

Migrants as “dissonant harmony-seekers” and migrant life in “foam”

Dissonant
harmony-
seekers living
in foam

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Received 27 June 2022
Revised 30 August 2022
Accepted 3 October 2022

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Abstract

Purpose – Migration of the Turkish new middle-class – high-skilled, well-educated, young professionals – has been growing in recent years. This paper explores their migration experience and discusses the role of physical and virtual bubbles in the formation of transnational communities and processes of adjustment to a new place.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based on a qualitative inquiry collecting data via semi-structured interviews with 18 London-based Turkish migrants and a digital ethnographic study of three Facebook groups that bring together the Turkish migrant community in Richmond, London.

Findings – Findings indicate that the migration of the new middle class differs conceptually from existing typologies. The paper proposes the concept of “dissonant harmony-seekers” and elaborates on their interactions to demonstrate that, in the Internet age, the traditional image of migrants living in isolated localised bubbles is no longer accurate. Findings also indicate a pragmatic and functional engagement with the bubbles, with migrants sporadically interacting with the bubbles to meet their individual needs in information, education and employment.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the literature with the concept of dissonant harmony-seekers, which will gain more visibility in a world where the trend of democratic decline and rising authoritarianism will motivate a migratory move for people who confront a moral dissociation from the civil order in their homeland. The engagement of dissonant harmony-seekers with migrant communities challenges the conventional thinking that social identity is central to creating and maintaining bubbles. The other contribution of the paper to the literature is the metaphor of “foam” to capture the ephemeral and fugacious nature of the dynamics of migrant communities and practices.

Keywords Migration, Diaspora, Dissonant harmony-seekers, e-diaspora, Physical bubbles, Virtual bubbles

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Migration from Turkey into the UK has been growing in recent years, but it peaked just before the Brexit transition period’s expiry on December 31, 2020. A record-breaking 20,000 Turkish citizens applied for a special businessperson visa under the Ankara Agreement, which granted them a path to emigrate to the UK and eventual British residency (Erem, 2020). Most of these migrants are members of “the new middle-class” (Kravets and Sandikci, 2014) –



The authors would like to thank Simon Edward Mumford for proofreading the article and Kay Galpin and Conroy Grizzle for the inspiring conversations that brought about the term “dissonant harmony-seekers”. The suggestions and constructive criticism of the two anonymous reviewers are also gratefully acknowledged.

young, urban, highly-skilled professionals who can make significant contributions to the economic development of their home country, as well as the host country (Keyder, 2013). Accounts of skilled migration to date have been based on globally mobile workers and professional expatriates (Scott, 2006); however, the new middle-class is a distinct group in their values, lifestyles and political inclinations (Uner and Gungordu, 2016). Therefore, current knowledge about professional expatriates fails to recognise the social morphology and experiences of this new wave of migration.

Presented against a backdrop of a burgeoning new middle-class in both developed and emerging markets, including Turkey (Uner and Gungordu, 2016), and rising migration from this class as a global phenomenon (Scott, 2006), in this paper, we offer a contextual and conceptual framework through which to view this new middle-class migration. We first address the following research question: “What are the characteristics and motives of the new middle-class migration?” Next, we explain how our inquiry into the characteristics of the new middle-class migration led us to a novel classification of migrants, which we coin “dissonant harmony seekers”. Finally, we discuss the possibilities afforded by this concept to understand migration aspirations and experiences in a world where the trend of democratic decline and rising authoritarianism motivates increasing numbers to migrate to a host country in search for an imagined future.

Furthermore, in scrutinising the life of the new migrants in the host country, we draw on Srinivasan and Pyati’s (2007) discussion of diasporic information environments to argue that the traditional notion of migrant communities in isolated localised bubbles does not hold true in an age of accelerated information production and interaction opportunities in social media. Therefore, our second research question seeks to address: “How migratory behaviour and experiences are shaped by networked technologies for maintaining and creating the migrant community?” In answering this question, we challenge the traditional perspective which holds that migrants experience a clustering life in physical and virtual bubbles. As an alternative, we introduce the notion of “foam” to capture the interaction of migrants with the migrant community.

We commence the paper by conceptualising the characteristics of the new middle-class and exploring relevant migration models and metaphors in the literature to explain their migratory experiences. We then explain the research methods adopted, followed by our empirical findings. Following that, we outline our theoretical contributions, expanding on the concept of dissonant harmony-seekers living in foam and explore its significance in deepening our understanding of transnational movements in an era when citizenship and belongingness are being renegotiated.

Literature review

Migration of the new middle-class

Traditionally, the definition of the middle-class has been based on disposable income and consumption behaviours (Cavusgil *et al.*, 2018). Accordingly, the middle-class constitutes households with 30% of total household income available for discretionary consumption. They can afford comfortable housing, annual holidays, private education and healthcare services. Since the mid-1990s, there has been a heated debate on the emergence of a new middle-class globally, especially in emerging countries. Although there are idiosyncrasies based on the socio-political dynamics of each country, some common characteristics are observed across countries (Uner and Gungordu, 2016). The new middle-class can be described as young urban professionals who are well educated, speak at least one foreign language, follow elite career paths (Kravets and Sandikci, 2014), and as such, are equipped with skills and expertise that make them less dependent on their employers (Keyder, 2013). In addition, they exhibit values of individualism, freedom, anti-authoritarianism and sustainability (Uner and Gungordu, 2016).

The combination of their high-level skills and the aforementioned values gives the new middle-class the flexibility to migrate when unsatisfied with their home country's socio-political and economic situation (Scott, 2006). Hirschman's (1970) seminal framework can be used as an interpretive lens to understand the motivation and migration behaviour of the new middle-class. The basic concept Hirschman (1970) proposed is as follows: members of an organisation, whether a business or a nation, have three possible responses when faced with a dissatisfying situation: (1) they can express loyalty by staying on, which can range from enthusiastic support to passive acceptance; (2) they can voice their discontent, for example through protests; and (3) they can exit by leaving their homeland.

