Identity Construction Online:

The use of Facebook by the Uyghur diaspora

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Declaration

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This Thesis entitled “Identity construction online: The use of Facebook by the Uyghur diaspora” is submitted in partial fulfillment for the requirements for the Unitec degree of Master of International Communication

CANDIDATE’S DECLARATION

I confirm that:

- This Thesis represents my own work;
- Research for this work has been conducted in accordance with the Unitec Research Ethics Committee Policy and Procedures, and has fulfilled any requirements set for this project by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee.

Research Ethics Committee Approval Number: 2012-1108

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ABSTRACT

Identity construction of diaspora people has been facilitated through the use of the Internet, particularly, social network sites (SNSs), providing online spaces for transnational communication. Diaspora identity construction of the Uyghur\textsuperscript{2} diaspora on SNSs has not been explored, or at least has not yet been documented. This thesis presents empirical findings of a research examining the use of Facebook, as one example of SNSs, among the Uyghur diaspora with a focus on diaspora identity construction. It is guided by the research question, \textit{how the Uyghur diaspora identity is being constructed on Facebook}. It provides a preliminary and exploratory analysis of how Facebook is serving as a platform for transnational Uyghur diaspora, how the Uyghur diaspora identity is negotiated through everyday Facebook use, and in turn, how the expression of identity online is contributing to the production of and emerging Uyghur diaspora identity.

The research applied a two-stage content analysis of messages uploaded on the Uyghur diaspora Facebook sites during January to April, 2013. In the first stage, data were collected from Facebook profiles and were analysed quantitatively to provide a general overview of how Facebook is used among the Uyghur diaspora. Results from this stage also helped the selection of Facebook sites for a further qualitative analysis in the second stage, in which data were collected from discussion archives of selected Facebook sites and were analysed qualitatively to provide an understanding of how the Uyghur diaspora identity is being constructed online.

Research findings indicate that the Uyghur diaspora identity online is actively being explored and constructed through everyday communication on Facebook. Findings

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{2} The ethnic name for Uyghur people is spelled in various ways, including Uyghur, Uighur, Uygur, and Uigur. In this thesis, the chosen version is Uyghur.
\end{footnotesize}
suggest that this identity is defined by continuing connections to the original homeland and it is multidimensional encompassing ethnic, cultural, national, religious, and political identity. While ethnic, cultural, and national identity are being cohesively articulated, political and religious identity is negotiated with inclusion of differences and fragmentations. Nevertheless, with a common feeling of discontent towards Chinese regime and close concerns about situations of the Uyghurs in homeland, the globally dispersed Uyghur diaspora is still emerging as a collective subject. Findings demonstrate that the diaspora Uyghurs on Facebook express a strong awareness of social network sites as a useful tool for identity exploration and construction, transnational connection and communication. However, it appears that concerns over Chinese state surveillance might be a serious limitation to Facebook as a platform which encourages a stronger participation.

This thesis contributes to research on how diaspora use the Internet to construct a shared imagination of identities and original homeland. It provides a foundation for future multi- and interdisciplinary studies as well as comparative and longitudinal studies on Uyghur diaspora. It points to the need for further research to address the complexity of the Uyghur diaspora identity in its interplay with other major factors for unifying the Uyghur diaspora.
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**Abbreviations**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ET</td>
<td>Eastern Turkistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICTs</td>
<td>Information and Communication Technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRC</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNSs</td>
<td>Social Network Sites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRT</td>
<td>Turkish Radio and Television Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WUC</td>
<td>World Uyghur Congress</td>
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<tr>
<td>XUAR</td>
<td>Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region</td>
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Image 1. Examples from an Uyghur Facebook page
CHAPTER I: OVERVIEW

1.1 Introduction

With the growth and development of the Internet and other new communication technologies, we have seen a shift in the practices and places of communication (Kissau & Hunger, 2008; Panagokos & Horst, 2006), with the Internet bridging gaps between time and space (Giddens, 1990; Helland, 2007) and providing transnational online spaces for people to come close regardless of distances (Georgiou, 2006; Georgiou & Silverstone, 2007; Kissau & Hunger, 2008). As living outside their original homeland and geographically dispersed people, diasporas have captured the great advantages of online spaces and have extensively depended on the Internet as a “central means of communication” (Kissau & Hunger, 2008, p. 245) for “sustaining relations and connections across distance and across diverse subgroups” (Georgiou & Silverstone, 2007, p. 17).

