Lawton, 2006, p.12). The imaginary one in this case are the networks created and occupied by the Virtual Diaspora for multiple purposes which have been described by Faist and Ozveren. According to Faist and Ozveren’s (2017) study, the exchange of information in networks became faster due to the increased amount and speed of transmissions through the Internet. Furthermore, the increased amount of transmitted information is also vital for many people to decide whether to migrate due to the contents of such information being potential pull or push factors. Michel S. Laguerre clarifies to a certain extent some of the meanings behind the concept of “digital diaspora” by deconstructing it and relating it to other similar concepts in order to understand how diasporas interrelate with information and communication technologies (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010). Alonso and Oiarzabal (2010) continue to argue that the diaspora activity is different from immigration because it has a “political connotation” shaped by economic, political and technological aspects in a globalized world. This led to a faster correlation between technology and the act of migration due to the evolution of communication and “transportation systems and infrastructures” that allowed the populations to move and form a diaspora. Examples are given of South Korea, India and Russia as being countries of immigration for skilled workers whom were motivated to leave to more developed countries. This was due to the “diffusion of awareness of better lifestyles and wealth, as spread by global media, the Internet and by immigrants already settled in” (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010, p. 7). Moreover, the diaspora has also become an architect

of a new atlas that relies upon identity which is spread throughout different geographical locations with different languages and dialects; yet representing one aspect of assimilation and maintaining a transnational connection to their homeland. “Nationalism becomes a multilayered or multifaceted set of discourses allowing for great diversity. Concepts such as nations, identity, and belonging take on new meanings” (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010, p. 9). This would lead to a new definition of diaspora activity which is to “inhibit” a new spatial territory between sending and receiving states while communicating through different social media programs across temporal, spatial, and psychological distance.

Similar to the Lebanese case which will be discussed in the following chapter, the diaspora uses the Internet to exchange information without barriers of synchronicity and locality. This, in effect, makes the diaspora a global imagined community. The authors, Alonso and Oiarzabal (2010), specify diaspora as a digital diaspora and refer to it as the “distinct online networks that diasporic people use to re-create identities, share opportunities, spread their culture, influence their homeland and host-land policy, or create debate about common-interest issues by means of electronic devices. Digital diasporas differ from virtual communities and nations because in digital diasporas there are strong ties with real nations before creating or re-creating the digital community” (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010, p.11). This means that all the Internet users are migrants using the cyberspace to spread information without being linked to any particular nation or diasporic group. Hence, the focal point of a Virtual Diaspora does not connect to virtual communities because the latter are not precisely from a common background or nation but, instead, share similar interests. The Virtual Diaspora is then a virtual

community with digital diasporic links maintained in virtual spaces that are real to its users or, more precisely, its inhabitants.

2.1.2 Virtual Diasporas and the Internet

The use of the Internet by the Virtual Diaspora is then a way to undo the movement of mobility through online activities. Their aim is to recreate their homes on a virtual space that does not fall in either their homeland or the receiving state. Additionally, they connect with their diasporas as well through a “transnational field of communication facilitated (but never limited to) the Internet” (Bernal, 2013, p. 167). According to Bernal (2013), the reason why the diaspora members tend to be active online is to make sure their identity is preserved in the context of new social surroundings. It helps them assure that their everyday lives are assimilated in their own home society to overcome assimilation or hinder it, or to escape a dominant society that could threaten their identity, merge it and make it invisible or stigmatized. Moreover, “the Internet allows diasporas to create and to access media that speaks to them as primary audience, something they may not be able to do anywhere else and certainly not as cheaply” (Bernal, 2013, p. 168).

Another interesting aspect on the use of the Internet is the fast response rate among users across borders towards breaking news and pooling information. Their effective activity on transnational networks allows them to communicate and operate above the boundaries of space and time in the context of their homeland histories, displacement

and migration experiences, and new social localities; all done by selective connectivity.

In summation, it is important to note that the use of the Internet and social media by the Virtual Diaspora was not intentional, and the aim of using it differs from person to person. Furthermore, it is also important to keep in mind that the Internet and social media are not traced processes, but a technological development used by all users. TCI, as defined by Navarrete and Huerta (2006), are the Transnational Community of Immigrants who are dispersed individuals from the same country maintaining a sense of “togetherness across geographical borders.” The authors refer to it as a “sense of community,” also explained as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and shares faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment together” (Navarrete & Huerta, 2006, p. 2-3). They refer to the communication as a bridge facilitated by the Internet to remove the barriers faced by the dispersed community at a very low cost; for example, video-conferencing with the community of origin. Clearly, new technologies do not create communities but enable the latter to reach each other because “the Internet sustains the bonds of community by complementing, not replacing, other channels of interaction” (Navarrete & Huerta, 2006, p. 4).

2.1.3 Diasporic Public Spheres and Virtual Communities

A relevant approach to this study was listed in Navarrete and Huerta’s (2006) article because it clarified that the virtual communities rich in content create access to information about events occurring in the community with stories, anecdotal information and forums. They are a place where opinions and ideas are formed and

exchanged about different community interests. Communication is then a process happening between hosts and sending states across electronic environments that look like a public square which gathers participants from the diaspora and country of origin. As Werbner (2009, p. 20) stated in her studies on the Pakistani community in the UK, the diasporic public spheres, as she refers to them, primarily began by stressing “the local face-to-face, imaginative, and creative aspects of the hidden, invisible public arenas diasporic Pakistanis create for themselves.” Subsequently, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the diasporic public sphere was divided into two separate spheres. The first being a sphere of “hybridity” and the other being a “pure” Islamic sphere. However, both were politicized and expressed differently by the media. The hybridity of popular culture in South Asia is expressed through “diasporic novels, films, television, newspapers, and classical and popular song and dance groups” (Werbner, 2009, p. 22). This diasporic public sphere is also familiar with the politics of gender, class and racism in the British society. Yet, on the other hand, “the Muslim public sphere” or “pure” Islamic sphere is involved with intensified religious and reformed ideologies “generated partly in response to intractable international political conflicts in the Middle East, Iran, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, and Iraq” (Werbner, 2009, 22). Werbner (2009) describes one example of a diasporic community in Manchester which rarely speaks out about domestic issues in the United Kingdom, but instead, focuses their public platform on issues and events in their home country such as the Middle East crisis or the plight of Palestinians. That is why the use of Information and Communication technology was fundamental and continues to be because it maintains the social connection with the home country. Navarrete and Huerta (2006) stated that when immigrants interact online

out of a “sense of community,” their aims are often to re-establish contact with other members of the diaspora with whom they had links before displacement took place. However, to fully understand how the SOVC functions (Sense of Virtual Community), we need to empirically and theoretically study it. First of all, “a group of individuals without an emotional connection is merely that and cannot be considered a community” (Navarrete & Huerta, 2006, p. 6). On the other hand, TCIs (Transnational Community of Immigrants) are people who are influenced by their community and would feel a real emotional connection to the virtual community. This particular article is very important to the research because it presents the connectivity between sending and receiving states across the virtual space.

The communities abroad tend to have social, economic and, of course, political effects in both host and home countries. From the home country, the migrants can affect the local political and economic situation shaped by private and developmental remittances designated to households or local development funds for projects and/or public institutions. In return, the online community allows immigrants to access these projects online through pictures posted on websites to be assured that the funds were in fact sent for the purpose of local development. Home countries that heavily rely on remittances from its migrants have strong vested interests in trying to continually instill a “national feeling of membership” in its migrants (Navarrete & Huerta, 2006). Navarrete and Huerta (2006) gave the example of Korea, Israel and Mexico as countries that take active steps into creating relations between immigrants and sending states. For example, in 1990, Mexico created the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad for the purpose of strengthening the ties and relationships between migrants and Mexico and develop

a portal with links to Mexican VTCIs (Virtual Transnational Community of Immigrants). Economic and political influences from migrants' influence on the homeland can be seen in public forums online. They have been used, for example, to denounce political corruption or draw the attention of government agencies to force particular authorities to act. One example is the website from a Mexican community in the US that denounced a Mexican agency that refused to act against the damaging of public property. The VTCI members forced the Mexican government to take action to hold accountable the people whom were responsible for the damage. "Online communities of immigrants have the advantage of allowing anonymous denunciation protecting the integrity of the denouncer"(Navarrete & Huerta, 2006, p. 16). In short, the impact of the VTCIs on the economic, political and social spheres between the sending and receiving states should not be underestimated. This can largely be seen as homelands attempt to maintain positive relationships with their migrant communities which go beyond fostering social ties between each other. Homelands or sending states are acutely aware of the influence and persuasion diasporic communities have on economic and political entities in their home countries. Therefore, maintaining healthy ties and close relationships with TCIs will encourage the same goals and diminish the possibilities of opposition. As Navarrete and Huerta (2006) demonstrate, "in 2001, the Mexican government launched e-Mexico, a public initiative that seeks to bring the country to the Information Society by reducing the digital divide and increasing online access to information and services related with education, economy, health and government" (p. 18). This initiative allowed for the establishment of online spaces supporting the creation of interactive migrant communities through forums, chat rooms,

and directories.

Lastly, when talking about place and identity, we saturate ourselves with terminology about physical space and location connected to the notions of Virtual Diaspora and immigration. At a time where the Internet is becoming part of diffused cultures, the terms of cyberspace and “information super-highway” have given us a specific language with which to imagine and label the new “space” (Mitra & Schwartz, 2001). The appearance of a spatialized language that has developed within the confines of the Internet has consequently shaped a new nature of the Internet in of itself. To clarify this point more, there is in fact a completely new space that is being synthetically developed between the real space and the cyberspace which was previously non-existent. New sites appear between real and virtual spaces which open doors for relations that have their own “intrinsic power.” This is because between the real and the virtual space, unique sets of connections are constantly being established (Mitra & Schwartz, 2001). We can take as an example the emerging e-businesses and the growing momentum of interest and investment it is spurring. Traditional businesses and institutions are rapidly being replaced by virtual ones with no physical existence (consider Amazon or eBay). These new spaces are also “spaces such as collections of diasporic people who are creating their nations on the Net to find the points of commonality that real life spatial disruption might have disconnected” (Mitra & Schwartz, 200, para. 241). If everything is moving in the direction of the virtual and the diaspora is now virtually doing its activities in the Third Virtual Space, what is the role of the Hometown Associations (HTA) in this new era? Before proceeding to this discussion, it is important to state the significance of

Bridgespaces and how they contribute to the Third Virtual Space.

2.2 What are Bridgespaces?

The terms “online” and “community” have recently been used together and interlinked under the umbrella of communication. Together, they defy notions of space and time and interact in a new area unknown previously. If we are to examine more closely such terminologies, the best way to study this area is by first talking about bridgespaces. Not long ago did the term emerge and encompass the world of the online experience currently used by billions across borders and time zones. The beginning of bridgespaces’ actual definition began back in the 1990s and reached its current meaning in 2010. With almost twenty years in the public vernacular, we can begin to discuss what bridgespaces actually are.