The recent migration of the new middle-class from Turkey exemplifies these dynamics. With the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) creation of its own Islamic middle-class of conservative bourgeoisie, the modern, secular, young urban professionals (coined above as the new middle-class) started to lose ground (Keyder, 2013). In 2013, the Gezi protests can be considered the "voice" of the new middle-class, in Hirschman's classification, strongly opposing authoritarianism and conservatism. The protests resulted in short-term success; however, in the long-term, increased authoritarianism, economic volatility and political instability – triggered by the coup attempt in 2016 – made migration, "exit" in Hirschman's terms, an attractive option for the new middle-class. It is worth noting that the rise of authoritarianism and consequent migratory response of the new middle-class is not unique to Turkey. Informed by the rise of new forms of right-wing populism following the 2008 global financial crisis, the mobility and belongingness of citizens have also been renegotiated in the UK and the US and, by extension, globally (Gilmartin and Wood, 2018). The scale and scope of this unique type of new middle-class mobility suggest that the phenomenon has become more nuanced and complex, calling for dedicated scholarly attention.

Migration models to explain the movement of the new middle-class

To shed light on the migration motivation and experience of the new middle-class, two models in the extant literature appear to be relevant: the corporate expatriate model (Scott, 2006) and lifestyle migration (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009).

The corporate expatriate model considers the transnational mobility of urban professionals – a narrow group of elite corporate expatriates migrating to appropriate socio-economic capital and career progression (Scott, 2006). This literature on professional mobilities can be crystallised into three main streams. First, taking a managerialist lens, scholars focus on the cultural differences between the country of origin and the host country and the challenges these pose for employee adjustment and adaptation (e.g. Yamazaki and Kayes, 2007). Cross-cultural training and learning (e.g. Kour and Jyoti, 2021) are offered for improved employee relations, satisfaction and performance (e.g. Liu and Ipe, 2010). Secondly, from an individualistic lens, research seeks to explain the personality traits, mindsets and competencies that make professionals open to building and adapting to transnational careers and lives (e.g. Harari *et al.*, 2018; Linder, 2018; Peltokorpi and Jintae Froese, 2009). Finally, from a sociological angle, consideration is given to the mundane and situated efforts by which mobile workers make their lives across international borders (e.g. Lauring and Selmer, 2009). By focussing on the everyday lives of mobile workers, this stream of research reveals strikingly diverse faces of professional mobility. For example, while expatriates in Lauring and Selmer's (2009) study lived in walled communities, totally separated from the local context, Beaverstock (2005) showed that expatriates were deeply embedded in a wide range of very local contexts, despite their putative mobility.

The corporate expatriate model (Scott, 2006) remains central to our understanding of transnational mobilities of urban professionals. However, the model privileges a narrow group of corporate employees. Recently, challenging the focus on a privileged economic form of career-based mobility, Benson and O'Reilly (2009) offered a broader phenomenon, called

“lifestyle migration”, to capture contemporary migratory moves. Lifestyle migrants are “relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that, for various reasons, signify, for the migrant, a better quality of life” (p. 609). The word “lifestyle” indicates the apparent “search project” behind the move and how this is central to the migrant’s identity reconstruction (Benson and O’Reilly, 2016). Therefore, this umbrella concept links vastly different migrant profiles (e.g. retirees and downsizers) under a common aim: seeking better and fulfilling lives. Although the corporate expatriate model (Scott, 2006) and the lifestyle migration concept (Benson and O’Reilly, 2009) provide a valuable lens to understand the contemporary migratory moves, they both represent migrants as actors disembedded from the social morphology of the context they originate from (Conradson and Latham, 2005; Scott, 2006). Therefore, we argue that these models cannot be stretched to represent the migration dynamics of the new middle-class, and we call for a nuanced analysis of this class’s mobility patterns and migratory experiences.

Variable metaphors for migratory experience: diasporas, enclaves or bubbles?

Moving and living transnationally creates new challenges, such as preserving social and cultural ties while adapting to the norms of the new country (Gustafson, 2009). To overcome these challenges and achieve a sense of stability, familiarity and continuity, migrants tend to interact with their ethnic communities (Zaban, 2015). Researchers developed several terms to study the tendency of migrants to congregate in places where their compatriots already reside. Traditionally based on the Jewish experience, the term diaspora has recently been expanded to include other national groupings. However, the concept still alludes to the maintenance of a strong national consciousness and an attachment to the homeland (Kaldor-Robinson, 2002). Diaspora, in the view of Clifford (1994, p. 308), “involves dwelling, maintaining communities, having collective homes away from home”. In this sense, the homeland is not a place for return in a physical sense but, instead, serves as a common base for migrant communities to connect and interact (Ghorashi and Boersma, 2009).

The geographic concentration of the diasporic community is often labelled as an enclave, usually with thick boundaries that exert social pressure on its members and isolate them from the host country (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). Even though ghettos, characterised by pre-modern ethnic ties, are the first images to spring to mind, modern expatriate communities can also function as enclaves, exerting implicit and explicit social demands on their members (Lauring and Selmer, 2009). However, the concept of enclave, as discussed by Zaban (2015), does not always capture the reality of migrants. In its place, she introduces the concept of bubble, an entity that is “transparent, so that those inside can see the larger world . . . [and] those outside are able to see and partially interact with those inside” (Zaban, 2015, p. 1007).

The concept of bubble emphasises hybridity and recognises that migrants do not have to be fully assimilated by the host community, nor do they have to remain enclosed in an enclave. Although a migrant may initially be pulled into an enclave and the support system it provides, as Breton (1964) shows, its influence may eventually decline and be replaced by more interactions with the host community and other migrant communities. In this respect, migrants occupy a liminal “in-between” space, betwixt and between a native and an alien (Thomassen, 2009). According to Zaban (2015), this liminal space allows migrants to enjoy the novelty that the host community offers but within the comfortable environment of their bubble, which offers ties to the familiar home community. The bubble can geographically enfold the migrants in both the home and host countries, as seen in Ehrkamp’s (2005) study of Turkish migrants in Germany. What is notable about this emplacement is that, rather than isolating the migrants, it encourages interaction with other local communities. In this sense, the bubble is porous enough to accommodate the negotiation of attachment to multiple spaces.

Going forward, we adopt the bubble metaphor, keeping with this Special Issue’s language.

The changing face of migratory experience: the role of networked technologies and virtual bubbles

Historically, migration meant a complete break from a territorial homeland, disrupting social bonds in the absence of opportunities for continuous interaction with the homeland (Hiller and Franz, 2004). Srinivasan and Pyati's (2007) work has shown that in the Internet era the conventional understanding of migrant groups living in isolated, localised communities fails to persist. Boundaries between local and trans-local are permeable. Migrants can stay online across multiple spaces simultaneously (Marino, 2018) and, therefore, are fluidly and permanently interacting at home and in the foreign land. Hiller and Franz (2004) argued that the use of the Internet and virtual bubbles affect even the conceptualisation of the migration act. With the Internet, the migrant experience extends to the "pre-migration stage". The migrant can migrate to a country's virtual bubble without physically moving from the homeland while making decisions regarding the move and interacting with locals and other migrants in the target country (Hiller and Franz, 2004).