As Demmers (2007) describes, diasporas are “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” (p. 9). Demmers emphasizes the importance of and identification with the experience of dispersal and, in turn, as having a homeland orientation. The Internet, in particular social network sites, by providing a “complex symbolic environment” for diasporas (Bucy & Gregson, 2001, p. 369) has increasingly played an important role in the development of a homeland orientation for diasporas and in the construction of diaspora identities.
The Internet not only facilitates the imagination of the homeland (Elias & Lemish, 2009; Kadende-Kaiser, 2000; Kissau & Hunger, 2008; Miller & Slatter, 2000; Georgiou, 2001; Karim, 2003), but also serves as an online space to contest “national and transnational political ideologies and cultural expressions, or counter-expressions of identity” (Georgiou & Silverstone, 2007, p.34). Cohen (1997), for example, observes that online communication is a key location of diaspora identity production and a space to share information and perspectives:

...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 (p. 26).

Moreover, online diaspora members and communities can lead to a rethinking, exploration, and construction of ethnic identities (Diamandaki, 2003; Ignacio, 2005; Kang & Yang, 2011; Kadende-Kaiser, 2000; Miller & Slatter, 2000; Schulz & Hammer, 2003; Tsaliki, 2003), cultural identities (Kanat, 2005; Merolla, 2002; Mallapraganda, 2000; Merolla & Ponzanesi, 2005), national identities (Candan & Hunger, 2008; Ding, 2007; Tynes, 2007; Sheyholislami, 2011; Wong, 2003), religious identities (Chiluwa, 2010; Miller, & Slater, 2000; Vertovec, 2004), in some cases becoming a platform for political dissent and the emergence of a new political culture within the diaspora (Adamson, 2001; Adeniyi, 2007; Bernal, 2006; Kanat, 2005; Mamadouh, 2001; Tekwani, 2004).

In addition, throughout the world, Facebook, as one of the most popular SNSs, has become an important platform of discussion and dissemination of information and opinions relating to a range of issues, from posting personal pictures of friends and families, the creation of a sense of belonging and community across a range of local
and global scales (boyd³, 2008; boyd & Heer, 2006; Ellison & boyd, 2013; Hine, 2000; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; McKay, 2010; Miller, 2011; Zhao, Grasmuch, & Martin, 2008). Further, Facebook is a relatively recent phenomenon (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012), and communication on Facebook has been an emerging interest in the field of diaspora and identity studies (Bravo, 2012; Marcheva, 2011; Oiarzabal, 2012).

It is important to state that this thesis is not suggesting that the Internet alone creates diaspora activities online. In other words, diaspora activities online, such as transnational connection, communication, and identity construction are not technologically determined by the Internet but the Internet usage is becoming a part of these activities. And different diaspora people would adopt the Internet differently to suit their own purposes in different contexts of use. Hence, this thesis illustrates the relationship between the Internet usage and diaspora identity construction more generally with an aim of exploring what diaspora members and communities talk about on online spaces and how they mould this online everyday communication experiences in their diaspora identity construction.

1.2 Aims and Objectives

In light of the literature on the Internet usage and diaspora identity construction, this research aims at exploring the Facebook usage of the Uyghur diaspora with a focus on diaspora identity construction. It identifies the Uyghur diaspora Facebook sites and examines messages that are shared on Facebook sites among the Uyghur diaspora Facebook users. Content analysis of messages from Facebook profiles and

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discussion archives represents how the Facebook usage and sharing information online is involved in the construction of the Uyghur diaspora identity. Hence, the research explores:

- Uyghur diaspora use of Facebook in transnational connection and communication;
- expressions through which members of the Uyghur diaspora have used the Internet to represent their identity;
- various dimensions of identity which are comprised in the construction of the Uyghur diaspora identity;
- extent to which each dimensions of identity play a role in the construction of the Uyghur diaspora identity;
- implications, if any, that may affect the Facebook use of the Uyghur diaspora.