According to Alonso and Oiarzabal (2010), in the 1990s, Nessim Watson elaborated on the term “virtual community” to encompass the concept of a community of people online interacting with each other within different groups. Despite the fact that they are not tangibly real, they still reinforce the concept that a community online is, nonetheless, a community, and in fact, is *quite* real. Furthermore, when we talk about a virtual community, we defy the notions of space and time because people who are inevitably separated from others in time and space contradict the idea of an “ideal of community” (Adams & Ghose, 2003). Therefore, the interference of new technologies will allow any community to maintain their close ties while also collapsing the boundaries of space and time.

While Adams and Ghose (2003) were studying temporary and permanent immigrants from India to the USA, they stated that this community maintains websites for the purpose of preserving its cultural and ethnic identity. These websites are not only used by the Indian diaspora but are also interlinked to the residents in India which constitute “a more variegated space of international and multicultural communication that we call ‘bridgespace’” (Adams & Ghose, 2003 p. 415). For Adams and Ghose (2003), the bridgespace incorporates not only the Internet but also media such as music, film, and CDs; all overlapping communication links in multiple media spaces. The bridgespace has many implications and is of multiple frames rolled up into one: mediascapes ideoscape, financescape, and technoscape. Additionally, they all serve the needs of the ethnoscape. If one would like to learn more about Appadurai’s concepts of “-scapes” they only need read his seminal book, “Modernity at Large.” However, the bridgespace illustrates one of the most important aspects of “globalizing culture” which is “the quality of disjuncture” (Appadurai, 1996). By this, Appadurai (1996) means filling the gap of the crossing or the flow of cultural goods, such as music and films, along with the flows of political and economic power made easier and at a faster pace. Therefore, what the virtual space can do to a certain community or society depends on how it is used and what information is being transferred through its channels. Similar to the bridgespace, this does not imply that it is a space that acts, however, it enables the movement of people through available knowledge, goods, ideas, and capital across channels and through the geographic divide of the culture between different continents; in Adams and Ghose’s case, North America and South Asia.

The bridgespace is constituted of many elements that fit together. Most

importantly, it comes not only from accessibility, but also from adaptability; how the people and organizations actually use information and Information and Communication Technology accessible to them (which will be discussed in more detail later) is of particular importance. In addition, it must not be overlooked the contributing significance to the advantage and benefits of the society and environment by bridgespaces (Hosseini & Wigand, 2017). Adams and Ghose (2003, p. 416) add that the “adaptation to a lifestyle with roots in multiple places is driving the creation of the virtual space we call bridgespace.” Moreover, the body of the bridgespace is combined with new technologies whereas its natural and tangibly solid character is more or less an illusion; meaning it cannot be physically tinged. “The body is symbolically constructed as one incorporates socially constructed labels and assumptions relating to the body. These take on the weight of unquestionable fact once applied to self and others” (Adams and Ghose, 2003, p. 418). What Adams and Ghose (2003) specifically mean is that the data available in this unique space is chosen by the ones who created it. After this statement, one must bear in mind that the bridgespace cannot be measured unless one studies the information shared on the channels and how efficient the transfer of data is to the targeted group or community present actively online. That is why it is important to study what Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) are and how they serve the purpose of the bridgespace.

2.3 Computer-Mediated Communication

Once a space becomes a landing page for the Virtual Diaspora, migration and the

Internet become noteworthy factors because the process of movement has increased in parallel with the increase of the use of Internet and computer-mediated communication (CMC). The extensive use of the Internet and CMCs creates new possibilities of linking people to their homeland no matter how dispersed they may be. This means that the Internet overcomes what Hiller and Franz (2004) describe as the “friction of distance.”

2.3.1 Different Forms and Usages of Computer-Mediated Communication

Hiller and Franz (2004) elaborate upon the migration experience and its classification of various forms of CMC, however, they only study the cases where the sender and receiver connect. This emphasizes the limitations that stand in the way of connecting people who are not active online. They identify four categories which are of particular use to the diaspora. The first category is the search tool used to obtain information through websites and search engines. The second tool is the email used to create an asynchronous and private type of communication. An asynchronous type of communication means that the transfer of information through emails happens at different times without having the sender and receiver's presence for the transfer to happen. Regardless of the asynchrony or absence of the receiver, the email works with the CMC free of the limitations of time and space. Thirdly, the bulletin boards systems (BBS) which are also asynchronous and efficient to reach a larger audience, however, BBS do lack privacy compared to other forms of CMC. The people engaged in BBS are

“more proactive in their attempt to recruit and build relationships, so they not only announce but also serve more as a chat” (Hiller & Franz, 2004, p. 736). Finally, the chatrooms category which is more synchronic because it runs in real time and is made up of organized topics and themes connecting together solely the people who are online and present in the room (Hiller & Franz, 2004).

The Hiller and Franz's (2004) approach to connectivity between the four categories is as follows: The search engines lead to BBS that, in return, lead to chats and then private messaging. Although many categories have different functions that vary according to the migrants and their experiences, what is important is the actual use of the Internet by the migrants. There are two key stages that a migrant encompasses throughout the migration journey. The first is the pre-migrant stage, or the person who has not migrated yet. This person will use the Internet to access vital information and establish links with other previous migrants who provide information and resources to the potential migrant. The post-migrant, on the other hand, has completed the migratory process and is physically away from their country of origin. They will use the Internet to connect with those left behind or with those who have been or are in similar situations. However, not all the migrants use the Internet, nor do they use it in the same way. Each migrant will use the Internet to share different material online such as the migration experience or personal events that are of interest to the viewers (migrants or non-migrants) (Hiller & Franz, 2004).

Hiller and Franz (2004), in their research, further distinguished between two uses of the CMC which have been both instrumental and oftentimes quite emotional for migrants.

The first use is dedicated to the job seekers. The Internet is often an essential tool used by migrants to obtain work or gain other resources. The second use connects migrants with their relatives and friends in a cost effective and fast way. The negative side of joining the online community is when the participants do not always present themselves as the correct identity. This creates deception and concealment defined by the Hiller and Franz (2004) as “signals of identity.” In such cases of potential identity fraud, verification can be accomplished through a series of questions eliciting information that only users from a particular location may be knowledgeable of. Oftentimes, new users who join chatrooms would be virtually ignored and sometimes ostracized until their place of origin is revealed and/or validated. Moreover, there are several questions that could be asked in an attempt to identify an identity using specific information about a community. This information is known only by the people from the particular community. For example, questions could be asked which pertain to the specific village or particular family from the village. Questions could also include a personal or cultural element as well. The cultural links of the community and its different elements like language and common dishes creates a “built-in solidarity and warmth” which may only be known to authentic members of the community (Hiller & Franz, 2004, p. 745). Moreover, the Virtual Diaspora is often intentionally or unintentionally connected to the place of birth. This, in effect, supports the importance of establishing authentic virtual connections based on members’ place of origin; it is essentially the main reason why such members are participating in such a virtual space in the first place. What Hiller and Franz (2004, p. 746) are trying to convey is that “the migrant is connected with the non-migrant, the diaspora with the homeland, almost seamlessly.” Members are able to share

pictures of family, friends, homes, territories, events, and much more. They are also able to listen to local radio stations online and watch their favorite television channels. This activity is often referred to as the telepresence concept. It can also help to understand how migrants can sometimes become quite engulfed to this online community. Furthermore, “CMC takes the migrant back home by creating and sustaining images through recipes, slideshows, community profiles and humor – all of which create an atmosphere of hyper-reality” (Hiller & Franz, 2004, p. 746). This atmosphere of hyper-reality which is facilitated by CMC can be thought of as the incapability to distinguish between what is real and what is not. Essentially, a place where reality and fiction can seamlessly blend together. One example is of expats from Trinidad that have used the Internet when they felt isolated or homesick. This migrant community created platforms to help them deal with their positions of marginalization and segregation. Further examples can be seen in the cases of South-Asian Indians living in Western cultures whom, in return, took refuge in the online community to deal with segregation and to have their voices heard. It is then clear that the Internet users or Virtual Diaspora use the Internet to escape the reality of the struggles of migration and find security in the online diasporic community. However, in a book written by Baubock, Faist and Lujiben (2010) entitled “Diaspora and Transnationalism Concepts, Theories and Methods,” the authors claimed that the diasporic communities have always relied on shared networks whereby the Internet has become central to communication characteristics and is a significant instrument used by the diaspora groups to help create and sustain a “shared imagination” for the migrant communities. In other words, the Internet has been a foundational asset for allowing many of these communities to not only discover, but to also rediscover and

learn from this shared imagination and community (Baubock, Faist, & Lujiben, 2010). Accordingly, the Internet has taken a lot of day to day time for the diasporic communities especially through forums, email, online chat-rooms, blogs, home-pages and so on to access information and communication grouped around certain topics and interests. This means that in addition to escaping reality and maintaining links, the Virtual Diaspora shares certain interests and information from back home delivered to them online through the mediated channels of social media and the Internet.

2.3.2 The Virtual Diaspora and the Use of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

For Hossein and Veenstra's (2017) approach to CMC and diaspora, social media is the greatest and most extensively used means of communication in the world for maintaining relationships across borders, time and space. Virtual migration also crossed traditional borders in the shared mind and imagination that define a Virtual Diaspora. But if social media is now the most efficient way to communicate with the Virtual Diaspora, an examination is needed to study the current situation of social media and its use by the Virtual Diaspora to maintain its diasporic activities and group linkages across borders. A recent study conducted in the US showed that the changes happening in the 21st century eased the access to social ties across borders between diaspora members. Immigrants nowadays are able to maintain their social ties and connections through the social media channels (Hossain & Veenstra, 2017). The media has now, more than ever,

become a major component in immigration, and its channels will ease “the transition into a new culture” (Hossain & Veenstra, 2017, p. 1). The authors took the example of the South Asian diaspora in the US and discovered that these immigrants perceive social media channels differently in terms of maintaining connections with friends, family and to be informed of events in their home countries. They talk about bridging and bonding social capital which clarifies more the connections between immigrants and homeland, immigrants and receiving states, and immigrants and other immigrants in receiving countries (Hossain & Veenstra, 2017).

This “immigrant social media use” is a model to reassess the notion of community. Maintaining relationships in social media means keeping contact with the ties already preserved at home while making new ones in the receiving countries. The first being about family and old friends and the latter about making new acquaintances.

Hossain and Veenstra (2017) also clarify that the creation of interpersonal communication between communities across borders are being redefined with the use of online media and virtual space. This allows for the interactions to happen in the form of an online community. Different social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc. transformed the offline communication into a more virtually accessible one through the use of online networks. But has this trend opened doors to new communities? Are immigrants now more interested in communicating with like-minded people who share similar backgrounds online instead of their homelands? Or does it apply to both equally?