Virtual bubbles are often conceptualised and discussed in terms of their role in creating a sense of belonging and collective identity. Once the migration act has been completed, and the migrant is at the "post-migration phase" (Hiller and Franz, 2004), networked technologies offer spaces for migrants to interact with others who share the same histories, values and practices (Srinivasan and Pyati, 2007) and create webs of solidarity (Marino, 2018). Studies highlight how networked technologies provide a sense of "place" that is a surrogate for the physical environment, allowing the migrant to momentarily experience the landscape, people and culture of the homeland (Kang, 2009), thus transforming the meaning of isolation, separation and settlement.

However, virtual bubbles do not merely exist virtually, disconnected from a physical sense of "place". Research on the Indian diaspora, for example, has revealed how the virtual bubble mirrors the physical by rearticulating enduring ideologies and struggles amongst opposing groups (Chopra, 2006). However, sometimes the interaction works in the reverse direction, with the virtual bubble creating or extending the physical beyond the boundaries of the enclave, by allowing communities to interact through food-based or other co-ethnic offline events (Kang, 2009; Marino, 2018). This evidence suggests that networked technologies blur the line between the physical and the virtual. This blurring requires researchers studying bubbles to go beyond local, place-defined domains, which may exist either virtually or physically, and explore the interaction between these bubbles to develop a nuanced understanding of their role in affecting migration decisions and experiences.

Research design

The research involved a qualitative inquiry using a multi-method research design. The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews with 18 members of the Turkish community in London who had migrated to the UK under the premises of the Ankara Agreement. Under this Agreement, Turkish nationals are permitted to enter or remain in the UK by setting up a business or taking up employment at a UK company. London attracts these people more than any other city in the UK (Sirkeci, 2017), and many of them find their way to the Richmond neighbourhood, given the opportunities it provides for education, commerce and entertainment (Richmond Council, 2021).

Convenience sampling was used to recruit respondents. The third author, a Turkish migrant living in Richmond, invited people from her network to participate in the study. In selecting our sample, we employed two criteria; respondents should have migrated to the UK in the 2000s and currently live in Richmond. Data were situated in a homogeneous demographic group regarding nationality, age and socio-economic background but drew on a heterogeneous population in other dimensions, as shown in Table 1. Specifically, respondents

Table 1.
Participant profiles

	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Employment	Migration year
1	Ali	Male	40–45	Full-time	1999
2	Banu	Female	30–34	Part-time	2021
3	Begum	Female	40–45	Part-time (her customers are in Turkey)	2021
4	Berna	Female	30–34	Part-time (online lecturing in a university in Turkey)	2019
5	Burçin	Female	40–45	Full-time	2017
6	Ece	Female	35–39	Volunteer/Part time	2020
7	Eda	Female	35–39	Full-time	2017
8	Elif	Female	35–39	Remote work (online shop owner with a partner from Turkey)	2019
9	Faruk	Male	40–45	Full-time	2017
10	Figen	Female	35–39	Unemployed	2017
11	Firat	Male	40–45	Full-time	2011
12	Hale	Female	35–39	Part-time	2019
13	Kaya	Male	40–45	Part-time (in partner's business)	2019
14	Nuri	Male	40–45	Full-time	2010
15	Oya	Female	40–45	Full-time	2016
16	Serap	Female	40–45	Full-time	2009
17	Sinan	Male	40–45	Self-employed	2017
18	Tutku	Female	35–39	Unemployed	2021

were at different stages in their migration cycle. They were also motivated by different career aspirations and had different employment statuses. Furthermore, they also diverged in terms of previous experience of living in foreign expatriate communities.

Half of the interviews were conducted face-to-face by the third author and the other half via Zoom by the second author, depending on respondents' availability and preferences. All interviews were conducted in Turkish and lasted between 45–95 min. We, the authors, share similar demographics with our respondents – bilingual, urban professionals. This similarity, as well as the use of our respondents' native language, Turkish, during the interviews, created a more welcoming environment and encouraged candid discussion.

The research also involved a digital ethnographic study on Facebook. Facebook was chosen as the “research site” for our digital ethnography because of (1) the two-way interaction it generates amongst its users with its features like comments and reactions; (2) the “group” feature, which connects users who have the same goals, interests and needs; (3) and the opportunity to collect publicly available data. Given these characteristics, Facebook enabled us to delineate the virtual bubble and observe interactions within it. We collected data from three Facebook groups that Turkish migrants in the UK congregate: Richmond and Kingston Turkish Community, Migrant Women and the London Turkish Meetup Group. These groups were chosen based on their popularity among our respondents, as confirmed during the interviews, and the engagement they generated for the posts. The corpus consisted of posts collected via a web scraper programme. A total of 10,911 posts were collected. [Table 2](#) summarises data collected from these groups.

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded with respondents' consent and then transcribed. Their analysis drew on the principles of thematic analysis outlined by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). Initial codes were inductively driven by the data and then sorted and categorised to identify sub- and main themes. The emerging themes were then captured in a document which acted as a “global impression” ([Liebllich et al., 1998](#)) in the form of written commentary supplemented by raw data

from the interviews. During the production of this document, regular reference back to the data ensured the credibility of our interpretations and the validity of the findings (Tracy, 2010).

At this stage, we used Facebook data to triangulate our commentary by employing “topic clustering”, a computational method to find major topics in a corpus and representative words of those topics (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021). Topic clustering is based on the number of times appears in each Facebook post and across the entire corpus of posts. It seeks a simultaneous grouping of posts and words based on word frequencies. Due to its performance advantages, we have used the non-negative matrix factorisation (NMF) method (Chen *et al.*, 2019). The analysis was implemented using the Python programming language, which implements text processing and NMF topic clustering.

Such computational methods cannot decide the number of actual topics. Apart from the computational complexity involved, even humans would have vastly differing opinions about the number and content of topics in such a corpus. To facilitate triangulation of interview findings, the algorithm was set to produce ten topics. In addition, the most frequent and distinctive words in each of these topics were extracted from the computation to enable the interpretation of each topic’s semantic content. This is presented in Appendix. We then reviewed the words, topic clusters and sample posts generated by the algorithm, and drawing on principles of thematic analysis identified meta-themes.