Guided by the above, this research centered on Facebook sites created and used by collectives, if any, of Uyghurs in diaspora, such as organisations, institutions, associations, communities, or groups. These sites are not individual Facebook accounts. Personal Facebook sites were thus excluded in this research. The reason for choosing collective Facebook sites was that they are the online spaces where members and communities of diaspora connect to and communicate with each other (Ellison & boyd, 2013).

Moreover, this research applied a content analysis (Donald & Amanda, 2009; Neuendorf, 2002) in a two-stage process. In stage one, Facebook sites were identified and were categorized into six themes based on quantitative content analysis of information provided on their profiles and postings uploaded on the sites. Profiles are the places where information provided is helpful in identifying in privacy settings, popularity, and location of the sites. Uploaded postings are helpful in identifying main topics, frequency of updates, and language usage on the sites. Results from this stage not only presented an overview of the Facebook usage of the Uyghur diaspora,
but also helped in the selection of Facebook sites for further content analysis in the second stage.

In stage two, messages from discussion archives on Facebook walls of selected sites were analysed qualitatively and organized into emerging themes; these themes then were organized in relation to various dimensions of identities. Messages are considerate representations of identity (Hecht, 1993). Analysis of such messages shared by the Uyghur Facebook users provided with an understanding of the identities represented through daily communication practices on Facebook.

1.3 Research Questions

The main question in this research explores how the Uyghur diaspora identity is being constructed on Facebook. The identity of the Uyghur diaspora in this research does not refer to only one, single identity; instead it refers to a collective identity comprised of various dimensions, including ethnic identity, cultural identity, national identity, political identity, and religious identity.

The following sub-questions guided this research:

Sub-question One: How is Facebook being used by the Uyghur diaspora?

Sub-question Two: How is Uyghur diaspora identity being expressed and negotiated on Facebook?

Sub-question Three: What implications, if any, exist affecting Facebook use by the Uyghur diaspora?

Consequently, an empirical study applying content analysis was conducted and analysis of findings has provided answers to these research questions.
1.4 Rationale and Purpose

The idea for this research was born out of personal experience as an Uyghur\(^4\) living abroad. As a member of the Uyghur diaspora I have witnessed an affinity among diaspora Uyghurs to ‘give back’ to the Uyghur people. Some of them attend political lobbying for the Uyghur cause; others bring together Uyghur students and professionals in diaspora to enhance unity and to promote education among diaspora Uyghurs. Some of them are enthusiastic in maintaining the Uyghur culture, language and in organizing festivals among the members of this diaspora. The Internet, on the other hand, seems to be a new space where some Uyghurs, through creating websites, contribute to introducing Uyghurs to their own culture, history, as well as to promoting political aspirations and support for the Uyghur cause (Kanat, 2005). Although this affinity manifests itself in diverse ways, members of this diaspora identify themselves as Uyghurs. They tend to keep their Uyghurness and to maintain a common desire for their original homeland.

I began to wonder if this affinity among the Uyghur diaspora manifested in their use of Facebook. Facebook, as one of the most popular SNSs, has demonstrated its important role in mobilization, for instance during the Arab Spring uprisings (Huang, 2011), and has increasingly become an indispensable part of the everyday life of diaspora members like myself. I came to know about Facebook only after I went abroad as it is blocked in China. Not long after I started my new life in New Zealand, I registered an individual Facebook account for myself, and since then I have enjoyed staying connected and being able to communicate with many old and new

