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Introduction

This paper presents preliminary empirical findings of an ongoing examination of the use of online social media, specifically Facebook, among the Uyghur diaspora which has been described as a 'diaspora under construction' (Dilnur, 2012, p.3). The paper demonstrates how online identities are constructed through social media use, and in turn how the construction of these identities contributes to the production of an emerging 'Uyghur diasporic identity'.

The research this paper is based on takes a mixed-methods approach, combining content analysis of key Facebook sites and semi-structured interviews with Uyghur diaspora scholars. Facebook sites have been chosen as this social network/social media constitutes a space of global, daily online interactions much used by members of the Uyghur diaspora. This paper presents an analysis of data collection over a three- month period on the Facebook wall discussion archives.

The research findings provide valuable insights into the character of the Uyghur diaspora which indicate that they use and consume Facebook for a wide variety of interests. The examination of discussions on Facebook sites indicates online Uyghur identity is actively being explored and produced through the use of this type of social media. The findings are in line with existing literature about diaspora and media (Karim, 1998; Tsagarousianou, 2004) which shows that the reconstruction of identities takes place through everyday interactions, such as the daily posts on the Facebook walls in Uyghur context. In the light of these findings, the Uyghur diaspora Facebook walls stand out as one of the key areas where diaspora identities are shaped and articulated.

The research is particularly timely as little work has been done focusing on the Uyghur diaspora and an examination of social media usage by this diaspora provides insight into the process of identity formation as it is currently taking place internationally. This work also holds value in the field of Central-Asian studies and provides a contemporary empirical case study to emergent study of social network sites and diaspora studies.

Background Context: A Brief History of the Uyghur Diaspora

The Uyghurs are an ethnic and religious nationality in China. Much less visible than the Tibetans who occupy a similar status, they are Sunni Muslims of Turkic origin living in the north-western

region of China, which is called Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). This region is a homeland for over 10 million Uyghurs and exceeds one and a half million square kilometres in area.

Historically, Uyghurs settled on the territory of current region and of present day Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Uyghur conversion to Islam from Buddhism began circa mid - 10th century during Karahanid Empire. The Uyghurs maintained their independence and autonomy until the invasion of Manchu (Qing Dynasty) in the mid - 18th century. Eventually the Uyghur were incorporated into the Chinese Empire in 1884 as an official province named Xinjiang, meaning New Dominion (Yitzhak,2007). Since then, Uyghurs attempted to resume separation for establishing independence from China. They had short-lived independence twice; during the establishment of Turkish Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan (1933); and the Eastern Turkestan Republic (1944 - 1949).

The relationship between Uyghurs and the Chinese state has been marked by tension and sometimes violence. In the post-Mao era, Uyghurs have been treated as an "illegitimate nationality" which should be incorporated into "Chinese" and "Han" nationality (Yitzhak, 2007, p.119) through a policy of forced assimilation. Any attempts to improve the lives of disenfranchised and impoverished Uyghur communities have been treated as terrorism, separatism and religious extremism by Chinese authorities (Petersen, 2006; Nicolas, 2004). As a result of human rights abuses (WUC, 2004), Uyghurs have called for self-determination, independence at large, which has been reflected on the increasing politicization of the Uyghur case both inside and outside China (Petersen, 2006).

Uyghur discontent with the political and social circumstances in China is one of the main motivations for Uyghurs migration which started from the early 19th century and has continued in several stages: at first, towards neighbouring countries in central Asia and followed by a small number of Uyghurs settling in Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the 1930s and early 1940s. Hundreds of Uyghurs constituted the third stage of migration in late 1940s and settled in Turkey, where there is currently a significant Uyghur community. Due to the internal Chinese hostility and external Soviet hospitality, thousands of ethnic Kazakhs and Uyghurs migrated to Soviet Central Asia from China in 1960s. Since the 1980s, the Deng Xiaoping-era Open Door Policy¹ resulted in further Uyghur migration. The exact number of Uyghurs living abroad is not clear due to the lack of official statistics, but according to Uyghur organizations abroad it is estimated over 1.5 million people (Dilnur, 2012, p.5 ; Yitzhak, 2002, p. 286).

Diasporic Identity, the Internet and Transnational Communication

The diaspora concept has been applied widely to theorizing human mobility within a variety of disciplines (Karim, 2003, p.1; Brubaker, 2005, p.4) and has been used to describe a variety of processes; from transnationalism and migration (Cohen, 1997); nationhood and nationalism (Anderson, 1983); identity (Georgiou, 2006a); cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism (Georgiou, 2006c). It is difficult to give a fixed definition for diaspora; nonetheless empirically, the concept is frequently used in relation to transnational migrants. Safran (1991, p.83) uses the following criteria for identifying diaspora and sees diaspora as expatriate minority communities that:

¹ The Open-Door Policy is a Chinese state policy seeking to boost economic development by encouraging foreign technology and investment (Yitzhak, 2007).

- are dispersed from an original “centre” to at least two “peripheral” places;
- maintain a memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland;
- believe they are not (and perhaps cannot be) fully accepted by their host country;
- see the ancestral home as place of eventual return, when the time is right;
- are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland of which the group’s consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by this continuing relation with the homeland.

Demmers draws a definitional line and defines diaspora as “collectives of individuals who identify themselves, and are identified by others as part of an imagined community that has been dispersed (either forced or voluntary) from its original homeland to two or more host-countries and that is committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland” (2007, p.9). In this definition, Demmers puts emphasis on identifying diasporia as identification with dispersal, as presupposing global dispersal, and as having a homeland orientation. This definition is applied within the current research project.

Diasporic identity has also been explained as a process of active consciousness and identity production. Gilroy (1993) states that identity production stimulates the need to conceptually connect oneself with others who share the same roots. Further, Stuart Hall (1990) states that diaspora are comprised of representations that provide an "imaginary coherence" for a set of identities; thus, diaspora identity reflects a sort of collective "one true self" through which diasporic members can share history, culture and a identity as ‘outside’ one’s homeland. This involves discovering and bringing to light, in various forms of representation, the stable oneness of diaspora. This reflects the strong connection which diaspora has to its homeland.

In the context of social media communication, the need for the connection with homeland has been fulfilled through online platforms where diaspora members can share their imagination (Kathrin, 2008). For Cohen (1997, p.26) online communication is a key location of diaspora identity production; "...transnational bonds no longer have to be cemented by migration or by exclusive territorial claims. Rather, in the age of cyberspace, a diaspora can to some degree be held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural artifacts and through a shared imagination".