Once the “global impressions” and “topic clusters” were completed and circulated amongst the team, we met to identify cross-cutting themes to explore areas of similarity and difference. This meeting allowed us to review, further define and refine themes. It is the results of this analysis that we turn our attention to next.

Findings

In search of harmony

We started our interviews with the question: “Why did you come here? What was your motivation?”, to which they usually answered by describing reasons for leaving the homeland rather than reasons for coming to the UK. The analysis revealed that although migration is often seen and experienced as an unsettling experience, threatening the migrant’s sense of stability, comfort and continuity, paradoxically, this migratory move was driven by a search for stability and harmony. The respondents expressed concerns about Turkey’s political climate being highly authoritarian and the consequent effects on the moral and civil order. They discussed their feelings towards the rise of “the Islamic middle-class”, the conservative Islamic bourgeoisie (Balkan and Öncü, 2014), and its influence on Turkey’s economic and social structure and cultural environment. These changes made them feel powerless, alienated and isolated in their homeland. Two recent events in Turkey were significant in triggering this feeling, as well as anticipatory anxiety about the country’s future: the “Gezi Protests” in 2013 and the failed “coup attempt” in 2016. Referring to the failed coup attempt, Oya reflected:

Group name	Group size	Data collection date range	Number of users interacting ¹	Number of posts and comments in the sample
Richmond and Kingston Turkish community	1.2K members	08/08/2016–4/03/2022	296	1077
Gocmen Kadinlar/ migrant women	38.2 members	17/08/2017–4/07/2022	1964	6657
London Turkish meetup group	37.9 members	24/01/2017–4/06/2022	1290	2100

Note(s): ¹This is defined as the number of people posted or commented, in the group, at least once

Table 2.
Summary of
Facebook data

On July 15, we were shocked. What would happen? What would it be like? I guess that was the breaking point.

Other respondents raised a moral and existential dissociation from the civil order after these events:

Before the Gezi protests, we had no intention (to migrate). After that, Turkey started to change; the political climate changed, the economy changed, people changed. (Senem)

Maybe the reasons that we didn't feel like we belonged are the negative changes in Turkey's economy, the way it is governed, its socio-cultural structure. (Kaya)

They firmly believed that Turkey could no longer be a homeland for people like themselves. This suggests an estrangement from the homeland. They felt they were in dissonance with the dominant class in Turkey, the Islamic bourgeoisie, which has been steadily gaining ascendancy. They argued that if high-skilled, well-educated Turkish citizens continue to reside in Turkey, the reason was a lack of viable alternatives due to, for example, their jobs not being transferable to another country. Hale said:

We have very few friends left in Turkey. Everybody is somewhere. Those who stay in Turkey have quite specific jobs; for example, a friend of mine is a lawyer . . . It is very difficult for him to work here as a lawyer, the system is totally different.

Although they seemed confident that migrating to the UK was the right course of action for people like themselves, they were highly aware that they had to leave much of their material comfort in Turkey and adjust to simpler and less comfortable lifestyles in the UK. They discussed the daily challenges they face, such as shopping, organising recycling of their household waste and cleaning, without paid assistance. They mentioned that, at first, they attempted to find paid assistance through their social circles or social media platforms. However, the majority ultimately determined that regular household help was too expensive, and the service quality was lower than what they were used to in Turkey. The sample post from London Turkish Meetup exemplifies this:

I live in a 4-bedroom detached house. I'm looking for household help every 2 weeks or every month. If there is a clean, tireless, reliable female helper experienced in cleaning, wiping doors and windows, general housework, such as dusting, vacuuming, mopping, please send me a message via DM. I'm looking for someone who cleans Turkish style, changes their water constantly and shows attention to detail. Sometimes I may need help ironing as well. It would be great if you have a reference. Working hours are from 9.30 to 3.30, sometimes until 4.30, if the work is not finished.

While they missed the comfort of having paid assistance, they were grateful for the tranquil lifestyle, the educational system, and the sense of safety.

Oya described her life in the UK as a delicate balance, a pair of scales weighing material against incorporeal factors. On the one hand, she realised that the weighing pan was lighter when it came to material satisfaction. On the other hand, the weighing pan of incorporeal satisfaction was heavier, as she felt her values were in harmony with the rules respected and followed by others in society. Others echoed the same trade-off:

Our living standard dropped significantly, but we can handle it. (Figen)

My mind is relaxed here . . . I know how much the rent or gas will increase next year . . . Life is predictable . . . Everything in Turkey is highly volatile. Anything can happen anytime. (Senem)

This can be seen as an act of exchange – of worldly privileges and the material for the incorporeal, such as the often-quoted feelings of security and certainty.

The data on migration motivations and decisions suggested an ostensible contradiction. Their life, in material terms, was “better” in the homeland. They recognised that their

intellectual and cultural capital would qualify them for higher salaries in the homeland and a quality lifestyle. Nonetheless, their concern about the rising authoritarianism and ascendancy of the Islamic bourgeoisie was so strong that they felt like a minority in their own country. This is the element of dissonance. The belief in their difference from most of their compatriots drove their decision to migrate in search of harmony. Paradoxically, by migrating, they became a minority in legal terms. Yet, emotionally and mentally, they felt like they “belonged” because their personal values were in harmony with the moral and civil order. With these characteristics, we named this group “dissonant harmony-seekers”. The feeling of separation that marked their migration motivation also influenced their migration behaviour – separated from a collective. This is what we explore further in the next section.

The Richmond bubble

Richmond attracted many dissonant harmony-seekers for its qualities, such as a family-oriented culture, low crime rate, nature and outstanding state schools. Interestingly, when asked why they decided to move to Richmond, our respondents started by rationalising their decision by their desire to avoid Enfield, a London neighbourhood well known by Turkish migrants. They perceived the Turkish population in Enfield, less educated, less acculturated and more conservative working class, as representing what they dislike about Turkey. Therefore, in their choice of location, they revealed one of the characteristics of dissonant harmony-seekers reviewed above, a desire for separation from most of their compatriots.

Richmond is a decent area . . . North [referring to Enfield] is not attractive. (Nuri)

I am sure that all of them [referring to the Turkish population in Enfield] are good people, but I cannot be with them. (Serap)

The need to disassociate themselves from the Enfield Turkish residents was so strong that they had to make material sacrifices to afford to live in Richmond, where the cost of living was higher. In return, they became part of an elite community well-aligned with their presentational choices. Below we can see how the meaning attached to Richmond contributed to their conceptualisation of self and place-based identity.