\(^4\) Some people may pronounce the word Uyghur as /ˈwiːɡəɾ/. However, Hahn & Ibrahim (1991) state that an acceptable English pronunciation closer to the Uyghur people’s pronunciation of it would be /uːi ɡəɾ/. Therefore, in this thesis, the indefinite article an chosen to be used.
friends amongst the Uyghurs who live outside China. I also found that, in addition to individual Facebook accounts, collective Facebook sites of organisations, associations and groups have been created where the diaspora Uyghurs join in and come together to exchange information and opinions. To my surprise, these collective Facebook sites seem to become common spaces where a wide range of information about Uyghurs is accessible. It appears that communication on Facebook has enabled diaspora Uyghurs to share Uyghur related ideas, news, and images, particularly about the Uyghurs in their homeland, a practice which is impossible in China. Is this a way for the Uyghur diaspora to find what it means to be Uyghurs? Is this a way of raising awareness of Uyghurness? Does this communication on Facebook have the potential in forming a collective Uyghur diaspora identity? Reading related literature on online practices of other diasporas taught me that such online communication is an expression of affinity which is part of diaspora identity construction and I embarked on this research to find out how this applies to the Uyghurs in diaspora.

Given the relatively recent recognition of the dispersed Uyghurs as “a diaspora under construction” (Reyhan, 2012, p. 4), Facebook is a key online space where meanings of being an Uyghur diaspora emerge. Moreover, due to its transnational nature, Uyghur diaspora, like other diaspora communities, has become substantially dependent on the Internet to strengthen the communication among the diasporic members and communities (Shichor, 2007). Yet, little has been done to understand to what extent the Uyghur diaspora is using SNSs for their identity construction as part of their diasporic development. This research aims to fill a gap in the literature on emergent diasporas generally, and the Uyghur diaspora in particular and the ways in which online communication is being mobilized for contemporary identity
construction. The research is particularly timely, as very little work has been done focusing on the Uyghur diaspora. An examination of social network sites usage by this diaspora provides insights into the process of identity construction as it is currently taking place internationally. Such research has consequences 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 also holds value in the field of Central Asian studies and provides a contemporary empirical study to emergent studies of diaspora, and their use of social network sites.

1.5 Thesis Outline

This thesis is organized into seven chapters including Introduction and Conclusion.

Chapter One provides an introductory overview about the research. It presents the main literature related to the topic, purpose and significance of the research, research questions, motivation of the researcher’s personal interest in the subject, and the organisation of the thesis.

Chapter Two presents a brief introduction to the historical background, current political situations of the Uyghurs in the Uyghur region in China, and the formation of the Uyghur diaspora. Studies on the diaspora Uyghurs are presented which indicate the need for research in the topic presented in this thesis.

Chapter Three places the thesis in the context of existing theoretical and empirical literature on diaspora studies. It presents definitions of the main concepts including social network sites, identity, diaspora, diaspora identity construction, also explains how the identity can be studied from a communication research perspective. Further,
this chapter presents empirical studies on diaspora identity construction online through which different dimensions of diaspora identity are illustrated.

Chapter Four discusses the research design and methodology. It details and evaluates the particular research approach of content analysis and justifies how it was employed in this research. It describes the selected data collection methods, process of data analysis, and ethical considerations and privacy on Facebook.

Chapter Five presents findings from non-participant observation of messages on Facebook profiles and discussion archives on Facebook sites in two sections. Section one analyses findings in six categories which gives an overall understanding of Facebook usage among the Uyghur diaspora. Section two gives a detailed insight into the information and opinions that the Uyghur diaspora shared on Facebook in relation to different dimensions of their diaspora identity. This chapter highlights key findings in preparation for the subsequent discussion. This chapter is largely descriptive in nature as it employed a technique of “quoting extensively” in order to give full space for the reader to evaluate and interpret the results of data analysing (Anderson, 1999, p. 55).

Chapter Six presents discussions of the research findings in the context of the relevant literature. Key findings are interpreted and concluded with an answer to the question of how the Uyghur diaspora identity is being constructed on Facebook.