The internet provides a “complex symbolic environment” for diasporas (Bucy & Gregson, 2001, p.369). The internet that includes email, discussion forums and blogs not only facilitates the imagination of the homeland, but also serves as websites to contest “national and transnational political ideologies and cultural expressions, or counter – expressions of identity” (Georgiou & Silverstone, 2007, p.34).

Studies have explored the role of internet on diasporic from different perspectives. Some scholars argue that diasporas have used the internet to retain their local identities. Elkins (1997) conceives online social relationships of diaspora as a “virtual ethnic communities” (p. 139). He argues that new media enables some ethnic groups to nurture their diaspora and protect their heritage. Tynes (2007) describes a Sierra Leonean diasporic listserv, Leonenet, as a representation of “virtual nation” that maintains the country’s identity towards a nation in the absence of the state (p. 497). His study provides an example of both the political organization and cultural maintenance possibilities of online communities for a diaspora. Mallapragada (2000) also suggests that, for the Indian diaspora, the internet has given a sense of home by serving their social and cultural needs.

Some writers have focused on how diasporic members construct, negotiate and reshape their individual and community identities. The negotiation of diasporic identity, culture and ethnicity

within transnational online communities constructed by diasporic communities has been examined. Georgiou (2003) suggests that these online diasporic communities can lead to a rethinking and exploration of ethnic identities. Adeniyi (2007) examined the role of internet on political identity construction amongst Nigerian diaspora, arguing that the internet has provided a platform for political dissent, and has facilitated a new diasporic Nigerian oppositional political culture within the diaspora. Other literature explores the connection between the reshaping diaspora identity and local, religious and global ideologies (Iganacio, 2000; Bahri, 2001).

Scholars have examined the way in which diaspora use the internet for specific purposes. Some diaspora use the internet for constructing social, political and economic networks within diaspora communities. For instance the internet has enabled Uyghur diasporas to express “the unspeakable and hidden truth about the nation” (Simon, 2008, p.1177). Focusing on the Tamil diaspora, Tekwani (2003) argues that the internet not only helps a diaspora sustain inter – diasporic relationship by facilitating diasporic networks, but also it enables immediate information sharing within that networked transnational diasporic communities, contributing to the overall strength of the diasporic political project, as in the case of Sri Lanka’s Tamils. The Uyghur diaspora, for example - especially Uyghur activists and non-governmental organisations have used the internet to link to one another, receive international financial and other support and to popularize their political/cultural causes by representing Uyghur culture online (Gladney, 2003; Kanat, 2005). The networked connections have played an important role in reinvigorating Uyghur identity among dispersed members (Kanat, 2005).

The Uyghur Diaspora Online

Although having a substantial population, Uyghurs abroad did not begin forming a network among diasporic members and communities until the advent of the internet communications in 1990s. Internet communication is playing a critical role in the construction of Uyghur diaspora which according to Uyghur scholar Dilnur (2012, p.4) is seen as a "young diaspora under construction". As scholars from a variety of disciplines (Yitzhak, 2003, 2007, 2012; Kanat, 2005; Chen, 2010; Clarke, 2010; Vergani & Zuev, 2011; Dilnur, 2012) have highlighted, the internet has played a central role in the very construction of the Uyghur diaspora because it has enabled Uyghurs outside their home region to:

- establish networks with governmental and NGOs at international level to support the Uyghur case for independence;
- establish connections and increase communication among Uyghur diaspora members and communities to strengthening unification at both local and transnational level;
- reestablish the connection with Uyghurs still based in China;
- represent political and cultural identity.

Although previous research has covered common topics of diaspora and internet studies, few have focused on the role that social network sites are playing in identity construction of Uyghur diaspora. Moreover, because the Uyghur diaspora itself is a recent construction, we still have much to learn about on the consciousness and identity formation by different members of Uyghur diaspora. The current research has implications for studies of diasporic use of social network sites as well as the application of these insights for shaping practices within and among the Uyghur diaspora.

This research explores Uyghur use of Facebook in constructing and developing Uyghur diasporic identity. Due to the strong relationship between diaspora and new technologies (Panagokos & Horst,

2006), it has been emphasized that the internet is an indispensable dimension and asset in understanding contemporary diaspora (Georgiou, 2007; Kathrin, 2008). How diaspora communities use internet platforms to construct a shared imagination of their identities and homelands is a central analytical concern (Kathrin, 2008). "The internet has allowed most of these communities to discover and rediscover this shared imagination and commonality; it has taken even further the potentials for developing diasporic culture of mediated, transnational and partly free from state control communication" (Georgiou, 2002, p. 3). It is important however to refrain from seeing the internet and online communication as 'producing' diasporic communities – rather this research emphasises the critical role of internet in enabling the transnational communication essential for the development and maintenance of diaspora communities.

Consequently, online platforms, such as blogs, Facebook sites, have been seen as a "cyberspace" where communication occurs (Hine, 2000, p.9). Unlike traditional media, such as newspapers, online platforms are "composed of texts" which are immediately available for the public after they are produced (Hine, 2000, p. 50). This makes it possible to collect high quality, immediate data from online platforms. As such, studying the message component on online platforms has been of great interest (Hina, 2000; Ignacio, 2005; Tynes, 2007; Candan & Hunger, 2008; Zhao, Grasmuch, & Martin, 2008; Sheyholislami, 2011). For example, Ignacio (2005), in her study of Filipino diaspora identity development online, examined posts on the soc.culture.filipino newsgroup. She gathered and analyzed textual data from that online platform to explore cultural identity of Filipino diaspora. Following a similar data collection method, Tynes (2007) studied the Sierra Leonian email forum called Leonenet to explore that nation identity's representation online.

Methodology

This study is a preliminary examination of the use of Facebook by the Uyghur diaspora. As such the research is exploratory in nature, attempting primarily to '**map**' the use of this online social network in order to create a **typology** of use, providing thus the basis which may be built upon in future research.

Following previous research which has demonstrated the appropriateness of applying a **content analysis approach** to online platforms, this study uses content analysis of Facebook sites together with interviews as the methodological basis. The inclusion of qualitative data from the interviews is expected to enrich the quantitative data observed from online (Collis & Hussey, 2003; Creswell & Clark, 2007) and add an extra layer of interpretation by members of the Uyghur academic diaspora.

A two stage content analysis was carried out. In the first stage, the Uyghur use of Facebook was 'mapped', providing an overall view of the nature, composition and extent of the Uyghur diaspora's Facebook use. In the second stage, a detailed qualitative content analysis of selected Facebook sites was conducted, examining how Uyghur diasporic identity is being communicated and constructed online. The process of data collection and analysis is outlined below.