It is important here to refer to the diaspora as being different from the immigrant or

being a segment from the migrant population. The usage of social media by the diaspora is to not only stay updated with the community and events back in their hometown but also to access resources through social capital. According to Hossain and Veenstra (2017), social interactions and relationships through social networks can present an additional aspect to the communication related to bonding and bridging. “Bridging relationships involves communicating with weak ties or developing new ties and connecting clusters within a network” whereas “bonding relationships involves the maintenance and continuation of strong ties that do not reach across subnetworks” (p. 2). “Bonding social capital” is about maintaining “emotionally close ties such as family members and friends” (Hossain & Veenstra, 2017, p. 2). That is why the Internet is not reduced to one or two uses, but it is a growing network of endless possibilities for the Virtual Diaspora. Hampton and Wellman (2003) argued that the Internet and the usage of online communication forms known as ICTs (Information and Communication Technology) transformed the way humans communicate and encouraged interaction between people from the same neighboring spaces living next to each other. In other words, the Internet has more or less become another communication tool among the many available in which people are able to interact, connect, and contact one another. Rettberg (2009) suggested that connecting through social media and crafting our narratives online with our community is “one of the ways we find our place in our culture and among our friends and families... by creating and consuming stories and images” (p. 453). On the other hand, Ellison, Lampe and Steinfield (2009) argued that the social level and the interpersonal level have been both transformed in the age of the Internet. Conventional or established ideas of identity and social interaction are

restructured with the increasing involvement in online society; particularly depending on how much members use the social media and how many activities or information they share online.

Hosseini and Veenstra (2017) also added that the ability of people to connect through a social network, whether it was imagined or real, identifies them in terms of identity and belonging to a certain community. This “community-formation process” occurs wherein new and existing strong social connections are created or maintained. Grudz, Wellman, and Takhteyev (2011) asserted that the different forms of electronic communications and social media (emails, Facebook, instant messaging etc.) allow people to stay connected whether they know each other or not. Twitter offers a closer connection between its members because it not only keeps them connected but also includes people in their offline lives. They further stated that “Twitter turns out to be an implementation of the cross-cutting connectivity between social circles that 19th-century sociologist Émile Durkheim suggested was the key to modern solidarity” (Grudz, Wellman & Takhteyev, 2011, p. 21).

The book written by Aleman and Wartman (2009) entitled “Online Social Networking on Campus: Understanding What Matters in Student Culture” speaks of the social media platforms as being a community that everyone is taking part in, and the more the social media platforms expand, the easier it is to join. The studies on social media and community bonding expanded to analyze every social media platform separately. The results were shown by Kwon, D’Angelo and McLeod (2013), who found out that Facebook was created for the purpose of communication and sharing among users. This

famous platform provides the potential for interaction on a personal level as well as on an international level; for example, sharing opinions about an array of different thoughts and ideas around the world. This is important mainly for political and marketing campaigns that work on attracting the largest number of influencers and followers possible to create a stronger impact. Kwon, D'Angelo and McLeod (2013) further argue that the people who use Facebook are more likely running away from their worries and stress but do not specify the effects of this escape or whether or not it has an effect on the social fabric of a community. They also found that Facebook has a positive effect on social relations because it bridges and connects social capital. "This suggests that keeping in touch with Facebook users who are currently linked as friends may be a strategy to maintain and/or increase the size of one's bridging social capital" (Kwon, D'Angelo & McLeod, 2013, p. 41). Because some studies provide evidence that bridging social capital (weak ties) may provide increased opportunities in the job market for job seekers (e.g., senior-year college students) such as getting information about job openings, it is plausible that users with many weak ties will get benefits from Facebook when it comes to professional aspirations" (Kwon, D'Angelo & McLeod, 2013, p. 41). Kwon, D'Angelo and McLeod (2013) agree that Facebook helps in maintaining social ties, however it can be affected by the demographic of the users and their utilization of social media. Bernal (2013) spoke about the diasporas and their handling of cyberspace in a context of deterritorialized and decontextualized situations contrasted by the liberation and dislocation or displacement.

2.3.3 Information and Communication Technology (ICTs)

To better understand Information and communication technology (ICT), geographers must perceive them as places and spaces defined by not only the physical presence but also through media contexts that form the virtual space (place). This brings us back to bridgespaces that were also analyzed as tangible spaces but turned out to be an illusion. Starrs (1997, p. 198) in his article, "The sacred, the regional, and the digital" similarly to Adams and Ghose (2003), argues that "Cyberspace is one realm where geographers ought to bestir themselves to consider how information has become tantamount to space and is in the process of becoming an actual place." However, Adams and Ghose (2003) add that personal identity is embedded in occupying the world extensively in order to build networks of common grounds, obligations, sharing knowledge and commitment across its space. This space represents a topology of relations between people involved. The sum of the one and two-way communication links between these people or agents create what is known as place.

According to Adams (1998, p. 93), "The two spaces, cyberspace and physical space, touch at all points but are incongruent; what is near in physical space is often far in cyberspace, and vice versa. Nevertheless, the spaces bear a significant similarity." Therefore, the physical and virtual place depend on the interconnectivity of the basis of the topologies of the social relationships that are supported regardless of the means of linking and shaping those topologies. Adams and Ghose (2003, p. 419) define the bridgespace then as a collection of "interconnected virtual places that support people's movement between two regions or countries and the sustenance of cultural ties at a distance." Therefore, it is not the Internet per se, but it is part of a space constructed in and across the Internet. For example, a website like india.com is a space built

between other media which can be considered as one of many bridgespaces. The focus in this definition is that the bridgespaces do not create the links between the two places because links are created by people, however, people's action are in need of channels which are in return "static structures like roads, or dynamic systems like airline flight schedules or the Internet" (Gould, 1991 in Adams & Ghose, 2003, p. 420). The question following that argument is, what is the Third Virtual Space and how is it different from the bridgespace? At this point, it can be clearly stated that the Third Virtual Space is an intangible space that connects virtually two or more separated communities through ICTs and social media to transfer specific data while maintaining links freely across borders at any given time. What makes it physically real is the fact that all the transferred knowledge is tangible and physically accessible to both ends whether it is cultural events, political news or developmental projects.

2.4 Explaining Hometown Associations

According to Chauvet, Gubert, Mercier and Mesple-Somps (2015), a hometown association (HTA) is a club or organizations that operates voluntarily in the immigrants' host and home countries by gathering remittances from migrants working in a receiving country. "One of their goals is to fund local development projects, and as such they have received increased attention from the development community, which considers them to be potential participants in the process of leveraging funds for investment and development in the resource-poor communities of origin" (Chauvet, Gubert, Mercier & Mesple-Somps, 2015 p. 2). The reason why HTAs are important, particularly in low fiscal capacity countries, is because of the collective remittances acting as additives to

the scarce public resources, and moreover, to “relieve binding budget constraints” (Chauvet, Gubert, Mercier & Mesple-Somps, 2015 p. 2). Even though the HTAs’ intervention is important, it could sometimes lead to a more relaxed government whereby they could extricate themselves from certain developmental responsibilities and leave the locals targeted with this collective funding worse off in terms of public goods.

Furthermore, the negative aspect of the funded projects’ objectives can be linked to how these projects are conceived and chosen. When designs by the HTA members has little or no input from potential beneficiaries, some projects “might be ill-conceived, might not meet the needs of home communities, and thus might be quickly abandoned” (Chauvet, Gubert, Mercier & Mesple-Somps, 2015 p. 3). Additionally, “when the migration process is selective and mainly involves certain groups, the HTA projects might serve private agendas rather than addressing larger community needs. Their benefits may thus be narrowly distributed and might aggravate social cleavages in the community” (Chauvet, Gubert, Mercier & Mesple-Somps, 2015 p. 3).

The CMC referred to by Hiller and Franz (2004) as a trend, present different aspects of communication, compression of space and time, maintaining and reinforcing interactions between the communities and their bonding. The online communication between HTA and Virtual diasporas is important because it has the potential of creating emotional ties over the boundaries of geography and particularly through an electronic connection. Also, CMCs and face to face communications online both have qualitative and quantitative interactions reinforced through an imagined physical space. Migrants

who come from the same background share similar roots and territory which they no longer reside in. This geographic location is extremely important and represents their personal identity, birthplace, and “generates strong emotional ties and can continue to serve as a significant community of reference” (Hiller & Franz, 2004, p. 733). Diasporas who use CMC tend to carry with them their places and interests in relation with the country of origin. This in return creates a characteristic that defines the migrant. The connection between diasporic members takes their relations between each other beyond old ties and senses of belonging. This means that it moves further to trespass the roots and creates new ties which are “nurtured because of a common identity that is based on a former place of residence” (Hiller & Franz, 2004 p. 733). This link between diaspora members creates a system of inclusion and commonality among people who are still living in this specific place with those who have migrated. How do the HTAs take advantage of the Third Virtual Space eased by the CMCs to connect with the Virtual diaspora? To answer this question, a history of the Lebanese diaspora will be discussed with the HTAs activities in Chapter 3 in order to analyze their relation in Chapter 4.

2.5 The Third Virtual Space

According to Jules Rochielle & B. Stephen Carpenter II (2015, p.131) the Third Space is a space where “cross-disciplinary relationships and collaborations flourish.” It is also a site of learning different cultural practices that function beyond the common traditional norms. This is followed by the creative practices and collaborations that encourage dialogue and citizen engagement and exchange of ideas for the purpose of promoting “together work.” But how is the Third Space different from the Third Virtual Space?

Defining the Third Virtual Space goes beyond the concept of exchanging ideas from the first space, which is in this research, the country of origin, all the way to the second space which is the country of destination, through a medium known as the Third Virtual Space. This unseen and untouched space works using digital tools such as phones, laptops and Internet access to emphasize sociocultural common backgrounds and designate one communal virtual space for one Virtual Diaspora. The Third Virtual Space is also the collaborative efforts done by the Hometown associations and the diaspora community online to work in this Third Virtual Space and produce an experience of transformative sense of distinct self, identity and relation to your own community.

Chapter 3

Lebanese HTAs

This chapter first discusses the Lebanese diaspora, its history, its contradicting statistical data and numbers and the importance of the Third Virtual Space used to connect its Virtual Diaspora. It also lists the Hometown Associations (HTA) that operate online and offline through different means to multiply the success of their efforts in the outreach of the Virtual Diasporic community.

How are the Internet and Information Communication Technology (ICT) used to bring together the Lebanese diaspora under one umbrella of belongingness and connect it with Lebanon? What are the topics that emerge regarding: The use of the Internet by the diaspora, and to what extent is the Internet outreach able to connect Lebanon with its diasporic community? There are a series of activities that should be monitored in order to assess the available data and limitations. Do the demographics interfere in this regard? If so, will they create biases among the diaspora community in terms of accessibility and inclusivity, moreover, in terms of age, location, and socioeconomic status?

3.1 Lebanese Diaspora History, Numbers and Policies

First, it is important to state that the Lebanese population in their migratory history and patterns are broad and it is the result of a combination of different economic and

political conflicts. Due to its “geographic location, in a region ridden with national and international conflicts,” it has “contributed to Lebanese emigration throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (Tabar, 2016, p. 258). This historical path led to the creation of different Lebanese communities around the world; mainly in the Gulf, Europe, West Africa, North and South America and Australia. All throughout these years, emigrants always showed interest in their home country’s political conflicts and have been engaged in multiple activities directed towards their country.