Chapter Seven summarizes the thesis. It includes conclusions, suggestions for future research, and limitations of the research.
Image 1. The location of the Uyghur region on the global map

Image 2. Scenes from Sunday market in the Uyghur region

Image 3. Political protest by the Uyghur diaspora
CHAPTER II: BACKGROUND CONTEXT

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a brief introduction to the historical background and political situation of the Uyghurs in the Uyghur region in China. Further, it describes the formation of the Uyghur diaspora and presents research on the Uyghur diaspora. Issues related to the Uyghur diaspora in their host countries are not presented here. The process in which the Uyghur diaspora is finding itself while adopting in new social, cultural, and political contexts in their host countries has undoubtedly affected their diaspora identity construction. But looking at the political circumstances in their homeland, it helps to understand better where the Uyghur diaspora came from and why. Particularly, because the Uyghur diaspora’s identity construction online is primarily dictated by circumstances in their original homeland rather than concerns about establishing a new life in their host countries, as the results of this research are pointing to.

2.2 Historical Background of the Uyghur Diaspora

The Uyghurs are one of the 55 ethnic minorities in the People's Republic of China (PRC). They are Sunni Muslims of Turkic origin living in the northwestern region of the country, officially called Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (also called as Xinjiang, XUAR in abbreviation). This region is a homeland for over ten million Uyghur and has a territorial size that exceeds one and a half million square kilometers as seen in the map:
Ancient Uyghurs settled in what is now Xinjiang and the area known as present-day Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. They began converting to Islam from Buddhism in mid-10th century during the Karahanid Empire. Their independence was maintained until the invasion of Manchu (Qing Dynasty) in the mid-18th century. In 1884, the Uyghur region was incorporated into the Chinese Empire as an official province named Xinjiang, meanings New Dominion (Shichor, 2007).

The quest for independence has never stopped. The Uyghurs have sought to become independent from the People's Republic of China and had short-lived independence twice. The first was the establishment of the Turkish Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan in 1933 and second one was the Eastern Turkestan Republic from 1944 to 1949. The relationship between the Uyghurs and the Chinese government during the last 60 years of rule by China has been marked by political, ethnic and other tensions, in some cases by violence and death. Since the post-Mao era, Uyghurs have been treated as an “illegitimate nationality” (Shichor, 2007, p. 119) which should be
incorporated into Chinese nationality. This policy requires that all people living in Chinese territory shall be seen as Chinese, with forced assimilation as a key policy measure. This has caused ethnic discrimination and has brought increasing threats to Uyghur ethnicity, culture, and language. Further, ongoing Han immigration has resulted in a demographic imbalance in the Uyghur region. Between 1949 and 2008, the percentage of the Han population in the Uyghur region has increased from 6.7 per cent to 40 per cent (Howell & Fan, 2011). Consequently, not only has the Uyghurs’ share in the population declined dramatically, but also they have been disadvantaged in relation to financial development and employment. In addition, 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; Becquelin, 2004). As a result of all of these plus human rights abuses, such as torture and religious repression (WUC, 2004), Uyghurs have called for self-determination, independence at large which has been reflected on the increasing politicization of Uyghur cause both in and outside of China. However, due to oppressive and quick punishment from Chinese authorities, Uyghurs within Xinjiang are unable to take action against injustice; in contrast, Uyghurs outside China are able to exercise the freedom of speech; some of them are politically active in making efforts to let the situation of Uyghurs be heard by the rest of the world (Petersen, 2006; Shichor, 2003, Chen, 2010).

Discontent with the political and social circumstances in China is one of the main motivations for Uyghurs migration from the Uyghur region. Uyghurs started to migrate from the early 19th century and have continued doing so in several waves. Firstly, Uyghurs migrated towards neighboring countries in central Asia; this was 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 wave of migration in the late 1940s settling in Turkey as well. Due to the internal Chinese hostility and external Soviet hospitality, thousands of Uyghurs migrated to central Asia from China in the 1960s. From the 1980s onwards, the Deng Xiaoping-era Open Door Policy\(^5\) 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 organisations abroad it is estimated at over 1.5 million (Reyhan, 2012, p. 5; Shichor, 2003, p. 286). There are presently significant Uyghur populations in Central Asia, Turkey, Western Europe, the United States and Australia as showed in Table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Asia</td>
<td>1,500,000</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>40-50,000</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>Mongolia</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scandinavia</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Distribution of Uyghur diaspora population in the world*  
(Reyhan, 2012, p. 5; Shichor, 2003, p. 286)