Facebook pages and groups created by Uyghur diaspora, excluding individuals' sites, outside China, were targeted for analysing. As there is no available list of Facebook sites created by Uyghur diaspora, the first task was to create a list which would be the sample frame in this research.

Identifying Facebook sites

In order to generate a representative list of Facebook sites created by Uyghur diaspora, the Facebook's search engine was used. Also any additional links mentioned on the Facebook sites themselves were included. Individual personal Facebook sites were excluded using the filtering function on the Facebook search engine. Since Facebook is prohibited in China, no sites created by Uyghurs in China were available. More specifically, the following two step selection technique was developed:

Step one: creation of a list of keywords referring to the Uyghurs to be used in the search of Facebook sites²

- * "Uyghur, Uygur, Uighur, Uigur, Uighuir, Uiguir" [different ways of spelling of the name of Uyghurs with Latin letters];
- * "East Turkistan/ Turkestan", "Sheriy Turkistan / Turkestan" ["East Turkistan" in Uyghur language];
- * "Doğu Türkistan / Türkestan" ["East Turkistan" in Turkish language], "Xinjiang" [the name of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China].

Step two: an exhaustive search using all keywords was used, including the keywords described above in different languages (French, Japanese, German, and Chinese). At the end of this process, the following list of 639 Facebook pages and groups related to Uyghurs was collated (February, 2013).

Facebook \ Key words	Uyghur	Uighur	Uygur	Uigur	Xinjiang	Sherqiy-Turkistan Turkestan	East Turkistan Turkestan	Doğu Türkistan Türkestan	These words in other languages
Pages	50	34	52	8	56	6/3	30/30	89/0	10
Groups	44	2	143	0	12	0/0	4/7	57/0	2
Total	94	36	195	8	68	9	71	146	12

From these 639 sites, only the Facebook pages and groups created by Uyghur diaspora formed the sampling frame for this research. Any other Facebook sites created by non-Uyghurs were eliminated. The selection criteria for identifying the pages and groups created by Uyghurs were based on the information on the sites, such as self-introduction, "about" section, of the creator of the page, or admin if it is a group, members, and posts. This elimination process filtered out several pages, including for instance those created by:

- International Organizations concerned about Uyghur issues [i.e. [Uyghur Human Rights Project](#)];

² The Uyghur background of the leading researcher provided the language and socio/cultural knowledge necessary for the selection of keywords

- Turkish and Central Asian organizations; individuals for supporting Uyghurs politically, [i.e. Doğu Türkistan - Sherqiy Türkistan - Источен Туркестан and Doğu TÜRKİSTAN'a Özgürlük];
- English-speaking individuals or Chinese for the purpose of introducing Uyghur people and their culture, or for promoting travel in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region [i.e. Xinjiang 新疆: Far West China];
- Wikipedia on Facebook for the purpose of introducing specific terms [i.e. “Uyghur”, “Uyghur culture”];
- or those that have the word “Uyghur” on their title but have nothing to do with Uyghurs [i.e. PAKISTAN TAHREEK-E-INSAF UYGHUR UTH WING, Asean Uyghur].

After this elimination, 99 pages and groups have identified as Facebook sites created by members of the Uyghur diaspora. The search was not restricted on the Facebook sites at this point. Looking for other Uyghurs links within each site provided an additional 18 pages and groups.

The sampling frame of 117 Facebook sites, which include 56 pages and 61 groups, was used to **map** the overall use of Facebook among Uyghur diaspora. In the effort to create a **typology**, they were classified into seven categories according to their *accessibility, content, frequency of updates, naming conventions, popularity, country of location, and language usage*.

It is important to note that there were duplications among these sites. For example, there are three groups having the same name “East Turkestan East Turkestan” (creators and location are unknown). Two pages and four groups have almost the same name of “Doğu Türkistan Maarif ve dayanışma derneği”, differing only by one or more letters in their title. Their creators are the same, but posts on Facebook walls are slightly different. Further, some pages were inactive in terms of updates, some only had the site name, none or only few updates. For example, “The Uighur Society in United Kingdom” only had one update since its creation in June 2011. These duplicated sites and inactive sites were all counted in the coming categorization process.

Sampling for the Content Analysis of Facebook sites

In the second stage of the content analysis, a qualitative analysis of selected Facebook Groups has been conducted. As it was unrealistic for the scope of this research to conduct an in-depth content analysis for all the Facebook sites identified in the first stage, a second stage sampling was necessary. Using a purposive sampling method (Reinard, 2008), Facebook Groups were selected according to their membership numbers and how active they are in terms of posts and discussion generated.

Firstly, Facebook Groups were selected instead of Pages. Groups were preferred as they are considered to be spaces where people come to communicate about share interests. Also, with Facebook Groups all members have equal access to the site and permission to uploading posts. This was believed to provide a more consistent sample of analysis in terms of a ‘online community’. Secondly, from the 61 Groups identified at the mapping stage, four Groups were selected for content analysis.

The selection criteria were based on the Groups’ accessibility, thematic category, and frequency of updates. Accessibility refers to whether the Group is open to the public, which means that the posts uploaded on its wall are intentionally open for viewing and consumption. As the main focus of analysis are the messages on Facebook sites, and the person that uploads them, the question of privacy was not raised. As there was no need to contact the page creators/administrators, nor identify those posting to Uyghur Facebook pages, no names were provided or privacy issues raised.

According to selection criteria based on accessibility, 43 Group, categorized as “universal” in the mapping stage, were chosen eliminating in the process 18 closed Groups. Those open Groups created with specific intention such as sports, politics, culture, business, entertainment, or education were not included, further narrowing the sample of “universal” Groups to 23.

Frequency of updates was then used to further narrow the selected group. Those groups which showed inactivity during the data collection period (January to April) were eliminated, leaving four Groups for the qualitative content analysis. These four groups are based in the UK, Germany, and Turkey, with one unknown location. These locations also match the transnational characteristics of Uyghur diaspora.

Data from the four groups was organized around the following emerging themes: politics, hometown concerns, ethnic concerns, religion, culture, history education, and entertainment. Codes were subsequently developed based on these themes and literature to include different aspects of identity including political, ethnic, national, cultural, religious, and diaspora. During this process sub-themes around identity emerged (i.e. concerns about political issues among Uyghur diaspora and political awareness under political identity).

Findings: Mapping Uyghur Diaspora Facebook Use

In this section, the findings of the ‘mapping’ exercise of the Uyghur Facebook use are presented. Among the 117 Uyghur administered Facebook sites, 99 are open to the public. Facebook pages, as one of the characteristics of how they are designed, are available to everyone. In contrast, groups can be open or closed to the public; or they can be set as a secret group which is visible for no one but its members. Among the 61 groups identified during the mapping process, 18 of them are closed.