In an article written on the Lebanese Diaspora by Al Kantar (2018, para. 1), the term diaspora is defined as “a dispersion of people from their original homeland, likewise expatriation, extradition, migration, separation or displacement.” Migration from Lebanon is estimated to have been between 11-13 million persons of Lebanese background or descent who traveled to North and South America, Australia, West Africa, the Gulf, parts of the Middle East and Europe where they established their own communities (Al Kantar, 2018). However, when speaking about the Lebanese diaspora, one cannot statically quantify it due to the variety of differing groups of migrants which do not always constitute part of the diaspora or fulfill its requirements to be considered a diasporic member. Moreover, although it is critical that the term diaspora is defined, at this stage, however, we shall refer to the Virtual Diaspora as a “transnational ‘imagined community’ of dispersed people who consider themselves to share a common bond or identity despite historical movement and the resulting differences among them” (Lebanese Diaspora, 2016, para. 5).

There are certainly difficulties in identifying all the Lebanese diaspora whom left in the

1880's until the 1920's. It has even been claimed that a minority migrated with Ottoman passports while another section of Lebanese migrants were classified as Syrian up until the 1926 constitution. "However, it is widely accepted that the majority of the Syrians arriving during this time period (up to 90%) came from the Mt. Lebanon area" (Lebanese Diaspora, 2016, para. 8). During the time of Independence and up until the beginning of the Civil War (when Lebanon was colloquially known to be "The Paris of the Middle East"), financial prosperity masked sectarianism. Later on, it was estimated that over 900,000 Lebanese fled Lebanon during the Civil War, between the years 1975 and 1989, consisting of approximately 40% of the Lebanese population. After the Civil War and moving beyond political instability, many Lebanese then started migrating for professional and economic reasons. Even though the reasons behind the migratory movements differed due to multiple historical events, identity and imagined communities remained sentimental to the Lebanese diaspora in the host societal context. They have remained in touch with their families, friends and other diaspora niches around the world through immigrants that have just arrived, connections with family members and with organizations that focus on promoting Lebanese culture. Furthermore, as iterated previously, the essential link for the diaspora has often been with the family. The importance of the family within Lebanese culture has been essential in maintaining such cultural roots between the diaspora and the homeland (Lebanese Diaspora, 2016). In the article, "Methods of Finding Population Statistics of Lebanese Migration Throughout the World," Muglia (2015) investigated the migration patterns of Lebanese migrants in the world to establish estimates of current diaspora populations. Most of the numbers estimated were proven to be both inflated and

speculative. Therefore, she combined various scholarly texts, articles, databases on the waves of migration and recent statistics to calculate such diaspora populations. Although Muglia's numbers are not flawlessly accurate, they do reflect an approximate to reality. According to her findings, 4,500,970 Lebanese immigrants exist around the world (Muglia, 2015). However, according to the Migration Policy Centre (Migration Policy Centre, 2013), Lebanon has the longest history of migration in the Arab world, incorporating Lebanese people from different socio-economic backgrounds. According to the Migration Policy Centre (2013), the number of Lebanese living abroad, and their particular characteristics is "fragmented and uncertain." Comparing figures from the UN and national population estimates from 2009 show that there is a disparity in figures of approximately 400,000 individuals. This has been primarily attributed to data collection that did not include children and grandchildren of former Lebanese migrants (Migration Policy Centre, 2013). In 2012, the estimated number was 602,280 which have been widely dispersed between the Arab countries (27.0%), North America (33.2%), European Union (24.7%) and Australia (12.5%), however, the attainment of accurate numbers has been criticized for being politically-driven and susceptible to being politically manipulated (Migration Policy Centre, 2013).

The Migration Policy Centre (2013) further encouraged the communication between Lebanese confessional groups whom are residing abroad to create a policy of "concord" and encourage Lebanese abroad to establish unions and associations and organize events through the Ministry of Emigration (e.g., Lebanese Emigrants Youth Camp). Migration Policy Centre (2013) also suggested that the Lebanese government should support sustaining links with the diaspora to benefit from a number of different strategies.

Lebanon can gain from Lebanese potential abroad in the field of development and technology; encourage remittances and the circularity of social capital; encourage Lebanese living abroad to return regularly to Lebanon; launching a moderately active dialogue with international organizations (mainly UNDP and IOM) on the Lebanese diaspora's potential contribution to development in the homeland with a view to mobilizing their competencies (UNDP through TOKTEN and Live Lebanon in coordination with the Foreign Ministry); urge Lebanese abroad to register and participate in elections (MPC, 2013, p. 7).

With the statistical data on the Lebanese diaspora maintaining a notable amount of variability from several sources, aims of reuniting the Lebanese diaspora under one umbrella of identity and belongingness can be understandably challenging. It is important to target locations of the dispersed communities which are more accurate than estimating numbers. Hourani (2007), from another perspective, discussed the importance of the links between Lebanon and its diaspora online mainly because it creates vital networks linking Lebanese residents with “transnational emigrants” and vice versa. In her article, she emphasized the help of sponsoring new emigrants by facilitating their move. Also, connecting the Lebanese diaspora is based on donations, investments, lobbying, public relations, and personal links. Hourani (2007) further emphasized the role of the previously founded World Lebanese Cultural Union (WLCU) which was created in 1960 to be a non-partisan and non-sectarian independent organization. Its main goal was to defend the interests of the migrants living abroad and to facilitate their move while maintaining relations with their country. It also developed cultural contacts with migrants, mostly youth, in order to keep them linked to

Lebanon and “to establish and promote links of friendship between its members and the peoples of the host countries and to make known the cultural heritage of Lebanon” (Hourani, 2007, p. 16). The WLCU (2017) was also able to reach out to Lebanese migrants in all of the countries they resided in. They were able to develop diasporic communities which organized several events internationally and regionally. The “Lebanese geographic diaspora” revived cultural awareness and collected and published directories of Lebanese migrants. This fast-growing organization was damaged by wars and by the government interferences. Despite efforts made to keep the “Lebanese geographic diaspora” going, it was terminated due to the lack of trust from the diaspora communities. Consequently, “The World Cultural Union continues to suffer from these divisions, which were most manifest in the rivalries between regions hosting the largest concentrations of diasporans” (Skulte-Ouais & Tabar, 2015, p. 146-147). Nevertheless, things have changed since the 1960s, and in the last decade, the diaspora has been characterized and linked within four categories: “memory and consciousness of a shared condition; organized transmission of this collective memory; a multiplicity of decentralized centers of cultural expression; and the economic and cultural means of maintaining a multinational network of links among these centers” (Asal, 2012, p. 5). Asal (2012), during her study on online websites of the Lebanese diaspora, observed the assortment of many medium-sized websites with no one or two websites maintaining any centralized authority. With the number of different websites aimed at targeting and holding influence with the Lebanese diaspora, a number of notable websites are considered more popular or common. The most connected websites are Liban Vision (which links 22 websites to it), Web Libanais Francophone (a media portal of the

diaspora), Leb411 (a media portal in Alberta) or Beyrouth sur Seine (an inter-professional group) (Asal, 2012). Additionally, authority and institutional websites connecting embassies, for example the “Lebanese Embassy in Ottawa,” are also quite active. Asal (2012) concluded that the linguistic compositions of the websites linking the Lebanese diaspora are mostly affected by the host countries’ language. Because Lebanon is a francophone/Anglophone country, the linguistic composition of the websites are as follows: English (60%), Arabic (4%) and French (57%) respectively (Asal, 2012).

As for the Lebanese government’s interference, Hourani (2007) stated that there was never a diaspora policy that strengthens or hinders the relations between the homeland and the diasporic community. The government still shows interest in the diaspora but never formed a “policy framework to govern relations between Lebanon and its expatriate communities, nor a clear socio-economic plan to seriously involve the diaspora in the development of their homeland” (Hourani, 2007, p. 13).

According to Skulte-Ouiass and Tabar (2015, p. 149), Lebanon’s “organizational dynamics do not solely reflect Lebanon as the power core and the diaspora as the follower, but rather demonstrate a ‘back-and-forth’ dynamic across national boundaries.” This is further highlighted by many Lebanese moving back and forth between Lebanon and the diaspora in the receiving states.

Gamlen, the first scholar to have studied the “emigration state” and “diaspora engagement policies” argues that Diaspora policies “reproduce citizen-sovereign relationships with expatriates” all while transnationalizing governmentality through the

“construction, machination and normalization of a set of governmental apparatuses and knowledge” (Gamlen, 2008, p. 5). Tabar (2016) further adds that the state facilitates the creation of a diasporic field through emigration policies extended to the diasporic community in an attempt to attract a diasporic capital that is “valorized and propagated.” The aim is to integrate the Lebanese living abroad and create a diasporic “symbolic capital” which is “another form of power that legitimates the stratified social order” (Swartz, 2013, p. 37, as cited in Tabar, 2016). To be able to achieve this connection, Delano and Gamlen (2014) stated in their article “Comparing and Theorizing State–Diaspora Relations” that short and long-term policies must exist to impact the diaspora engagement. Coherent policies should also focus on the development and integration in the host state. This will ease the process of having the transnational community “based around a common, state-centric national identity around which policies can be directed, and secondly, on the existence of corresponding governmental apparatuses within the home-state system” (Tabar, 2016 p. 260; Gamlen, 2006).

*Although Lebanese emigrants have always been part of Lebanon’s life, Lebanon has not actually had a specific diaspora policy.
(Hourani, 2007, p. 2)*

3.2 Dispersion of the Lebanese Diaspora

As previously stated, the Lebanese diaspora dynamics have been affected by world politics, economy and cultural processes, and these events acted as a push factor for the migration of the Lebanese communities. This widely dispersed community, also referred to as the largest group of Arab immigrants (Abdelhady, 2011), is now present in every

corner of the world since the beginning of the mid nineteenth century and up until today. Lebanese emigration has been a continuous trend in the society because of the several push and pull factors manifested in religious, political, economic oppressions and discriminations which led to desperation. The outbreak of the 1975 civil war in Lebanon encouraged and increased emigration from Lebanon where approximately 990,000 left to the oil booming Arab gulf, Europe, Americas, Africa and Australia until the year 1982. Later on, the Lebanese diaspora settled mainly in countries where other members of the Lebanese diaspora congregated worldwide. The attachment of the Lebanese migrants to their homeland and culture has been maintained through various mechanisms. Online media has become a platform that is rapidly spreading throughout the globe. The online media boom has had a positive effect on the diasporic solidarity by allowing such communities to be more “formed and expressed.” It also allowed for some ethnic cohesion to be maintained at the base of the linkage between different respondents in different parts of the world. Nevertheless, it is important to note that “staying in contact” does not implicitly imply that being active online depends on patriotic or cultural dialogue. In fact, it allows for the opening of more doors of exchange through the use of news, pictures, and conversations. This, in return opens up new ways of communicating across borders and through different networks. These exchanges allow for such networks to keep the “homeland alive” while reinforcing ties between the country of destination and the country of origin (Abdelhady, 2011, p. 177). This online approach to communication exchanges has altered an imagined homeland into a real and tangible space. What is unique about this particular space from others is the notion of time. For example, time zones are not as important of a hindrance through

an online approach compared to different communication methods. What the online community created was a space to share online interests, hobbies and art from many different places. For example, “a collection of photographs” can be shared as part of an online exhibition by many Lebanese artists (Abdelhady, 2011).