Although having a substantial population, Uyghurs abroad did not begin forming a transnational network among diaspora members and communities until the advent of the Internet communications in 1990s. Before the Internet, they used the conventional means available locally by establishing associations, launching publications, organizing cultural activities (Shichor, 2003). Yet, these attempts were not effective in reaching a larger audience among the geographically dispersed Uyghurs and communication was mostly limited at local level (Shichor, 2003). This

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\(^5\) The Open-Door Policy is a Chinese state policy seeking to boost economic development by encouraging foreign technology and investment (Shichor, 2007).
situation has changed with the development of Internet communications providing the opportunity for easy, affordable transnational communication. The Internet has played a critical role in bringing the Uyghur diaspora members and communities together online to engage in transnational communication and to construct a diaspora of the Uyghurs abroad. The Uyghur diaspora is therefore a “diaspora under construction” (Reyhan, 2012, p. 4) and this construction has been facilitated by the Internet (Chen, 2010; Chen, 2011; Chen, 2012; Reyhan, 2012; Gladney, 2005; Kanat, 2005; Petersen, 2006; Shichor, 2003; Shichor, 2007; Shichor, 2010). Moreover, the Internet is playing a central role in enabling the Uyghur diaspora to express “the unspeakable and hidden truth about the nation” (Simon, 2008, p. 1170).

2.3 Studies on the Uyghur Diaspora

Limited studies are available on the Uyghurs. Uyghurs both in China and in diaspora have recently been of interest to Shichor (2003; 2007; 2010). According to his personal investigations within Uyghurs, Shichor (2007) states that “whether inside or outside China, Uyghurs have never constituted a homogenous group” (p. 124). He emphasizes the fragmentations among Uyghur diaspora which undermines the sense of solidarity among them (Shichor, 2007). In addition, due to the political and economic relationships between China and other countries, Shichor (2003) is not optimistic about the accomplishment of the Uyghurs’ goal - independence of the Uyghur region called Eastern Turkestan by the Uyghur political activists and organisations. Nevertheless, Shichor (2010) confirms the role of the Internet for the Uyghur diaspora. His studies provide an overview of the websites created by Uyghur diaspora and states it is the Internet which enables Uyghurs abroad not only to
achieve greater visibility than ever before and but also to disseminate information and opinions among Uyghur diaspora (Shichor, 2010).

Chen has produced studies on transnational social networks of the Uyghur diaspora political mobilization (Chen, 2010; Chen, 2011; Chen, 2012). Chen’s studies demonstrate that the importance of the role of the Internet is in making it possible to create online transnational linkages among the Uyghur diaspora for their political activities. Findings from Chen’s (2011) study also indicate that the World Uyghur Congress, a political organisation of Uyghur diaspora, and Rabiye Kadeer, the leader of Uyghur political activism, are central to the social networks of the Uyghur diaspora and their political mobilization; yet, there are fragmentations existing within these social networks online. She suggests further study for clarifying the potential factors contributing to these fragmentations and exploring the role of national identity, religion, and political ideology in the formulation of Uyghur diaspora networks (Chen, 2011).