Richmond Hill is like a small version of Istanbul. On the streets, you certainly hear people speaking Turkish!. At least they are fine people representing a good Turkey image . . . Turks in Richmond are high quality, sweet people, just like us. (Hale)

Living in Richmond was a manifestation of their values and was instrumental in self-categorising oneself to a particular group of migrants and disidentifying with the “other” – in this case, the earlier waves of Turkish migrants living in Enfield. This is another example of exchanging the material with the incorporeal, in search of harmony.

Despite acknowledging the high and ever-increasing visibility of the Turkish population in Richmond, our respondents did not describe their community as a “Turkish diaspora” or the Richmond area as an “enclave”. Richmond, for them, was neither a place to experience and reproduce their cultural heritage far from the homeland nor a symbolic anchor for their collective identity. Consequently, they did not build their lives exclusively around their Turkish “fellow townsmen” (*hemşehri in Turkish*), Turkish stores, or large-scale co-ethnic activities. They lived independently without needing a new collective identity. Richmond was perceived as a place that provided the ground for developing offline friendships and acquaintances. This was fundamental to building social capital as a resource:

Some people love and miss Turkey. They like to enjoy Turkish cuisine and raki with Turkish friends. I am not like that. But also, I see the advantages of being in a small community of Turkish migrants. (Nuri)

The separation discourse is perhaps a reflection and/or consequence of the fact that, for our respondents, the choice of moving to Richmond was undertaken individually. Contrasted with other forms of migration, such as labour or forced migration, which is more akin to an exodus with mass migration, for our respondents the act of migration was a purely individualistic endeavour, in line with the values of their new middle-class identity. In migrating, our respondents relied mainly on their respective cultural and financial capital.

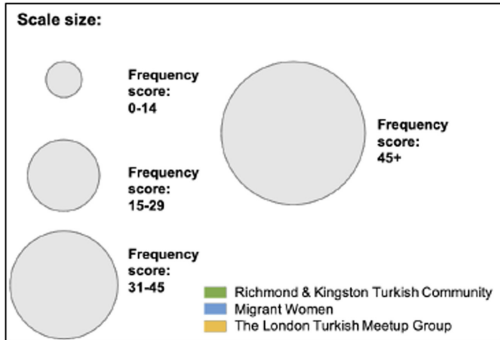
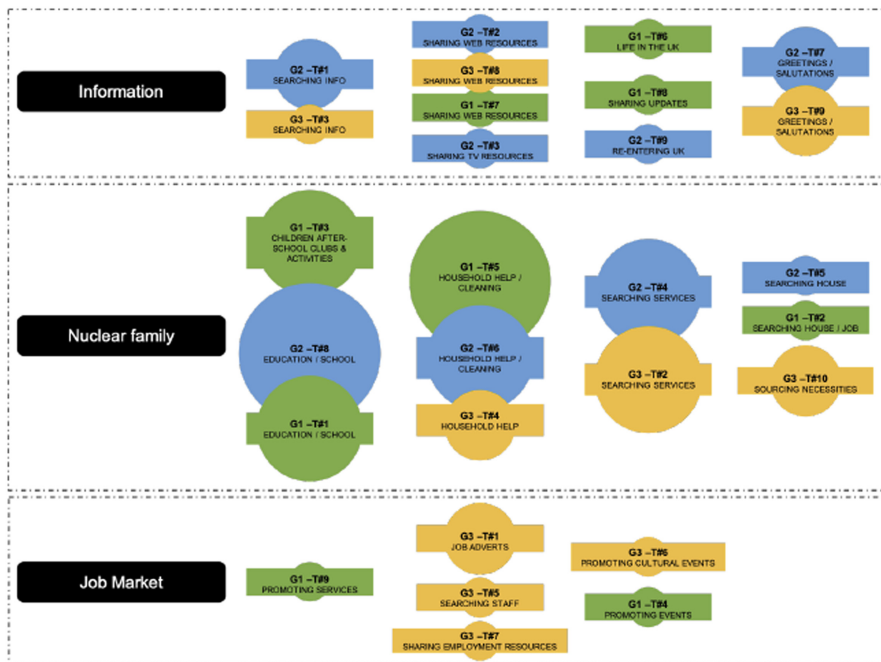
Diasporas are traditionally formed via some family reunion, where “fellow townsmen” identified with a particular locality reunite in a neighbourhood in the host country. In contrast, for our respondents, family members or close acquaintances played no significant role in their move to Richmond. This distinguished them from members of traditional diasporic environments, which in the literature (e.g. Ehrkamp, 2005; Zaban, 2015) are described as having a greater tendency to generate networks of solidarity fed by pre-modern social ties. The so-called *hemşehrilik*, “townsmanship”, ties are conventionally identified as important features of the Turkish migrant experience offering fraternity and solidarity, which could also provide material benefits (Gedik, 2011). *Hemşehrilik* in the traditional Turkish migrant identity is a crucial platform for exchanging ideas and expertise, goods and remittances from settled to new migrants. Furthermore, *hemşehrilik* exerts such a strong pull factor for migrants to the extent that migrants who find it hard to access *hemşehri* relations are abandoned to isolation (Erder, 1995). However, strikingly, dissonant harmony-seekers not only did not seek *hemşehri* relations but, arguably, deliberately avoided them and the collectivism that these would imply.

This individualism typified their migrant lifestyle. They had Turkish friends living in the neighbourhood, whom they met after migration. They organised social activities, which often revolved around children, such as birthdays and picnics. Nevertheless, their connection to one another can be classified as friendship ties. There was no collectivism implied by *hemşehri* relations, where members “stick together” and expect loyalty to the community and mutual obligation (White, 2000). Therefore, the migrant community did not have a coherent identity strong enough to exert concertive social control over its members (Lauring and Selmer, 2009).

The virtual bubble

Our analysis of the Facebook and interview data indicated that Turkish migrants’ interactions with virtual bubbles portrayed a similar break from the ethnic and national solidarity we observed in our investigation of the physical bubble. Computational topic clustering analysis showed that discussion in all three Facebook groups revolved around three thematic axes: information needs, nuclear family needs and the job market. Topic clusters are presented in Figure 1, with frequency scores used to show the respective dominance of each of the topic clusters in the whole corpus of posts.