Furthermore, one of the first state institutions created to more careful attention to the Lebanese diaspora was the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Emigrants (MFAE) which was established in 1946 to develop and maintain relationships with emigrants (Tabar, 2016). Moreover, Lebanese diplomatic missions across the world emerged in 2011 as a means to provide services related to consulates, visas, passports and crisis responses to Lebanese abroad. They were part of “a ‘set of disciplinary subject-making’ services that facilitate the diasporisation of the Lebanese ‘model of citizenship’” (Tabar, 2016, p. 261-262). However, while no recorded data was found on the policies linking Lebanon to its diasporic community, decree No. 1306 was created by the MFAE specifically to look after the emigrants’ affairs. Two other departments were established “under the auspices of the Directorate of Emigrants Affairs to deal with Lebanese abroad and their interests in Lebanon” (Tabar, 2016, p. 262). These efforts collectively consolidated a sense of belonging among the Lebanese diasporic community as stated by the political elites in Lebanon (Tabar, 2016).

Furthermore, Tabar (2016) in his article “The Lebanese Diasporic Field,” stated that the Lebanese immigrants who left for Australia suffered from segregation. As a result, they encouraged their community members to live closely and form associations based on the villages that they left behind, their religious affiliations and national backgrounds. At

least 200 associations exist in Sydney and Melbourne constructed by encouragements from the anti-racism and anti-discriminations laws fostered by the state for multiculturalism to form a national identity. Lebanese diaspora institutions adopted new structures and developed new diasporic activities based on individual and collective resources. They were able to also draw on the Australian state “which could be increasingly derived from its emerging multicultural policies” (Tabar, 2016 p. 267). However, these associations had different goals such as addressing the settlement needed for new migrants and assisting in the maintenance of the links with the homeland. These particular goals complemented each other well, and the community, with its diverse associations, was capable of properly functioning across borders with Lebanon. “In other words, the resources of the community associations were mostly mobilized not only to overcome migrants’ alienation and fulfill their settlement needs, but also to support a political cause in the homeland... or to hold a *hafli* (i.e. annual dinner) to raise funding for a development project in a village” (Tabar, 2016). On the other hand, migrants who have gathered themselves and created Hometown Associations (HTAs) took part in different diasporic activities and supported the local development of their communities by “building a church or a mosque, sending medical equipment and medicine, developing the village water system, building a local school...” (Tabar, 2016 p. 268). Moreover, these HTAs are the domain where capital is formed and converted to become either: social, economic or cultural capital. For example, Tannourine Charity Association used its network to raise \$120,000 AUD to build a ward for the hometown hospital along with medical equipment donations. “Members of Tannourine Association have successfully used the resources provided by

members, by supporters and by the broader Sydney community to engage actively in the diasporic field encompassing both Lebanon and Australia” (Tabar, 2016 p. 269). In the coming section, the HTAs will be listed with their respective goals and duties to encompass the efforts done recently to bring together the Lebanese virtual diaspora in the Third Virtual Space.

3.3 The Nature of the Work Done by Organizations and Hometown Associations Concerned with the Lebanese Diaspora

For the Lebanese migrant communities that support villages and HTAs in Lebanon, engaging in multiple and different public activities targeted for the homeland could challenge the role of the state and grant them influential goals for the future. In this regard, Skulte-Ouaiss and Tabar (2015) discussed the important contribution that the migrant community makes towards the development of infrastructure in their “home” villages. This is based on “the huge amount of money spent on building churches and mosques” and “other funded projects which include improving the supply of potable water, creating a clinic, building a hospital ward, expanding the community school and opening a new road to better access agricultural land” (Skulte-Ouaiss, Tabar, 2015 p. 147). This infrastructure development provided by migrants is possible in part by the multiple associations that are concerned with the development of Lebanon. One example is al-Mughtareb a-Lubanani (the Lebanese émigré) who has been an important contributor in the building of Lebanon to become a prosperous nation.

In addition to contributions in the infrastructure sector, another main function of the

diaspora emerges in the shape of political capital to support political and social activities. Their involvement relates to activities related but not limited to taking part in political parties, religious associations and village associations. Skulte-Ouaiss and Tabar (2015) explained that diaspora associations who are actively engaged in public activities in the home country expend a significant amount of time and effort to develop their resources like buying property in Lebanon. Furthermore, diaspora associations are also engaged in gathering support for their counterparts in Lebanon, involved in recruiting new members and increasing support, organizing fund-raising campaigns, disseminating cause-related ideas in media outlets, developing activities and publications through the media (including websites and other social media platforms), organizing political and social functions, organizing political demonstrations and engaging with local politicians and political parties in hopes of gathering political support for their respective causes (Skulte-Ouaiss and Tabar, 2015)

Furthermore, throughout the Arab Spring, “social media played an important role in articulating not only a new model of protest based on virtual communications, but also a spatial model of mass demonstration” (Al Sayyad & Guvenc, 2013 p. 2019). Cases studied from Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen were analyzed and the recent protests witnessed live suggested that “the reciprocal interaction between social media, urban space and traditional media does not simply reproduce relations between these actors, but also transforms them incrementally” (Al Sayyad & Guvenc, 2013, p. 2019).

Henceforward, HTAs, the role of the media, and the Third Virtual Space play an important role in reshaping the way the connection between homeland and diaspora are

perceived, and it defines its multiple functionalities as being indispensable to the country. Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri launched a new platform designed to work online with the Lebanese Virtual Diaspora and connects it across borders. This new platform entitled “DiasporaID,” was created by Netways and funded by USAID. The project was launched in the Grand Serail on April 10, 2017 in Beirut, Lebanon, and was attended by officials like Minister of Interior Nouhad Machnouk and United States Ambassador to Lebanon Elizabeth Richard. This platform aims at strengthening the Lebanese economy by connecting and linking Lebanese émigrés, also part of the Virtual Diaspora, with their Lebanese hometowns. Hariri said that “Lebanon is a melting pot of ideas, creativity, entrepreneurship and advancements in science, technology and the arts” (Hariri Launches Project, 2017, para. 3). In addition to its economic goals, the goal of this platform is to connect the Lebanese entrepreneurs in a virtual way to ease interactions and “promote Lebanon’s development” (Hariri Launches Project, 2017). Hariri added that Lebanon has a high rate of educated human capital in an open economy, a loyal active diaspora and an undistinguishable financial expertise that will help the country prosper and empower its youth in the public and private sector. “Our aim is to make Lebanon a global innovation hub to attract our best talent to stay, build and export, rather than emigrate” (Hariri Launches Project, 2017, para. 7). Also mentioned by The961, DiasporaID, as written by Grace H., is a digital platform that connects the Lebanese diaspora with its homeland to facilitate the collaboration between Lebanon and its expats in contributing to the development of their country through an online application that is user friendly and easily accessible (H., 2018). The qualities of this app are the perfect example to make the users who are active (not only observers)

on it part of the Virtual Diaspora working on the Third Virtual Space to achieve one common goal.

Another initiative prepared by the Lebanese Government is the Lebanese Diaspora Energy, known as LDE. It was launched by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants in 2014 by Minister Gebran Bassil. It has many goals and objectives concerning the Lebanese Diaspora mainly to celebrate successful stories through the journey of Lebanese people in different countries. It also works on promoting the Lebanese heritage and spreading the Lebanese culture and traditions around the world (LDE, 2018a). Another objective is the establishment of different connections between residents and diaspora members to provide a chance of sharing experiences, creating relations, establishing businesses and creating social connections. Furthermore, the LDE also tackled ways to explore “new possibilities and opportunities” where Lebanese residents can connect with Lebanese expatriates and spread the positive image of Lebanon to the world in the hopes of better economic development (LDE, 2018b). The inaugural LDE edition, with over 500 invitees, occurred on May 30 till June 1, 2014, and the second edition was held in May 2015 with over 1300 attendees from 73 countries. “We Are Lebanon” was the theme of the event (LDE, 2018c). The 3rd edition happened in May 2016 with over 2000 invitees focusing on investment in Lebanese regions and praising the achievements of the numerous projects from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants. The conferences, according to the LDE (2018c), occurred in regional areas where Diasporas are concentrated, mainly in North America, Latin American, and Africa. The mission of LDE is focused on celebrating the Lebanese diaspora and their experiences in order to motivate them to maintain their

connections with their homeland. The efforts are part of maintaining the “Return to Roots” initiative which is marked by their journey to success. It also promotes the Lebanese impact on humanity and human civilizations in history while tracing the way to recent times of heritage and modernity (LDE, 2018a; LDE, 2018b). Aside from the emotional aspect, LDE encourages the sharing of experiences, relations and social connections to bring together a network of people from Lebanese origins scattered worldwide “in order to spread and diversify their domains of action on the individual, national and international levels” (Live Lebanon, 2016). In 2016, the project was to establish a B2B (business to business) online platform to connect people bilaterally or in groups to share and discuss opportunities and experiences. The support of the Lebanese community is a chief goal for LDE, and one of its objectives is to create active diplomatic efforts to enhance the economy of Lebanon and maintain the national, identity, and cultural links. Residents and expatriates, if their forces are joined together, have the ability to restore the world’s trust in the Lebanese economy. “On a more practical level, various on-ground projects have been promoted by the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants (Lebanon Connect, Learn Arabic, Diaspora House, Diaspora Museum, Lebanese School, among others) in order to implement a strong sense of belonging to Lebanon” (Live Lebanon, 2016). During its fourth conference at Biel, President Michel Aoun and Prime Minister Saad Hariri signed the “first decree that allows Lebanese expats to reclaim their nationality” by allowing the process of voting in the Lebanese elections from abroad (H., 2017).

Lebanese emigrants now have Facebook and LinkedIn accounts specified for them and are creating the new community of the Lebanese Virtual Diaspora. DiasporaID,

the new electronic platform that connects Lebanese Virtual Diasporas with their homeland, works on maintaining the links, and on introducing the home village to diaspora members once they are registered. It also introduces them to its municipality board members, ambassadors and locals. Furthermore, it has an economic motive that allows the participants to register their industries, and its smart platform connects the diaspora with potential candidates interested in the domain. The inauguration of DiasporaID also occurred in the Grand Serail and is funded by USAID. Former Prime Minister Saad Al Hariri, stated on Thursday August 10, 2017, that this electronic podium is designed to connect the Lebanese Virtual Diaspora with their homeland and to make the return to Lebanon a dream come true. The Prime Minister added that the creations of online platforms are an excellent initiative that will help facilitate the communication between the Lebanese Virtual Diaspora and residents of Lebanon. The Prime Minister stated that the importance of making Lebanese people connect across borders no longer through consulates and embassies but through the touch a button (Fayad, 2017). Elizabeth Richards, the American ambassador to Lebanon, expressed her opinion on this initiative as a great start to strengthen the links between Lebanon and USA by encouraging the role of migration in the development of Lebanon. She added that this is particularly salient since there are 14,000,000 Americans of Lebanese descent that are among the most successful in the receiving states (Fayad, 2017).