<i>Accessibility</i>	<i>Pages</i>	<i>Groups</i>
<i>Publicly available</i>	56	43
<i>Closed</i>	0	18

Thematic Categorization of Facebook sites

Facebook sites have been categorised thematically. This categorization was based on the site’s self introduction part which is called “About”³ on Facebook. In this section, the intention for creating that site is clearly stated by introducing the purpose or by declaring the mission statement on some sites. Those sites with no information on their “about” section were categorised using information from their name, content and the dominant topics of posts on the site’s wall. In total eleven distinct thematic categories have been identified.

³ “About” section is available for public on some closed Facebook Groups.

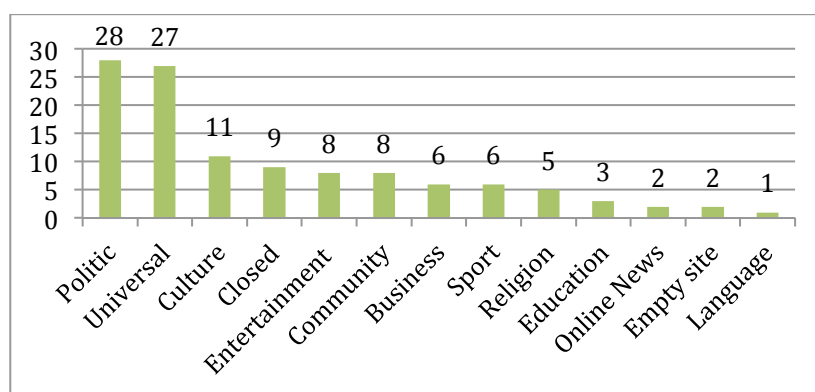


Figure 1 Themes of Uyghur Facebook Sites

The “*political*” sites, as the term indicates, focus on political information about Uyghurs. This category comes first and the most represented with 29 sites, including 16 pages and 13 groups. These sites are mostly located in Turkey (7 sites) and USA (6 sites). The location of 10 political sites is unknown.

The sites categorised as “*Universal*” address all the other themes present in this figure. They often play the role of universal and general discussion platforms. The majority of these sites are frequently updated.

The “*Culture*” sites are devoted to introduce and promote Uyghur culture, history, tradition, and literature. Among them “*London Uyghur Ensemble*”, “*Uyghur Culture & History Studies*” (both located in UK), and “*Association des Ouïghours de France*” (located in France) are particularly active.

The “*Community*” sites refer to those which focus on community concerns and interest. Among the 8 sites, 7 have been created by and for Uyghurs who live in the same geographical location: Uyghurs living in the USA (one closed Group), Australia (two Pages), France (one Group), Turkey (one Page), New Zealand (one Group), and Austria (one Group). Among them only one Group in France is frequently updated. There are 2 sites devoted on topics of Uyghur women and femininity also categorized as “*Community*” type as we see the online group of women as a community.

Some sites are devoted to specific activities and are categorized as “*entertainment*”, “*sport*”, and “*business*” respectively. While sites for entertainment and sport are not active, only one business page UK based “*The Uyghur Online Shop* تۇيغۇر تور دۇكىنى” is active.

The “*Education*” and “*language*” sites are categorized separately as education sites tend to focus on information about studying overseas while the latter focus on Uyghur language study. These sites are located in Australia, Turkey, Norway, and UK and are relatively active.

The “*Religion*” sites are dedicated entirely to Islamic teaching and information. Among them only two sites are active; “*IslamHouse.com* تور بېكىتىنىڭ رەسمىي سەھىپىسى” is located in Saudi Arabia; the location of the other active group is unknown. Other sites are rarely updated.

The “*Online news*” sites are structured in the form of an online newspaper, publishing news in the form of text, video, audio, or website links. These are the “*Erkin Asiya Radiosi*” Page (Radio Free Asia, located in USA) and the “*TRT Uyghurche*” Page (Turkish TRT International news channel located in Turkey).

Publicly unavailable Groups, of which there are nine, are categorized as “Closed”. Any information about them is not obtainable which makes it impossible to fit them into any category. Lastly, the “Empty” sites refer to those which have nothing but site’s name, neither information nor posts are available, even though they are publicly available.

Frequency of Updates

The frequency with which a site is updated or contributed to is a key aspect of understanding the activity levels across the Uyghur diaspora’s use of Facebook.

	Groups	Pages
Closed	18	0
Not updated	1	3
Rarely updated (less than 20 updates)	19	18
Occasionally updated (more than 20 updates, but no updates since Dec. 2012)	7	13
Frequently of Updates	23	20

“Closed sites” here refers to the Groups which are not publicly available⁴. Eleven per cent of the Uyghur Facebook sites are not open to the public, only accept members which approved by the admin/s of the Group. Therefore, how often these Groups are updated is unknown.

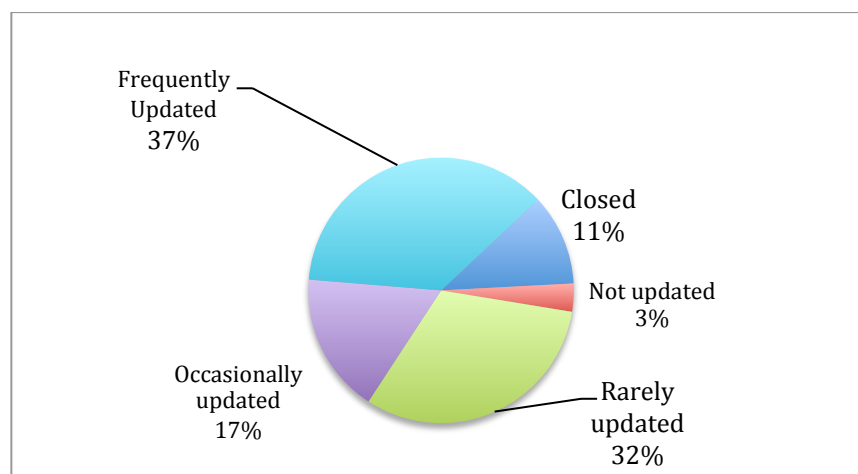


Figure 2 Frequency of updates of Uyghur Facebook sites

There are four sites, one Group and three Pages, inactive since creation. These sites have only their title, not active regarding to the updates.

⁴ Facebook Pages are designed to be publicly available.

As indicated in the figure above, 32% of the sites are updated rarely, they have less than 20 posts onto their sites. Of the rarely updated sites, ten are political in nature. Occasionally updated sites refer to those which have more than 20 updates, but have not been updated since December, 2012.