First, the information theme represented how virtual bubbles were a source of information that people resort to for understanding the institutional regulations and their rights in the UK. This was especially salient, but not limited to, in the pre-migration period, when people were unsure whether or not to migrate and, if so, to which location. Via Facebook groups, they asked questions and shared their concerns with their compatriots who have already undergone such an experience. They often inquired about the benefits and drawbacks of living in the UK as a migrant. In topic clusters, the frequent use of words like “is there?”, “info”, “wanted to ask” (in Migrant Women and Richmond and Kingston groups) indicated activity related to seeking information and meeting people of similar interests. Typical messages included: “*Anyone living in the New Malden area? I’d like to ask something if they don’t mind.*” (a post in Richmond and Kingston Turkish Community). On this



Source(s): Grouping of posts and words based on word frequencies

Figure 1.
Map of themes from
computational topic
clustering

basis, we can assert that the virtual bubble assisted migrants in adapting to their new environment.

My wife followed the Migrant Women Facebook Group to receive support about where to live and which place was suitable for us. (Kaya)

Computational topic clustering analysis supported the informational value the migrants placed on Facebook groups. Two of the three Facebook groups, Migrant Women and London Turkish Meetup, had typical messages like *"I have to register with the police on Monday. I will do it for the first time. Is there anything else I should bring besides passport and BRP?"* (a post in

Migrant Women). Other topics indicated that migrants sought legal advice around a range of daily life disputes with authorities, landlords, service providers and so on.

Secondly, virtual bubbles were beneficial in meeting the needs of the nuclear family. As indicated by the topic clusters in all three Facebook groups, migrants sought guidance on renting a house, locating a school for their children and finding household help. Three topics in Migrant Women, one in London Turkish Meetup and two in Richmond and Kingston group, focussed on finding or advertising for tutoring or schooling for their children. These topic clusters included words such as “child”, “school”, “private tutoring”, “education”, “workshop (art and chess)”. As evidenced in the analysis of both the Facebook data and interviews, migrants relied on the opinions and comments provided by the virtual bubble for decisions on issues concerning their children’s needs:

After settling here, I couldn’t choose a school . . . I read the migrant parents’ comments about the schools. They explained what they are satisfied or dissatisfied with. It helped. (Hale)

Hello, dear mums . . . We are looking for a school for my daughter, who will turn six in April . . . How can we find out if there is a place in those schools? I would be very grateful if anyone could help. (a post in Migrant Women)

Another need that was fulfilled via the Facebook groups relates to household help. In two of the three Facebook groups, there were topic clusters covering keywords such as “cleaning”, “cooking”, “weekly cleaning” and “service”. This involved a search for occasional help, for example:

Does anyone know a good cleaning company? Or a cleaner? “End of tenancy” cleaning is needed for the oven, refrigerator, carpet etc. (a post in The London Turkish Meetup)

They often searched for a household help for fortnightly or monthly cleaning or to take care of the children after school as tutors or sitters. Topic clusters about seeking help were found in all three groups’ Facebook content, with common posts such as “*seeking someone to do house cleaning on Fridays for four hours*” (a post in The London Turkish Meetup).

Relatedly and thirdly, the virtual bubble was an active job centre. Migrants were sharing job ads and experiences and advising about navigating the job market as a migrant on a skilled worker visa. We saw this most evidently in the London Turkish Meetup group with the posts including words; “work”, “work ad”, “worker”, “looking for”, “restaurant/cafe”, “need”. Migrants also searched for various services, from TV repair to dental care.

A friend of mine needs someone to create a digital catalogue. Can anyone offer help? (a post in The London Turkish Meetup)

On the other end of the value chain, other migrants were promoting their businesses ranging from personal training studios to transportation companies:

Ventilation solutions and catering equipment across the UK (a post in The London Turkish Meetup)

For dissonant harmony seekers, after feeling more settled in their new life, the emphasis placed on Facebook groups diminished. They did not totally exit the virtual bubbles at this stage, but their use has become more sporadic based on their emerging needs. For example, during the post-migration period, re-engagement with the virtual bubbles was triggered by issues such as visa renewal, expecting overseas visitors under the changing COVID-19-related restrictions, or employing a painter/carpenter. This function-based communication kept them in the virtual bubble, but their social interactions took place in smaller social circles, whose members represented similar profiles, in closed WhatsApp groups and offline environments.

WhatsApp groups were also built around common interests; Richmond Recycle, Richmond Mums and Richmond Mahallesi (“*mahalle*” means neighbourhood in Turkish) were some of the most frequently referenced in the interviews. The discussions in these groups primarily revolved around the group’s focus, but they also served as a means of more general social interaction. The initial encounters between WhatsApp group members resulted in new friendships, which in turn contributed to the formation of new physical sub-bubbles.

I joined Facebook groups as I was all alone. It’s not easy to be part of the local community. Besides, I wanted to see someone similar to me. . . After a while, everybody found friends and laid low. I am no longer active on Facebook as I have my own friends. (Oya)

Regarding diasporic connections, the traditional view treats virtual and physical bubbles as two poles on a continuum, one affecting the other unidirectionally. Some scholars see the virtual bubble as an outcome of the physical bubble that allows additional online connections between migrants living in an enclave (e.g. Kang, 2009). Other scholars see the physical bubble as being shaped by the virtual bubble allowing migrants to connect to their compatriots in offline events thanks to connections built online (e.g. Marino, 2018). However, our findings challenge this unidirectionality. The virtual and the physical interact in a complex way; they coalesce fluidly and dynamically. These virtual bubbles can substitute, complement or remain separated from physical bubbles. The unique needs of the migrant determined the form and interaction of these bubbles.

I had no one to help me. Then I found this [Facebook] group. I wasn’t the one to create it, but I made it popular. I organised different events and meetings to bring people together. As a result of my efforts in ten years, I built a good network. (Serap).

I met Hale [one of the respondents], our house’s previous tenant. She immediately introduced me to 3 WhatsApp groups so that I could be part of them. (Ece)

Discussion

Our findings indicate that the new wave of Turkish migration, migration of the new middle-class into the UK, is conceptually different from the existing typologies offered in the literature. Dissonant harmony-seekers in our study, despite having migrated under a special businessperson visa, were not motivated by the job opportunities, as would be the case for labour migrants or professional expatriates. The transnational professionals studied under traditional models of migration are defined by their commitment to the profession and its associated practices from which their identities are drawn (Harrington and Seabrooke, 2020). In contrast, the migration motive of dissonant harmony-seekers is not directly related to the career path linked to their original profession. Indeed, some have built new careers around their personal interests, such as yoga and cooking. This conceptual difference sets them aside from the relatively elite patterns of movement studied under the transnational mobility of skilled migrants.