Furthermore, Live Lebanon, which is also another initiative that gives the opportunity of the Lebanese Virtual Diaspora to support the people in their hometowns on a community-based level whom are most in need, now target health, environmental, and educational issues through funds and personal support whereby they are able to

financially contribute on the Live Lebanon crowdfunding website www.livelebanon.org and mobile app (Live Lebanon, 2016). The new concept of crowdfunding was first introduced to Lebanon and the Middle East by Live Lebanon. Their goals are to reduce inequality and sustain cities and communities. However, it does not come without its challenges. The project's goal attempts to eliminate regional disparities and strengthen the links among the nationals. The private sector and the developmental initiatives is often considered a long process which is achieved under "the social and local development portfolio that operates as a neutral channel through which Lebanese citizens, members of the private sector and expatriates can provide direct support to the development of Lebanon's underprivileged communities" (Assi, 2017, para. 4). Their proposals are discussed on regular basis with the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities. They are then presented and supervised by the municipalities and the NGOs. The selected projects are based on needs, feasibilities, targeted beneficiaries and sustainability. "In terms of how it benefits its stakeholders, the Live Lebanon project focuses on empowering women by providing equipment, training, capacity building, venues and markets for women cooperative" (Assi, 2017, para. 5). Last but not least, the project targets farmers and supports them in building canals, providing electricity, marketing their products and training them. Moreover, the youth also benefit from this project in a way where they can live in a safe environment, have access to new projects in building schools and playgrounds and recreational centers. "The Live Lebanon team works with local municipalities, including Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior, as well as Ministry of Water and Energy. The team also conducts awareness raising campaigns for the public. A most recent example was

a campaign for better roads specifically to fix 3000 potholes and, in turn, decrease the number of road accidents” (Assi, 2017, para. 6). In 2015, this project achieved over 55 successful plans on a budget of USD 2.5 million.

In addition, the World Lebanese Cultural Union published the invitation of the immigrants’ reunion under the patronage of Prime Minister Saad al Hariri. The “Planet Lebanon 2017: Lebanese Diaspora Connections National Economic Development” event was held at the Grand Ballroom at the Phoenicia Hotel in Beirut on August 3, 2017 and was followed by a tour to the Chouf area on August 4. The 7th World Conference of the Lebanese International Business Council (LIBC) witnessed a large gathering of Lebanese elites, locals and expatriates, and businessmen. Participating in this event was ensured through reservations and a payment of fees of 100 USD for both days as stated: “For those who wish to be present at the forum on the 3rd of August, 2017 at Phoenicia Hotel please inform Mr. Antoine Menassa WLCU Chairperson of the Economic Committee for registration to ensure reservations at the forum and the dinner at the Sérail in Beirut with Prime Minister Saad Hariri. Fees participation is US Dollars 100 for both days” (WLCU, 2017, para. 3). Raising money has been an essential component of HTAs that work on events which focus on gathering active Virtual Diaspora members and inviting them to Lebanon.

The @LebanonConnect Facebook page is linked to the Lebanese Diaspora Energy (LDE) and promotes the events and news of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants in collaboration with LDE. The events’ objective aims at strengthening the bonds between the Lebanese emigrants and residents worldwide while promoting the

successes of the Lebanese diaspora members in different fields (Lebanon Connect, 2015). The event that took place in 2015 showcased the success of Lebanese expatriates and encouraged them to maintain their links with their Lebanese heritage. The business to business B2B approach was an opportunity to cultivate a common interest in tandem with the connection of emotional nostalgia. Inviting diaspora members to reconnect is a way of opening new doors to possibilities by creating networks of social connections. Diplomatic efforts are also being revitalized to enhance the Lebanese economic sector on national and international levels. There is a great promise behind this project and it will help the “Lebanese diplomatic entities to market Lebanese products abroad, to promote the image of Lebanon, and to encourage investments, especially by Lebanese expats who are eminent in their adopted countries” (Telecom Review, 2016, para. 5).

In an article written by Live Lebanon (2016), the committee discussed its attendance of the LDE event in Latin America to reconnect with the Lebanese diaspora through a conference at the Palacio Do Governo e Clube Atletico Monte Libano in Sao Paulo, Brazil. The community-based initiative was supported by the diaspora and the LDE to promote a positive Lebanese image of the homeland’s historical heritage. LDE emphasized the support of investment opportunities between Lebanon and other countries with a focus on better management of Lebanese assets. Attending these events will benefit both ends since they will be able to create networks with peers from different parts of the world involved in the same sector. This, in return, will allow the establishment of lobbies that can take part in the “foreign policy-making regarding the diaspora” (Live Lebanon, 2016). On the other hand, Lebitivity, a website which is well-known as a Lebanese event blog, mentioned the LDE event which happened

in May 2017 at the Beirut International Exhibition and Leisure Center as a promotion of the Lebanese roots running deep in the world. This event was chaired by Minister of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants Gebran Bassil and became an annual ritual that celebrates the Lebanese success stories in different fields around the world (Lebtivity, 2017). “LDE represents a one-of-a-kind occasion for Lebanese emigrants to return to their roots and develop a valuable cultural and social connection with their homeland. The event also enables influential Lebanese residents to meet thousands of leading Lebanese key players and decision-makers from the same active Virtual Diaspora, and share investment opportunities in Lebanon and abroad, as well as ideas for a better management of Lebanon’s assets” (Lebtivity, 2017, para. 4).

Another approach to the Lebanese Virtual Diaspora took the shape of an artistic event. The faculty of Architecture, Art and Design (FAAD) in collaboration with the Lebanese Emigration Research Center (LERC) at Notre Dame University in Lebanon organized an event that brought together artists from Lebanon and abroad to attend and participate in an art exhibition arranged for the Lebanese Diaspora (Notre Dame University, 2010). Art can also bridge the Lebanese living abroad to their homeland which further creates and deepens the link and chain meant for a universal Lebanese society across the world. The artwork that was showcased ranged between painting, drawings, mixed media, collage and photography. 129 artists participated and presented 298 artworks, 83 of which were selected by a jury (Notre Dame University, 2010).

Additionally, Nakhoul (2017) published an article on Business News Lebanon to promote an app created by Bank of Beirut to connect Lebanese diasporas worldwide

with local entrepreneurs and businesses. The “Lebanese Investors” online platform was accompanied by the “Ya Mijana” mobile app created by Abacus Lebanon to “globally promote local producers.” Moreover, TEDMOB launched an App in return similar to LinkedIn and works on a local level mainly targeting Virtual Diaspora members. Danielle Issa, Head of Strategic Development at Bank of Beirut, clarified that the app of “Lebanon Investors” is targeted for the active Virtual Diaspora to link them to the economic opportunities and investment available in Lebanon (Nakhoul, 2017).

All these activities of bridging connections and attracting financial and political remittances occurred in the Third Virtual Space while targeting the largest numbers of active Virtual Diasporas in different parts of the world. Therefore, an essential component of the Virtual Diaspora could be considered as a means in which Lebanese abroad are present in a space where they could be seen physically and targeted directly by the new emerging online apps allowing Lebanese officials to engulf persons outside of their sovereign territory into their realms of their influence. Therefore, the Third Virtual Space is, in effect, the eye watching over these active members regardless of their age, location and socioeconomic status who happens to be in the Virtual Diaspora; and make sure that they are receiving and consuming the messages delivered to them. This is because any Virtual Diaspora members are a potential investment with regards to the construction of Lebanon, politically, economically and socially. Could this be a new type of pressure?

3.4 Benefits and Limitations

Finally, chapter 3 brought together the idea that “the Internet has become, for a

number of ethnic minorities, a means of community representation and a way of participating in public debate” (Rigoni, 2010, para. 22). However, the maintenance of a website, app, social media page, blog etc... through time requires users’ engagement and interactions continuously. Consequently, the websites aimed for the Virtual diaspora are different from the newsgroups, similar to what Androutsopoulos (2006) has said in his article “Multilingualism, Diaspora, and the Internet: Codes and Identities on German-Based Diaspora.” The aim of the website is to build a community where users are audiences and participants. It is an affordable approach that can be edited in content according to the participants’ own discourses. The users will have easy access to “virtual interaction platforms” including discussion forums and community-based awareness (Androutsopoulos, 2006). Accordingly, an interruption arises relating to the use of the Internet which allowed for the creation of new hybrid identities and cultures due to the simultaneous process of cross-working between maintaining and mixing the different poles of sending and receiving states’ cultures. Another problem arises relating to the computer-literate segments which in return could marginalize some voices and put their dual identity into negotiations. To counter-argue this point, Mandville (2003, p. 135) claims that “spaces of communication in which the identity, meaning and boundaries of a diasporic community are continually constructed, debated and reimagined.” Androutsopoulos (2006) contends that this does not necessarily mean that all the views expressed by users are “unanimous and unprejudiced.”

Oiarzabal and Reips (2012) have further explained the impact and growing salience of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and a particular emphasis on the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) on migration. Such

technologies have facilitated the flow of people throughout the world. ICTs have also been responsible for the growth and maintenance of family and friendship ties, particularly within the diasporic communities. Instruments like laptop computers, cellular phones, wifi, and 3G are just a few examples of resources that have been vital for migrants to “develop, maintain and recreate informal and formal transnational networks in both the physical and the digital worlds, while reinforcing and shaping their sense of individual and collective identity” (Oiarzabal & Reips, 2012, p. 1334).

Chapter 4

Findings and Analysis

4.1 Analysis of the Operations Occurring in the Third Virtual Space

As stated previously, the notion of an online community witnessed a lot of contradictions by different scholars, such as Adam and Ghose in 2003. They claimed that the separation of the community members and the reestablishment of their links through the Third Virtual Space defy the notion of “ideal of a community.” However, the interference of new technologies has allowed for the ideal community to reestablish its links and form what is known to be the Virtual Diaspora. Therefore, the Internet makes a difference first by stating that a community maintains its characteristics despite the fact that it is separated geographically. Social media platforms, such as Facebook for example, created first by Mark Zuckerberg with a purpose of bringing people together under the title of one entity, however, nowadays is no longer the case. Now Facebook and social media users connect with their friends and family members at all times using their mobile apps or laptops in order to stay in touch with those left behind on a network where the visibility of the person is easily determined. If social media platforms and the internet allowed reach and engagement and influence to happen quickly and easily, how does the future of the HTAs appears to be like? If the title of “virtuality” of the diaspora is now reaching all members of a diasporic community, then it is reciprocally affecting the Lebanese HTAs involved in this Virtual Diaspora.

4.2 Future of the Lebanese Hometown Associations

The future of Lebanese HTAs appears to be gaining in relevancy, particularly in the present circumstances in Lebanon. Multiple social media platforms have opened the doors for many different portals to attract an ever-increasing number of community members scattered around the globe under the title of Virtual Diaspora. One example can be the website of “Lebanon Without Borders.” The title itself is meant to conjure the notion of defying borders, boundaries and geographic distance with the aim to uplift or deepen the connection between members of the Lebanese diaspora. “Lebanon Without Borders” seeks to not only enlighten but inspire migrants about the importance of their historical roots. This point is emphasized with the website’s slogan being “he who denies his roots, has no roots” (Kalem, 2016). The Internet, along with multiple social media platforms, form a new paradigm of communication which allows for the recruitment of more and more users. This allows for increased promotional opportunities to include people whom are involved in the migratory sector. Rivera-Salgado (2016) emphasized the importance and impact of reaching out to the diaspora. His analysis on the extensively documented data and sociological literature of Mexican immigrants in the United States since the 1980s shows the “economic and social impact of the almost 12 million migrants has been such that it has transformed the places of origin and settlement on both sides of the border” (Rivera-Salgado, 2016, p. 118). Moreover, Rivera-Salgado (2016, p. 120) states that “each organization has a different nature and sphere of action” which can achieve multiple goals on both the United States’ side and

Mexico's side of the border. Such reciprocal connections, which have been facilitated and integrated by HTAs, have achieved many successful goals which have made an impact on a number of different fields; including labor, health, education, social services and legal.