Frequently updated sites consist of 37 % of the total. They are consistently updated either on daily or weekly basis. One “universal” Page has the most updates which also has the highest popularity. Eleven “political” sites are frequently updated, yet they have less active members who comment, but very active users who upload very often and who virtually dominate that specific site.

Naming Conventions

Site naming is one of the major aspects defining Uyghur Facebook sites. Examining the titles chosen for particular sites shows how the naming is influenced by the current situation of Uyghur diaspora in terms of political, economic, geographical or ideological aspects.

Notably, more than half of the sites (76 out of 117) use the word “Uyghur” in their title. The sites using the words “East Turkistan”, “Doğu türkistan”, and “Sherqiy Turkistan” on their titles turned out to be political sites. The sites which used “Doğu türkistan”, as it written in Turkish language, are located in Turkey; four Pages used “Sherqiy Turkistan” for their title with three of them located in USA, one in Germany.

Location of sites which used “East Turkistan” on their title, except one in USA and one in Turkey, are unknown. The word “Turkestan” is rarely used. “Uighur” and “Uigur” spellings are not popular. Only one group and four Pages applied these words on their site title.

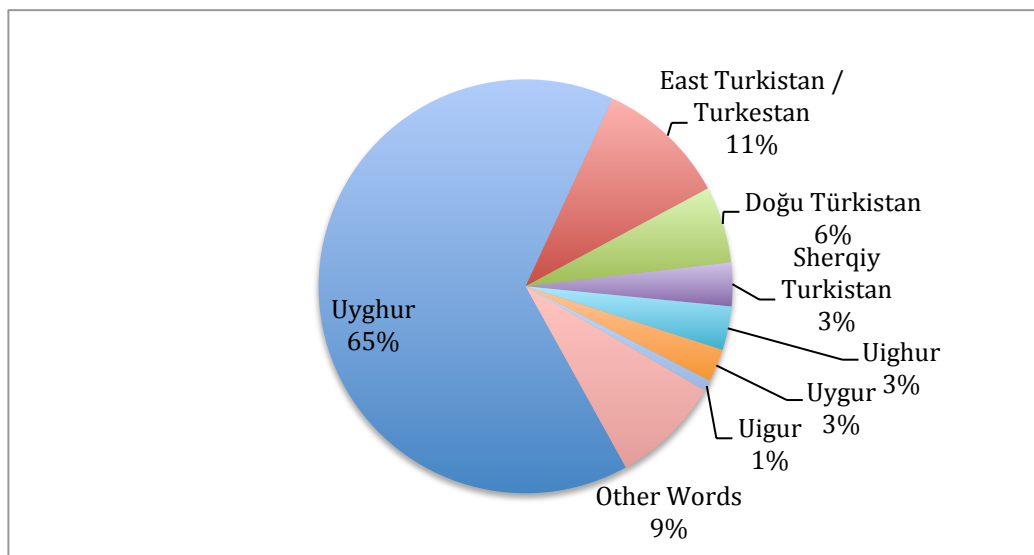


Figure 3 Naming conventions of Uyghur Facebook sites

“Other words” used on site’s title turn out to be symbolic Uyghur words from Uyghur literature, place names, such as “Qutatqubilik” (an 11th century book well-known in Turkic literature), “Dolan” (a place name located in XUAR), and “Ana tupraq” (motherland).

Popularity

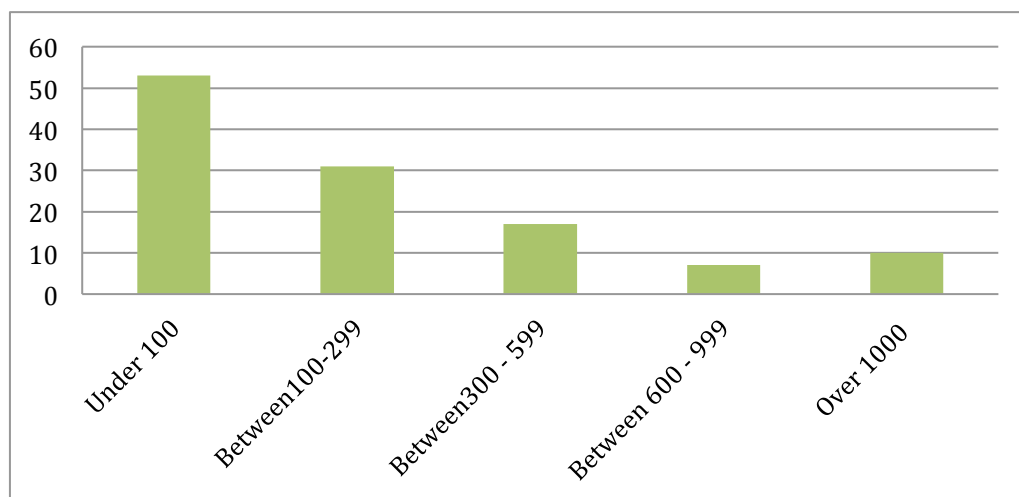


Figure 4 Popularity of Uyghur Facebook sites

There are ten sites, including four pages and six groups, that have more than 1,000 likes and/or members. This percentage shows the existence of an Uyghur community looking for information and news about themselves as an ethnic group. Information is being sought, not only on Facebook, but also on the Internet more widely, as Facebook posts are often embedded in Uyghur diaspora websites (i.e. an information centres or homepages of activists associations). Three of these sites located in UK are culture – orientated; three located in Turkey and one in Germany are politic – orientated. The remaining three are unknown for location.

The most popular sites that have likes/members between 600 and 999 are also the most frequently updated and located in Turkey, Germany, and UK. Two sites, with religion and education content, are located in Saudi Arabia and Australia respectively. Half of the sites that have likes/members between 300 and 599 are rarely updated or only have few posts. Those frequently updated are mostly located in Turkey.

More than half of the sites that have likes/members between 100 and 299 were not updated since September, 2012. The frequently updated sites are located in France, Germany, Turkey, and UK. Only four out of 53 of the sites that have likes/members under 100 are frequently updated and are culture – orientated. Eight sites are not publicly available. Other sites either have several updates since created or not updated since May, 2012.