On the surface, the intricate link of dissonant harmony-seekers’ migration motives to their lifestyle preferences may point towards a conceptual overlap with lifestyle migration. Like lifestyle migrants, dissonant harmony-seekers value the destination because of the contrast to the homeland left behind. However, one significant difference is that there is no ongoing identity-making project or reconstruction of identity to render life meaningful, whether downsizing from corporate careers to small-town communities (e.g. Benson, 2010; Hoey, 2005) or a search for authenticity (Korpela, 2009). While the host country or the values it represents are significant drivers of migration, the migratory move does not necessarily imply “a better life” in terms of employment options or a lifestyle with lucrative financial, social and self-growth opportunities.

Therefore, our first contribution to the literature is with the concept of dissonant harmony-seekers to represent migrants who feel a dissonance with their homeland and migrate in search of harmony. In [Hirschman's \(1970\)](#) framework of exit, voice and loyalty, the separation of the dissonant harmony-seekers from the dominant moral and civil order made them choose the “exit” option by migrating. They felt unable to articulate their “voice” through an exercise of individual agency or collective action. Perhaps more importantly, they felt that trying to repair or improve their relationship with the homeland would be futile. As a result, they started feeling like a minority in their homeland, which impaired their sense of loyalty and made the option of staying unattractive. To overcome these feelings, they chose to migrate, which paradoxically placed them in the position of a minority, in the legal sense, and perhaps at a higher risk of more dissonance with the rest of the population in the host country.

This will resonate with the migration experiences of a wide-ranging population confronting an existential and moral dissociation from the civil order in their homeland. Conventional typologies of migration, such as labour or forced migration, would explain a sharp increase in migration numbers from a country with a major economic or political crisis. However, our findings suggest that subjective beliefs, in particular, perceptions about the future, and levels of uncertainty attached to these, are qualifying drivers of migration. As such, we can expect the emerging migration of the new middle-class to affect a broader range of countries beyond those with fragile political and economic orders. As a matter of fact, mobility and belonging of citizens have also been renegotiated in the UK and the US in the era of Brexit and Trump. For example, [Auer and Tetlow \(2020\)](#) demonstrate how “collective uncertainty”, induced by national government policy, affects UK citizens’ migratory behaviour. Concerns about a negative economic outlook and social consequences in the UK have driven approximately 17,000 UK citizens to migrate to the EU – a 30% increase compared to pre-Brexit numbers ([Auer and Tetlow, 2020](#)). Similarly, in 2020, the number of Americans renouncing their citizenship was approximately 7,000 – a 260% increase from the prior year ([Cuison-Villazor, 2022](#)). While the primary reason cited is the need to avoid paying taxes, for some, this was a protest of US government policies or actions ([Cuison-Villazor, 2022](#)). The response of citizens to their governments, such as the decisions and actions of the Johnson ministry in the UK and the overturn of *Roe v Wade* in the US, suggests that the experiences and migratory behaviours of Turkey’s dissonant harmony-seekers may have transferability to other national contexts.

Our inquiry into the way dissonant harmony-seekers interacted with the bubble – the migrant community – and the world outside the bubble – the host community – showed that migrant bubbles are basically cooperative and short-lived, rather than directed towards higher goals, such as a panacea for existential uncertainty and isolationism. We found little evidence of community sentiment and identification, contrary to much extant literature (e.g. [Kang, 2009](#); [Marino, 2018](#)). Traditionally, a community is defined (a) physically by reference to a specific locality, as in an ethnic enclave; and (b) socially and psychologically by reference to community sentiment, a “we-feeling” ([Maciver and Page, 1949](#)). [MacIver and Page \(1949, p. 9\)](#) insisted that “the mark of a community is that one’s life may be lived wholly within it”, which also supports [Breton’s \(1964\)](#) observation about the “institutional completeness” of ethnic communities and how it shapes migrants’ interactions. In this regard, it is a significant finding that despite the experienced loss of social structures that were once familiar, dissonant harmony-seekers do not perceive the Turkish bubble as a necessary condition of their life in the UK.

Dissonant harmony-seekers interact with the bubble not to experience a “clustering life” ([Taube et al., 2016](#)) but to meet their functional needs. The functional relationship is prior to groupness, in contrast to what was identified in previous work (e.g. [Kang, 2009](#); [Marino, 2018](#)). Migrants do not long stay focussed on any single bubble; once a definite set of

functions are fulfilled, the migrant decreases contact until a different need or goal emerges. At that point, the cycle resets, and the migrant finds a bubble to fulfil a specific or specialised function, either in the physical or virtual environment. This causes the bubble to reform or partially coalesce. There are some smaller and more enduring bubbles, but these are structured around generally accepted friendship ties. The dynamic and ever-shifting interaction with multiple bubbles, which coexist in a wide range of fora, physically and virtually, brings us to our second contribution. Transnational migrants in the information age, portrayed as living a “timeless time” in a “space of flows” (Castells 1996), live in foam, not a monic bubble. This is illustrated in [Figure 2](#)

Based on our findings, we shall argue that the foam mainly functions as a convenient environment for migrants. The foam is composed of multiple bubbles constantly and dynamically forming, bursting, reforming and coalescing. This may happen physically, for example, during a walk in Richmond Park, as well as virtually, most significantly in Facebook and smaller WhatsApp groups. The bubble that the migrant inhabits may emerge from the foam, though not necessarily, and most importantly, often does not remain permanently within the foam. The migrants feel no conflict, individually or socially, to leave the bubble or spill over into the host community and other migrant communities. The foam exists to meet their information needs or make new friends before they separate themselves from it. As such, the associations’ nature is neither repressive nor concertive, as observed in [Lauring and Selmer’s \(2009\)](#) work.