In this same scenario, the future of the Lebanese HTAs will further utilize social media platforms and ICTs to organize activities and raise contributions from its members. The ever-evolving means of communication via social media and other forms of ICTs will further enhance the efficiency of time and costs. Virtual Diaspora members (through the use of specific websites, Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of social media) will not only increase in numbers through the increased accessibility of such ICTs, but they will also have a more interactive and intimate connection with their home communities.

Rivera-Salgado (2016) further explains the importance of HTAs and their usage of the Internet and social media to play a crucial role in the political discussions, debates, and cultural continuity of their home country. Historically, Lebanese HTAs have always maintained a rooted interest in the dispersal of Lebanese immigrants around the world while trying to attract them into the sphere of the diaspora. However, it has only been recent that this evolution of technology and communication has allowed a more simplified and effective means of locating and reaching out to the Lebanese Virtual Diaspora. Now, more than ever, with the appearance of the Third Virtual Space, HTAs have used this new space to develop a deeper contact with this diaspora. This non-physical, yet actual, space, although divided among users for multiple usages, is used mainly by the Virtual Diasporas from multiple regions of the world to actively

participate in their home countries' affairs. Furthermore, the Internet will further facilitate the intensity of interest and number of people whom are interested in their home countries' affairs. This will be primarily due to the easier and faster access to information that can be debated and discussed from abroad.

4.3 The Usage of the Virtual Diaspora through the Third Virtual Space

Although diasporic communities, and the Lebanese diasporic community in particular, have vested interests in a multitude of different issues pertaining to their home country, the subject of notable interest involves the topic of home politics. Tabar, Skulte-Ouaiss, Habib, and Murray (2012) raise questions concerning the reciprocal roles that the Lebanese diaspora play in politics of their home country and the role homeland politics play within the Lebanese diaspora. Although there is a “great cultural, financial, social familial interaction” between the Lebanese diaspora and their homeland of Lebanon (Tabar et al. 2012, p. 6), what is more salient is the crucial interaction between the active Lebanese Virtual Diaspora and its homeland. According to Tabar et al. (2012, p. 6), “government and municipal officials in Lebanon are exploiting the divisions inherent in the political make-up of the state in order to secure voter support” all the while having the Lebanese Virtual Diaspora maintaining “strong sectarian identities as opposed to a more unified national identity.”

In other words, Lebanese immigrants living in Australia, Canada and the United States, although abroad, still maintain their sectarian affiliations, which are being taken advantage of by political elites in Lebanon. These connections between the Lebanese diaspora and political elites demonstrates that Lebanese HTAs linked with government

officials are increasingly reaching out to Lebanese immigrants within the Third Virtual Space to further maintain and ensure political power. On the other hand, the HTAs independent from government officials such as Live Lebanon and Lebanese Without Borders are actively supporting the cultural, traditional and linguistic side of the equation. This is noticed because in this year of 2018, Lebanon underwent their first national elections with the added significance of permitting the Lebanese diaspora the capability to vote from abroad after claiming their Lebanese passport/ identity; as shown in figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2 was established by the Directorate General of Civil Status in Lebanon and shows the number of electors that reside abroad. According to these figures, there are approximately 82,900 voters spanning over 40 countries (H., 2018). In figure 4.1, which has been provided by Ajroudi and Chughtai (2018) further illustrates the figures regarding Lebanese election and the number of voters; registered and expat. For Lebanese migrants living overseas in countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman, polls were opened for voting on April 27, 2018. This was followed two day later with polls opening for a further 33 countries in the Americas, Europe, Australia and Africa (Ajroudi & Chughtai, 2018). With the number of Lebanese expats, along with the involvement of the Lebanese Virtual Diaspora attention in Lebanese political affairs, reaching 82,965 voters worldwide, Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil was quick to write on Twitter that he was “very proud” to witness the first Lebanese expat voting abroad in the country’s history (Ajroudi, Chughtai, 2018).



Figure 4.1
 Chart showing the distribution of Lebanese voters abroad by country
 Source: Directorate General of Civil Status

However, these tables provide a clear indication of the involvement of the Lebanese Virtual Diaspora in Lebanese political affairs is growing however in a minimalistic amount. This is in large part due to the Lebanese HTAs' increased connections and participation in the Third Virtual Space however, are not particularly interested in the

political affairs of the country. Such efforts to significantly reach out to the Lebanese Virtual Diaspora involve developing apps, websites social media fan pages, etc to be able to reach, influence and engage the biggest number possible.

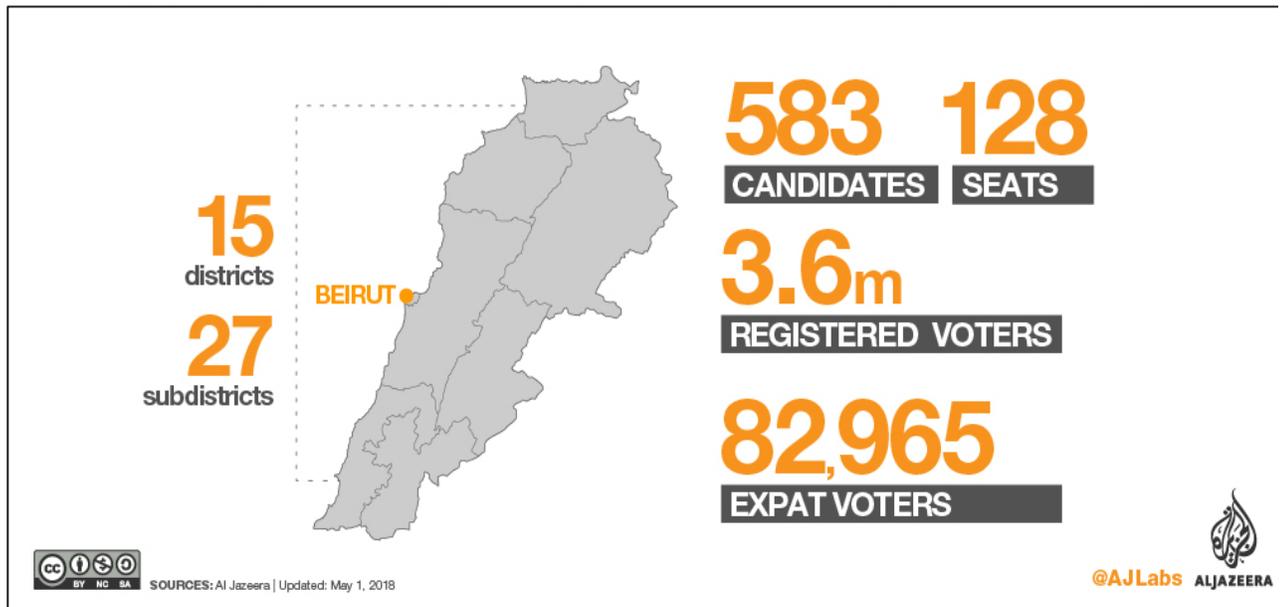


Figure 4.23
Source: Al Jazeera | May 1, 2018

In addition to the numbers registered, this has allowed for a clearer, simpler, and more accessible means of involvement with the Virtual Diaspora on different levels. Historically, the Lebanese government had not been directly nor extensively involved with the Lebanese Virtual Diaspora, however, since the Lebanese expat community had been granted the ability to vote, Lebanese government officials have been keener than ever to particularly invest in this Virtual Diaspora during the election season. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Gebran Bassil, who is also the founder of

Lebanese Diaspora Energy, tweeted immediately following the Lebanese national elections stating that this was a great achievement for the Lebanese Diaspora active members. This certainly suggests that the purpose of such outreach is primarily to obtain political remittances and the manifestation and preservation of power. The Lebanese Diaspora Energy (LDE) maintains a Virtual Diaspora through Facebook with over 8000 followers (LDE, 2018b). This can be compared to another existing Virtual Diaspora; DiasporaID, presented by Prime Minister Saad Al Hariri and funded by the USAID with over 20,000 Facebook likes and over 20,000 followers as well (DiasporaID Lebanon, 2018). With the Lebanese Diaspora Energy celebrating its 5th edition in May of 2018, the main objectives were reiterated with the emphasis of reaching out to the Virtual Diaspora around the world under the banner of a “dream coming true” (LDE, 2018c). Curiously, the outreach within the Third Virtual Space by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the promotion and publicity of Lebanon and Beirut to Lebanese expats fell quite short in terms of financial effort on the part of the Foreign Minister. As most users are aware of, purchasing Facebook ads enable the user the ability to target particular audiences for an effective and targeted advertisement campaign to boost more awareness, outreach and engagement. However, both Lebanese Diaspora Energy and DiasporaID relied on organic growth through their user base fan. This lack of engagement compared with the actual numbers of people following the Facebook page resulted in uploaded videos with a limited amount of views, likes, shares and comments. One video on the Lebanese Diaspora Energy holds only 24 likes. This begs the question of why would the Lebanese government reach out to its Virtual Diaspora in the Third Virtual Space but with limited efforts on the pages? One reason for the lack of

engagement from the Virtual Diaspora may be because on both DiasporaID and Lebanese Diaspora Energy most content is relevant to Lebanese investors and entrepreneurs who are becoming distinguished in their country of residence. Nevertheless, the only video to receive a significant amount of attention from followers was a video that promoted the Lebanese election in May 2018. It was the opening ceremony video launched soon after the Lebanese elections (LDE, 2018c).

Four days after the election, Lebanese President Michel Aoun highly praised the Lebanese diaspora for taking pride in their home country and thanked them for voting. He claimed in his speech that the Lebanese Diaspora Energy is the center where all the Lebanese expats can meet. He also added that reaching out to this Virtual Diaspora online and Lebanese diaspora offline, in Lebanon and abroad, is in effect taking advantage of Lebanon's resources; "الإستفادة من خيراتها" which means "take advantage of its resources" (LDE, 2018c). The president of Lebanon further added that the Lebanese elections allowed for a new parliament that represents the Lebanese community by the size of its political parties due to the new law of allowing the Lebanese diasporic community to vote.

On the other hand, the motto of "our roots run deep in the world," that allowed the Lebanese aboard to acquire the passport, promoted access to Lebanese opportunities such as developmental projects, that strengthen the bonds for good returns in order to further encourage the tourism sector and increase financial revenues. One example was when the Lebanese Diaspora Energy hosted a large organization conference for Lebanese immigrants in Beirut. Over 2000 visitors attended this conference whereby

they were encouraged to, when they return to their resident country, further promote their family and friends to visit Lebanon (LDE, 2018c).