Country of Location

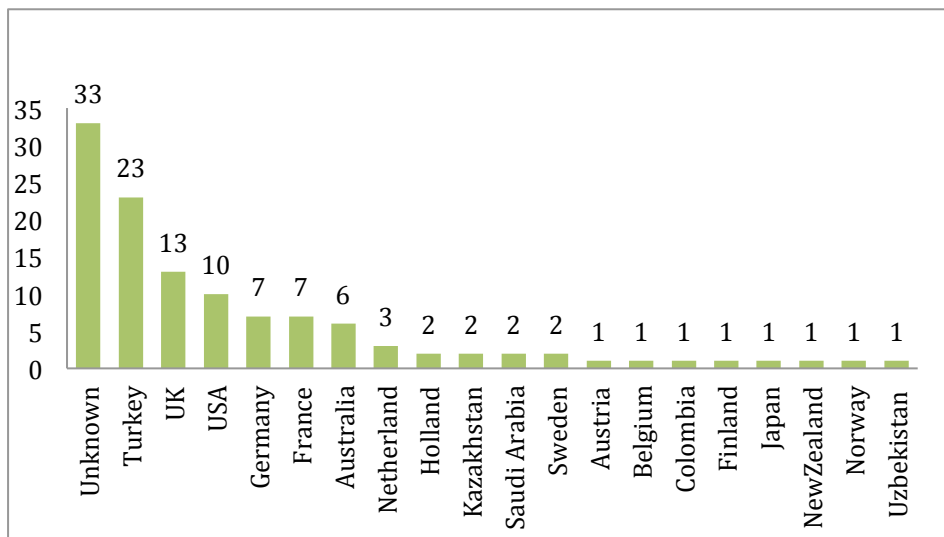


Figure 5 Country of location of Uyghur Facebook sites

The most common location designation is “*unknown*”. Of the 117 sites, 33 are listed as unknown location. It is not clear why the creators do not publicize their location, this could be intentionally or unintentionally. The rest of the sites are listed as originating from a variety of locations. Twenty three sites are originated in Turkey where there is a strong Uyghur population. However, this is not the case for other countries where the population does not determine the number of Facebook sites.

Language Usage

The language used in the Uyghur Facebook sites is an important element to consider in the analysis of Uyghur diaspora online. There are two ways used to write in Uyghur on the internet, one is using the Latin alphabet, and the other the Arabic alphabet (commonly known as old Uyghur). Sites that have used both of these two versions are categorized as “*Uyghur*”. Sites that used one of these two versions are categorized as “*Uyghur Latin*” or “*Uyghur Arabic*”. Further, Facebook sites that have used two or more languages are categorized as “*multilingual*”. Arabic/Latin Uyghur and any other language, such as English, French, German, or Turkish are presented in multilingual sites.

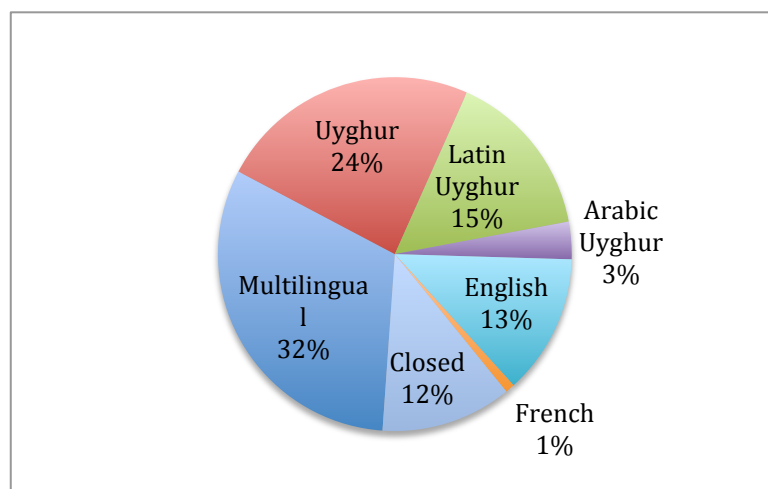


Figure 6 Language used on Uyghur Facebook Sites

The majority of Facebook sites, 32%, are multilingual. Many of these sites are political or cultural. The use of various languages may attract a wide audience. This is indicated by more than half of these sites having over 200 members or likes. These sites have used Latin /Arabic Uyghur and other languages, such as Turkish, French, German, Russian, or Japanese language. Interestingly, Chinese language is only used in one Page “World Uyghur Congress (WUC)”. This page does not use the Arabic Uyghur transcript, which is prominent in many other sites.

English language alone is featured on 13% of the Facebook sites, many of which are political sites located in English-speaking countries, such as USA and Australia. In contrast, only one Group has used French alone which is intended only for French-speaking audiences and introducing Uyghur culture.

Three sites are in Arabic Uyghur script, they are intended only for Min-kao-min⁵ Uyghurs and address the themes of politic and religion. Posts on these sites are based on information from specific website links which is in Arabic Uyghur script. Two of them located in Turkey and their main source for information are the “www.istiqlal.tv” and “*TRT Uyghurche*” (an International channel which broadcast news in Turkic world) respectively. Another two sites using Arabic script are religious sites located in Saudi Arabia.

Latin Uyghur is used exclusively in 15% of sites. These sites are intended both for Min-kao-min and Min-kao-han⁶ Uyghurs. Even though these sites address various themes of culture, politic, sport, entertainment, and community, they are not popular in terms of likes or members. Except from one Page which has over 1000 likes, others have less than 170 members or likes.

In contrast to the sites either in Arabic or Latin Uyghur alone, the sites in Uyghur (both Arabic and Latin Uyghur) are 24 % of the total number of sites. More than half of these sites are ‘universal’ sites regarding to thematic category, intended to have broad or general appeal.

It is also worth mentioning that posts of Website links on Facebook sites are mostly in Arabic Uyghur; comments though usually are in Latin Uyghur. Further, some comments are written in Turkish, German, or French.

Findings: Qualitative Content Analysis

As outlined above, the researchers conducted a qualitative content analysis on four selected Uyghur Facebook sites. Clear themes are emerging from this research in relation to the use of Facebook sites by members of the Uyghur diaspora, including politics, hometown concerns, ethnic concerns, religion, culture, history and education, and entertainment. As the examination of posting to Uyghur Facebook sites demonstrates, Facebook is an important forum of discussion and dissemination of information and opinions relating to a range of issues associated with the Uyghur diaspora. What is clear from this examination is that Uyghur diasporic identity is both emerging as a unified identity and that in important respects the identity which emerges can be understood as in tension. The most significant political posts concern political issues related to Uyghurs both in and outside the

⁵ Chinese term used to designate minority students who taught in their mother language in Minority schools

⁶ Chinese term used to designate minority students who taught in Mandarin in Chinese schools

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Posts about the social situation of Uyghurs in XUAR are frequently shared, and these issues are obviously important within the diasporic community.