We use the foam metaphor and delineate it from [Zaban’s \(2015\)](#) bubble metaphor for three reasons. First, the foam metaphor captures the lived experience of dissonant harmony-seekers who migrated from a position of psychological and discursive disaffection and separation and hence did not seek immediate and absolute integration into the Turkish migrant community upon arrival to the UK. Second, it expresses the multiplicity and hybridity of migrant identity that transcends the simplistic notion of identity as a stable and unilateral construct. In this sense, we align ourselves with identity scholars (e.g. [Alvesson, 2010](#)) who argue that identity is merely the formation of a discourse manipulated by one’s self-narrative. As to be expected, this self-narrative is much more multifaceted than an ethnic identity. It is constructed with presentational choices with regards to political views, professional and life experiences, cultural capital and so on. Third, it contests the conventional representation of the migrant community, which argues that the larger the bubble, the more likely it is to develop thicker boundaries because it will be self-sufficient (e.g. [Breton, 1964](#); [Cohen, 1977](#)). The Turkish migrant community in the UK is large, estimated to be somewhere between 180,000 and 250,000 ([Sirkeci and Esipova, 2013](#)), and

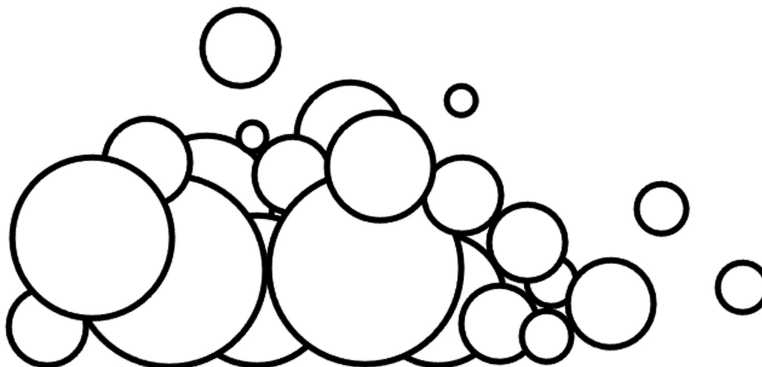


Figure 2.
The “foam” metaphor

London accommodates 64% of those (Sirkeci, 2017). Nevertheless, despite the size, the bubble does not automatically draw the migrants into itself; instead, it remains as foam, ephemeral and fugacious.

Conclusion

In this paper, based on the case of the Richmond-based Turkish population, we argue that ethnic solidarity and collective national identity are destabilised in the alternative integration discourse of a new type of migrants, called dissonant harmony-seekers, who migrate with the desire to psychologically and discursively separate themselves from the homeland. An important question to advance research relates to whether the disaffection and detachment experienced by Turkish dissonant harmony-seekers apply to other migrant communities similarly. How does the dissociation experienced with the moral and civil order of one's home country affect migration decisions, behaviours and interactions as a migrant?

Zooming into the everyday lifeworld of dissonant harmony-seekers, we argue that the dissociation dominating their migration experience contributes towards an instrumental interaction with the bubble, geared towards meeting individual needs. The Internet, and the acceleration that accompanies it, helps to meet these needs quickly and conveniently, making the interactions with the bubble more superficial and fleeting. It is worth noting that although the findings suggest that the virtual bubble is ephemeral and fugacious, it may have different characteristics on different social media platforms. While our data collection focussed on Facebook groups, respondents mentioned other information media environments such as WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube and podcasts. However, we do not know whether their interactions in these environments are equally as instrumental and individualistic as our Facebook data suggest. To what extent are the functions of, and the ties within different new media technologies fleeting and permeable? Or do they show more diasporic behaviour characterised by psycho-emotional attachment in other media environments? Future research is required to explore the potentially differentiating effects of new media technologies on migrants' experiences of separation, interaction and integration.

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Appendix

Topic clustering

Group 1 - Richmond and Kingston Turkish community

- T#1 - *Education/School*: one, child, internal, lesson, city, as, educate, school, Turkish
- T#2 - *Searching House/Job*: exist, hello, Kingston, Richmond, searching, one, house, work
- T#3 - *Children After-School*: drama, club, drama club, child, lesson, group, study
- T#4 - *Promoting Events* : eventbrite com, eventbrite, refresh, refresh yourself, 2019
- T#5 - *Household Help/Cleaning*: cleaning, cleaning after, work, cleaning work, cleaning done, after, weekly
- T#6 - *Life in the UK*: uk, co uk, co, www, psychcentre, info, Turk, https, in, page
- T#7 - *Sharing Web Resources*: com, https, https www, www, facebook, facebook com, www facebook com, www facebook, https www facebook
- T#8 - *Sharing Updates*: and, your, at, 2021, 2021 at, we, call, us, for
- T#9 - *Promoting Services*: thank you, many, internal, everyone, friend, child, work, hello, private

Group 2 - migrant women

- T#1 - *Searching Info*: one, am, internal, ask, many, be, I, place, more
- T#2 - *Sharing Web Resources*: com, https, www, instagram, https www, instagram com, facebook, facebook com, youtube, www facebook com
- T#3 - *Sharing TV Resources*: was live, was, live, channel, television was, television was live, television channel
- T#4 - *Searching Services*: is, is there, there is, lots, friends, now, hello, I wonder, many thanks
- T#5 - *Searching House*: is there, hello, now, rent, a flat, thanks, rental, need, thank you
- T#6 - *Household Help / Cleaning*: house, cleaning, cooking, hello, search, for, friends, helper
- T#7 - *Greetings / Salutations*: mum, dear, dear mum, hello dear, hello dear mum, migrant, migrant mum, hello
- T#8 - *Education / School*: lesson, child, for, city, information, private, online, educate, hour
- T#9 - *Re-entering UK*: to, PCR, Turkey, test, PCR test, flight

Group 3- London Turkish meetup

- T#1 - *Job Adverts*: job, advert, can share, group, groups, facebook com groups, reference share, groups, share, reference
- T#2 - *Searching Services*: is, is there, there is, I wonder, is there I wonder, do, thanks, hello, everyone
- T#3 - *Searching Info*: a, for, as, to, everyone, I, information, more, year
- T#4 - *Household Help*: friends, thanks, is there, lots, now, for, thank you, hello friends, private, helper
- T#5 - *Searching Staff*: woman, borough, to work, interested, search, restaurant, cafe, searching, staff

T#6 - Promoting Cultural Events: 2021, cemevi, 2021 at, at, culture, alevi, cultural centre, November 2021, November 2021 at, alevi culture

T#7 - Sharing Employment Resources: uk, co, co uk, britisyasam, britisyasam co uk, britisyasam co, tv, life, www, https

T#8 - Sharing Web Resources: com, youtube, https, youtube com, www, instagram, instagram com, https www, www instagram com, www instagram

Topic #9 - Greetings / Salutations: londra, hello London, hello, everyone hello London, north, north London, bicycle, everyone, Turkish

Topic #10 - Sourcing Necessities: have, thank you, friend, now, needed, need, thank you for now, one

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