This proves that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants recently started playing a major role in activating this Lebanese diasporic market. However, according to Rahhal's (2018) interview with the president of the Lebanese Federation for Tourism Industries and the Lebanese Hotel Association, Mr. Pierre Ashkar, Lebanon's tourism industry is not as it used to be before 2010. The Lebanese tourism sector saw little improvement in 2017, due to the diasporic communities abroad in the new markets, which are Europe, American and Australia however no longer from the Gulf. This is because the European Market requires more than what we can offer in availability and prices. Durability is also a factor since the Gulf market had a minimum of 10 days stay whereas the west market has around 3 days (Rahhal, 2018).

This emphasizes the reason why so "many diaspora organizations have emerged in the last few years to mobilize assistance. Their emergence is perhaps nowhere more noticeable than on the Internet. Websites have been set up to advertise jobs back home for emigrants and otherwise coordinate cultural, political and business initiatives such as collective investment promotion" (Phillips, 2013). Hence, promoting what is important through multiple social media platforms online is not only the quickest way to reach out to the Lebanese Virtual Diaspora, but also the most accurate as well. A virtual world of opportunities and possibilities have opened up in the Third Virtual Space that did not previously exist. Its existence has led to the creation of many opportunities for serving Lebanese communities and also led to numerous developmental and political projects. In

return, it has provided many Lebanese scattered throughout the globe a means to reconnect with their roots and provide them the prospect of becoming more involved and connected with their Lebanese heritage. However, under the proud effect that the internet and the Third Virtual Space have to twist the way communication is happening with the Virtual Diaspora, the sectarian aspect still arises. In the following section, policy recommendations will be provided to control this connection that is too broad and scattered.

4.4 Policy Recommendations

In order to better track the activities occurring in the Third Virtual Space and gain the trust of the Lebanese Virtual Diaspora again, it would be advantageous for Lebanese HTAs and most importantly the government to adopt new policies. This is important because “remittances from Diasporic communities could dramatically influence their home countries’ financial prosperity” (Manor, 2017, p.2). Moreover, the emergence of Virtual Diasporic communities help in the formation of connections among members in home and host cultures. This is imperative in order to create transnational networks, activities and “exemplify global connectivity and the functioning of multidimensional networks” (Manor, 2017, p.4). Finally, it is important to implement new policies in the age of digitalization because digital tools and social media ease the transfer of knowledge from embassies to diplomats, to foreign populations, and foreign opinions. The transfer of such information allows for the nation to rebrand itself and open doors for new Virtual Diaspora activities and to influence the Virtual Diaspora toward financial and political ends (Manor, 2017, p.7). In El Salvador for example, the HTAs

have established partnerships with various organizations, importantly, these groups also included the national government. The implementation of projects depends on the political affiliation and religious affiliation of the diaspora. Moreover, some HTAs are connected with Salvadoran organizations used for lobbying powers (Orozco, 2006, p.18). These policies can be easily implemented in Lebanon because Virtual Diasporas could link themselves to their religious or political background; with relevant affiliated organizations however it is only the beginning because the aim is to shoot for national unity far from sectarian division. Furthermore, in order to gain the trust of the old and young Virtual Diaspora generations, one can look at the diasporic policies implemented by Israel and examine the research on the efficacy of such policies. First of all, making ties with second generation diasporas who are more involved online could be an effective element in the benefit of the Lebanese community. The offering of these generations the opportunity to visit their country and become exposed to the Lebanese daily life, culinary art, security concerns and history could have a significant benefit to fostering emotional ties to the country. Israel also maintains a heavy social media presence and encourages its Virtual Diaspora to serve “online boundary spanners by sharing insights and experiences with their online and offline networks” (Manor, 2017, p.10). We can implement some policies taken from various sources to preserve the rights and interests of the diaspora.

Below are some important recommended policies collected and adjusted from The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and The Ministry of Trade Ethiopian and Investment Agency. These policies will allow for the Virtual Diaspora to gain the trust of the

Lebanese government again while engaging in the home country affair through remittances (UNESCO, 2017).

1- Establishing cultural centers where Virtual Diaspora could develop their skills and knowledge on the country's language, history and culture.

2- Virtual Diasporas should be provided with support to participate in the construction of developmental projects back home.

3- Support the Virtual Diaspora in planning and organizing events that reveal an authentic experience of culture from their country and promote it online across the nations where Virtual Diasporas are located and are active.

4- Offering online courses to learn Arabic language and Lebanese dialect along with cultural participation to help the Virtual Diaspora generations maintain or acquire strong attachments to Lebanon.

In addition to these policies tackling developmental and cultural links with Lebanon, the below policies retrieved from Diaspora Policy (2018) represent the important elements to be considered by the government and hometown associations when maintaining proper links with the Virtual Diaspora.

1-Preserving the rights and interests of the Virtual Diaspora to improve its engagement and investment.

2- Enhancing knowledge and technology transfers of information equally and accessibly.

3- Promoting cultural values and Lebanese image building abroad.

4- Encouraging the Lebanese Virtual Diaspora active members in participating in good governance and democracy since the passports and Lebanese identities can now be claimed.

5- Encouraging Philanthropy and Development Associations with registered representatives.

6- Establishing Permanent Information Exchange Forums especially on social media platforms.

7- Expanding information services online and through one approved application.

In addition, the former Director-General of the Foreign Ministry Haytham Jumaa, in his book *جناح وغربة المغتربون اللبنانيون شمس لا تغيب* (Jumaa, 2017, p.159-168) the author talks about the high hopes and lost hopes of the World Lebanese Cultural Union which tried to emphasize the important role of the Lebanese Diaspora until 2013. The failed trials of establishing better policies, visions and goals for the diasporic community and to have an effective institution which is strong enough to represent the community in many different fields was unfortunately not a success. However, the policies introduced would be still beneficial even today. However, functioning as an independent entity unimpeded in the political affairs of the government and exercised by an institution responsible for its administration and organizational work would be an essential component to its success. It should work for the benefit of the Lebanese Virtual Diaspora first and active diaspora second under the title of Lebanon as a country. The policies are as follows:

- 1- Introducing a policy of return and securing a job (while posting it online) to assure an appropriate and decent lifestyle; and not only invest in those who are abroad and exploit their potentials.
- 2- Following up on the virtual diaspora's daily news, activities and accomplishments through social media, apps, blogs and the internet.
- 3- Creating institutions in every country and supporting them on a national level.
- 4- Promoting online Lebanese villages, histories, numbers, solutions and news on a neutral network far from the sectarian division and targeted for all age groups, generations, locations, sexes and status.
- 5- Promote educational and cultural events online similarly to Live Lebanon in coordination with the UNDP in different villages and cities.
- 6- Provide assistance and financial security to those in need through the involvement of consulates, embassies and organizations
- 7- Honor the achievers with trophies, recognitions, promotional events or even by naming a street or a place by their name

Furthermore, Jumaa suggests that the creation of a Lebanese lobby of approximately 3000 representatives to work with consulates and embassy would be essential in promoting Lebanon on an economic, cultural and touristic level to allow for it to move into new markets (Jumaa, 2017).

Chapter 5

Conclusion

“Keep that flame of love for Lebanon alive in your heart, while keeping your success in the diaspora.” – H.E. Minister Gebran Bassil

Finally, my research study targeted the new spaces used to accurately and efficiently target a large audience with the lowest cost, time and effort possible. Hence, the appearance of the terms Virtual Diaspora and Third Virtual Space. These terms generate activities that are beyond the borders of geography and time which have a specific focus to the known and target diaspora including its activities across borders.

The significance of the location we live in defines our element of focus as diasporic members. Calling this new cultural space, a virtual diasporic space is not unusual. It demonstrates that they are in fact not lost or adrift at all, but they essentially rely on technology as human beings to find a unique place intersecting between the virtual and the real; and to also properly navigate and operate in such a space. When we as people go online, we put ourselves into the cyberspace and direct ourselves away from the real physical place. “The good life is no longer just in the real, or just in the virtual but in a congruence of the two where one seamlessly feeds into the other, transforming both, and creating the cybernetic space that becomes the synthesis of the two” (Mitra & Schwartz, 2001). We no longer live in the “metaphors” of nations and borders. When the tangible and physical means of occupying a certain space becomes out of reach, people whom

still wish for the experience turn to more accessible means by going online. In the virtual space, people are able to find a multitude of online communities or create their own space where others can join them. Such new technologies are constantly changing and transforming who we are, how we act, how we live and how we communicate. In this day and age, where we can be defined *not only* by the physical space we inhabit, but with the activity that we do across the Internet. We are capable of moving seamlessly from one space to effectively reach another in mere moments. The Virtual Lebanese Diaspora, in tandem with the HTAs, actively participate in the Third Virtual Space and use the Internet as a tool to facilitate its cross-border activities. The reality has shown that HTAs have been growing rapidly with ever more rapid response and user outreach through the Internet and social media. It is also important to note that delivering such promises to the Virtual Diaspora is very critical. Despite the registered improvements of the Virtual Diaspora's involvement in Lebanese affairs, many Lebanese expats remain indifferent or skeptical towards joining, collaborating, or participating in efforts for the welling-being of their home country. For example, Amal Movement leader (a major political party in the Lebanese government which represents the Shiite constituency) and Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri expressed his disappointment in the low registration of expatriates arranged to vote in Lebanon's parliamentary elections. He further called on those whom did not register to "fly home and take part" (Al Bawaba, 2018). In a speech broadcasted specifically for audiences abroad, Berri addressed the Amal supporters around the world informing them that Lebanon needs their participation in the upcoming elections (Lebanon's first such vote in nine years). According to Al Bawaba (2018, para. 3), the concern for a low turnout rate for Lebanese

expats voting is attributed to the “historic exclusion of the diaspora and its marginalization.” The article continues to explain that Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri was very fierce during the promotional activities happening before the elections. He also attempted to reach out to the Lebanese Virtual Diaspora as a representative of the Shi’a sect to vote. According to Berri, this was because “in all cases, I ask for your attention because your country has learned a lesson and has paid attention to you [as you] aren’t only of a financial force, but also as an electoral force that all groups and alliances are in need of. “Don’t be afraid of the elections, but be afraid for them [if you do not vote].” (Albawaba, 2018, para. 6). This message has a clear political motive which was directed towards the Lebanese diaspora through all means of communication available.

Finally, it is essential to state that the goal behind the entire process of such online activities is to ensure that the diasporic community is and stays an active provider of financial and political remittances for a country whose government has had a sub-standard reputation to make the country a better place for its citizens. Many feel that the last straw Lebanon has at its disposal is through utilizing the love the Lebanese diaspora has for their home country. Importantly, this is why the efforts of interacting on social media, the Internet and blogs should remain active and engaged at all times. This is because the Third Virtual Space require constant maintenance, updates, and engagement with the Virtual Diaspora. With Lebanon conserving such a valuable and delicate resource, it would be in the best interest of the Lebanese government to be wary of broadcasting its goals, achievements, aspirations and successes. In order to maintain the Lebanese diaspora’s interest and engagement, the Lebanese government

(that the diaspora helped to elect) should show that they are a credible, reliable, and honest entity, otherwise promises will be in vain and the trust of the diaspora will not be so easy to win back in the future.

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