Facebook sites obviously serve an important purpose in providing a forum for discussion of political issues facing the Uyghur diaspora – for instance garnering and solidifying support for Uyghur political causes such as human rights freedoms within China; sharing information and updates about conditions for Uyghur friends, families and associates within China and debate over political strategy in relation to Uyghur causes. On the other hand, Facebook also provides a platform in which encouragement to political awareness is taking place, alongside fears and anxieties in relation to Chinese repression and intimidation being expressed.

The analysis also clearly shows that Uyghur identity is strongly articulated among diaspora members. An analysis of postings relating to ‘ethnic identity’ reveal that Uyghur ethnicity is defined in several ways. Firstly, Uyghur identity is in contradistinction to that of the Han Chinese population. However, also prominent within Facebook postings are fears and anxieties concerning the preservation and development of a distinct Uyghur identity and, in particular language. The research findings presented here concentrates on these two important dimensions of diasporic identity; political and ethnic identity.

Political Identity

Postings expressing the concerns of diaspora Uyghurs for the political and social issues in motherland are uploaded very often. They are indicating the resistance of Uyghurs towards oppression from Chinese government, such as ethnic discrimination and human rights issues.

For example, there are article postings expressing discontent with Han people that are depriving Uyghurs farmers of their land; discussing the disadvantages that Uyghur children face as a result of the forced bilingual education; about students penalised for wearing traditional hat in a high school; and about prohibition for Uyghur women entering public spaces like supermarkets wearing Islamic cloth, such as hijab. These posts uploaded on Facebook walls indicate that the Uyghur diaspora is paying attention to the political and social developments in the homeland. Most of these posts are simply sharing information without commenting and do not often receive responses or comments by others. The following post with comments may help understand the concerns of Uyghur diaspora on these matters:

“Have a look at this news! Graduates, try your best to pass the examination! Otherwise, look at this amaze, look, 13,000 Han graduates will come to deliver help in XUAR! Although they are organized to come for practice here, they will be registered workers in bilingual education system. Hmm our poor children finish school as illiterates!”

A response to this post indicates discontent for the Han internal migration through a personal experience at a school, calling these “helpers” as “*specialist cadres*” who are actually unqualified in their career/subject. This comment received “likes” by other members indicating the Uyghurs distrust of the Chinese government. Also, comments on this post questioned this new Han migration by asking “[w]hy the government does not consider that there is not enough drinking water for them?”, indicating concerns about the pressure the arriving of Han workers will put on the short water supply issues in XUAR.

Other posts exposing cases that cause Uyghurs’ discontent include, for example, postings about a former Uyghur surgeon disclosing live organ harvesting in XUAR; informing about unknown to

public disappearances of Uyghur individuals; giving a warning that there are forged products made in China under the name of a Turkish brand; and the arresting of people watching the banned Turkish film *"Valley of the wolves: Ambush"* (Turkish: *Kurtlar Vadisi*).

Facebook posts also indicate that diaspora Uyghurs' political identity is being shaped through questioning issues related to Uyghurs, as such it can be seen that Facebook does provide a platform through which political awareness among the diaspora is being developed. This for instance is manifesting in sharing literature expressing hope for freedom. For example, writings from Nurmemet Yasin Orkishi, a young freelance writer, have been shared several times. His poem and story titled *"wild pigeon"* were a strong portrayal of Uyghur people deeply unhappy with life under Beijing's rule. As a result, he died while in detention by the Chinese authorities. Comments express Uyghurs' sympathy and condolence, "[m]ay he rest in peace at Haven" and using Nurmemet's own words like *"[f]inally, I can die freely"*. This kind of confirmation of political solidarity can be seen in other posts and comments, including a post providing news about another 20 Uyghur sentenced to life imprisonment. There was a comment saying that *"those people are the ones who fight for Uyghurs"*.

Calling for support to the Uyghur case indicates that political awareness has started to take place. For example: *"Brothers, sisters, please have a look at this (video link) tragedy in XUAR, and also let the people in your host country know about it. Let the world know about the tragedies that Uyghurs are facing under Chinese oppression!"*

The issue of naming the Uyghur homeland has a central role in debates within the Facebook sites under analysis. It focuses on whether the priority should be given reaching an agreement over the naming of the Uyghur territory or achieving substantial human rights and political freedoms first. Some suggest that having an agreed name can contribute to attaining freedom for the motherland faster by creating a platform for a shared identity name. Others argue that getting independence is the of more importance: *"we are not building our new country, but we are restoring it. So let us discuss how we can liberate our motherland from Chinese authority first"* or *"it is not a time for us to argue about the name now, it can be decided it in our parliament in the future"*. Some disagreements are expressed using metaphors linking the naming of the country to naming a baby and indicating preference to certain names: *"it will become what you call it now, so we shall call it Uyghuristan"*, while others preferred *"East Turkistan"* by giving historical reasons for how this name created. One member strongly agreed with this idea:

"Change the name from East Turkistan to Uyghuristan is a foolish and also a failure. We shall not forget there are other Turkic ethnicities, such as Kazak, Kirgiz, are living in our motherland. Now we are weak situation under Chinese control. This situation will get worse if we separate ourselves from other ethnics who are sharing the land with us, and this is also what Chinese authority wants to happen on us".

This idea is explained in more detail in another post of an article titled *"Is it hostility or stupidity to make East Turkistan case solely as a Uyghur case?"*. This article provides the history of Uyghurs and other Turk ethnic groups in the region, and makes the case for the name of *"East Turkistan"* which was given as an indication of all the Turkic people who occupy that land and argued that it can give a sense of nation as a state, unlike *"Uyghuristan"* which focuses only on one group. Embracing and gaining solidarity from all other ethnic groups seems to be the only way to strengthen the case of an independent state. The article expressed concern about the impact of the Uyghur political activists who fight for the *"East Turkistan"* case only for Uyghurs and calls for Uyghur intellectuals in diaspora

for speak out their opinion about this important question. There were no replies for this post except one “like”.

Another discussion on this issue is manifesting around questions on the causes of lack independent statehood: “[w]hat is the reason for us to have the current situation of homelessness?”. Comments indicate different points of view. One is reprinted with this comment that has a religious resonance: “we became homeless due to the reason that our faith has weaken; in history, we were strong when we had faith, we are weak now as we have followed after entertainment”. While others give various reasons, such as weak solidarity, selfishness, and fearfulness.

Fearfulness here is referring to the fear from persecution from Chinese authority. This feeling was also expressed in a post that provides a website link that leads to an article titled “It is a bit early to set up the flag” discussing how Uyghurs are afraid of being political. The article illustrates an argument around setting up the flag⁷ in a park where Uyghurs were to have a picnic. A member of Uyghur diaspora wanted to set up the flag earlier so that it makes it easy for people to find the place. Those opposing this indicated a caution on anything that might be perceived as political and suggested: “so let us do not set up the flag and do not make this social activity political”. Another person indicated the divided opinion and uneasiness about the use of the flag in public display by suggesting to “not set up the flag earlier so that Uyghurs are not to be frightened to join the picnic. Set it up when everyone arrived, so that the ones who are afraid of the flag cannot escape”. There was a strong reaction: “We have to have a clear goal towards the freedom of our motherland, the Uyghurs who are afraid of the flag can miss this picnic, and they are not welcome”. This short comment not only shows that there is political awareness amongst the Uyghur diaspora but that is also fragmented.

Ethnic Identity and language

Posts from Facebook walls show that Uyghurs are differentiating themselves from Chinese Han people through the use of ethnic names, places, and festival celebrations. For example, they use words like “Uyghurlar” (Uyghur people), “Qeindashlirim”⁸ (my bothers/sisters), “Biz” (we), and “Bizning” (our), and “Qerindishim”⁹ (my brother/sister) to refer to Uyghur ethnic people. In contrast, they use words like “Zhongguoluqlar” (the people of China), “Henzular” (the Han people), and “Xitay” (the Han people) to refer people of Han ethnicity. As such Uyghurs prefer to use their ethnic name or Islamic words differentiating thus themselves from the Han ethnicity.

Further, instead of using the words China or Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) to call the place where they lived in China, Uyghur diaspora uses several other selective words to call the geographical place. For instance, “Weten” (motherland/ home country), “Wetinim” (my motherland/ home country), and “Yurt” (hometown) are used to refer XUAR in China. The word “East Turkistan” is also used once in an announcement for a protest. The Group member who posted that announcement used “Bizning ulugh wetinimiz – Sherqiy Turkistan” (Our great country – East Turkistan) to refer XUAR.

Differentiating themselves from Chinese Han people is also reflected on the festivals Uyghur diaspora prefers to celebrate. During the data collection period (January to April), there were the following festivals in China: Chinese festival, Chinese New Year, on 10th February, and the Uyghur

⁷ It is the flag of “East Turkistan”, exactly the same design as the Turkish flag, but in blue colour instead of red.

⁸ Words used in Islam to call others Muslims.

⁹ Words used in Islam to call other Muslims.

New Year festival of Nowruz¹⁰ on March 21st. On Facebook Groups' walls, there were no signs of celebrating Chinese festivals. In contrast, Uyghurs posted congratulations for Nowruz. For example, one member posted the following message *"Essalamueleykum, barliq qerindashlarning Nuruz bayrimigha mubarek bolsun"* (Assalamueleykum¹¹, brothers and sisters, congratulations for you all for your Nowruz festival). The use of religious words in Arabic is also observed amongst the diaspora online indicating an increasing awareness of the link between religion, language and identity.

Uyghur diaspora's ethnic identity is also reflected through the use of Uyghur language on Facebook walls. While the Uyghurs that live in XUAR have faced forced bilingual education, diaspora Uyghurs face the challenge of passing the mother language to the new generations. Uyghurs, both in and out of XUAR, are increasingly realizing the importance of preserving their mother language and this is reflected in posts on Facebook, touching for instance on the anxiety for losing the mother language, efforts that have been put on preserving Uyghur language both in and out of XUAR:

"The longest distance in the world is neither the distance between two sides of the earth, nor the distance between two unfamiliar people standing face to face, instead, it is the distance between two Uyghurs talking in Mandarin".

This is an expression of sorrow for Uyghurs who cannot speak their mother language. In another post, a video shows a foreigner teaching an Uyghur language course. A comment for this post expresses anxiety for losing Uyghur language: *"The challenge we are facing now is losing our language while overseas, even more tragically Uyghurs youth are ignoring this issue."*

In another post this concern and the dilemmas faced while living in diaspora come in the shape of this question: *"[h]ow can we (Uyghurs living abroad) make sure that our children overseas learn their mother language without feeling additional pressure on top of their current study?"*. Several members discussed this and suggested the important hindrances and reasons for teaching Uyghur children Uyghur language. The importance of creating Uyghur communities abroad was highlighted and suggestions were given for making an effort live close to each other as children learn their mother language faster when they are in Uyghur language environment. Others advocated the need for Uyghur language schools for children as more important. Several members though emphasized the important role of parents in passing the language to their children by speaking in Uyghur at home.

The above findings indicate that the Uyghur diaspora is aware of the importance of maintaining the use of the Uyghur language both at home and abroad as a way of maintaining a sense of shared identity. They include examples of a video link showing an Uyghur child reciting poems in Uyghur language; another video clip showing a Uyghur boy and girl praising Uyghur language by reciting a prose; a post announcing that Uyghur language course has been established at one French university, and announcement for a lecture given by Uyghur scholars about Uyghur language in Sweden (there are duplications of same posts among FB Groups). Sharing translations of Uyghur terms and criticizing mistakes occurred on websites in Uyghur language is another way the language issue manifests and demonstrates efforts for protecting the Uyghur language.

¹⁰ Nowruz marks the first day of spring and the beginning of a new year in the Persian calendar. It is celebrated in Central Asia, Caucasus, North-western China (which is XUAR), the Crimea and some groups in the Balkans on 21st March every year.

¹¹ Arabic words used for greeting by Muslims. Which mean "peace be upon you".

Conclusion

In this research Uyghur diaspora identity construction was examined through an interpretation of Uyghur diaspora use of Facebook. Combining findings from the mapping and content analysis processes, some early observations can be made.

Manifestations of identity of Uyghur diaspora include political, ethnic, national, religious and cultural aspects indicating the complexity of Uyghur diaspora identity. Uyghur diaspora is presenting online an identity that exists within political limitations as a result of years of caution living under the restrictions of the Chinese authorities which has in its turn resulted to their own self-censoring. There is weak alignment between Uyghur political activists and general members of Uyghurs diaspora manifested in the lack of posts or discussion about Uyghur political activists acting on Uyghur case. Nevertheless, the anxiety of losing their identity, culture, and language is becoming a shared angst among Uyghur diaspora, which is gradually enhancing their sense of ethnic identity.

Findings show the emergence of certain individual members that are playing a dominant role in uploading posts on Facebook, especially in regards to posts with political and religious content. These individuals act as opinion leaders that dominate the public perceptions of Uyghur diaspora identity and have an impact over the production of Uyghur identity online.

Findings showed that Uyghur diaspora identity is contextual to the country Uyghur diaspora is living. Those who live in USA and Australia tend to be more political, while Uyghurs that live in Europe tend to be more concerned about ethnic culture and identity. This may indicate an intensification of identity division among Uyghur diaspora.

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