Similarly, the use of the Internet by the Uyghur diaspora is highlighted by Gladney (2005), Kanat (2005), and Petersen (2006). They state that Uyghur diaspora, especially Uyghur activists and non-governmental agencies have linked to one another through websites and online forums, and receive international financial and other support that helps popularize their political cause. The networked connections have played an important role in reinvigorating Uyghur political identity among dispersed members (Gladney, 2005; Kanat, 2005; Petersen, 2006). The efforts that Uyghur political organisations and activists have put in organizing political activities offline and running websites with political information has been important in communicating the plight of the Uyghur people to international audiences (Gladney, 2005; Kanat, 2005; Petersen, 2006).
Further, Kanat (2005) studied the role of the Internet for the Uyghur diaspora and investigated the general commonalities among websites created and used by them. Kanat (2005) states that websites created by the Uyghur diaspora have been used as online spaces where the Uyghur political identity, Uyghur culture, and history are promoted. Kanat (2005) notes that it is common among websites of the Uyghur organisations to represent Uyghur political identity through symbols, such as images of the Eastern Turkistan flag, history of Uyghurs, and human rights violations in the Uyghur region back in China. Further, the Uyghur culture has been represented in those websites through providing information about the Uyghur culture, recommending websites for downloading Uyghur folk music, and “almost in each and every site, designed either by a nationalist organisation or by an individual, one can see the endeavor to present Uyghur culture or Uyghur history” (Kanat, 2005, p. 2).

French-based Uyghur scholar Reyhan (2012) recently studied the Uyghur diaspora and its use of the Internet as part of a project of e-Diaspora Atlas. She argues that the Uyghur diaspora is a “diaspora under construction” in terms of formation of transnational and international networks and communication within Uyghur diaspora (Reyhan, 2012, p. 4). She emphasizes the indispensable role of the Internet in this construction process and in establishing the Uyghur diaspora as a digital diaspora. Her findings indicate the Uyghur diaspora uses the Internet extensively in different countries; yet “countries where there is a strong Uyghur population are not necessarily the most developed digital spaces” (Reyhan, 2012, p. 3). For example, while 16 Uyghur websites were created in France where a smaller number of Uyghur population, about 500, are living in, Scandinavian countries on the other hand
(Norway, Sweden, and Netherland) where about 2,000 Uyghurs are living in, have eight Uyghur websites (Reyhan, 2012).

Generally, previous research as mentioned above on the Uyghur diaspora and their use of the Internet show that the Internet has enabled the diaspora Uyghurs to:

- establish networks with Governmental and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) at international level to support the Uyghur cause for independence;
- establish connections and increase communication among Uyghur diaspora members and communities at both local and transnational level;
- reestablish connection with Uyghurs still based in China;
- represent political and cultural identity.

Nevertheless, there are no empirical studies examining SNSs usage among the Uyghur diaspora. Do the Uyghur diaspora members and communities use SNSs for their transnational communication like other diasporas do? How have they used the online spaces provided by SNSs? Many SNSs related questions in the context of the Uyghur diaspora have remained unexplored. Particularly, the information and opinions produced through transnational communication among the diaspora Uyghurs on SNSs is an important aspect to be examined in order to establish a better understanding of the Internet usage by the diaspora Uyghurs. As Kanat (2005) suggests “content analysis of materials produced by diasporic communities” of the Uyghurs will help to construct a better picture of the use of the Internet by this diaspora (p. 4). This research aims to fill this gap and is expected to enrich the current studies on the Uyghur diaspora and their Internet usage.
2.4 Summary

The Uyghurs have faced ongoing ethnic discrimination, political and religious suppression, and human rights abuses perpetrated by the Chinese government. Consequently, they have expressed an increasing discontent and resistance towards the Chinese regime and have made a quest for self-determination, and independence at large. While this quest has been suppressed inside China, it has been revived abroad, particularly due to the rights of freedom of speech outside China. Moreover, the limitless communication opportunities provided by the Internet have enabled the Uyghurs outside China not only to publicize their quest to international audiences, but also to start the construction of the Uyghur diaspora through transnational online communication. Although the project of greater Uyghur self-determination seems to be far from realization and the struggle for it seems to be increasingly harder, the diaspora Uyghurs have actively and continuously used the Internet to express their concerns and supports for this project from various aspects. They have created online spaces, such as websites, discussion forums, to disseminate information and opinions among the diaspora Uyghur members and communities, to establish transnational links for their political cause, and many more. Their identity construction has also been integrated into the Internet usage and previous studies indicate that they have represented political and cultural identity online. However, how they are using newly rising online spaces of social network sites, such as Facebook, in relation to their identity construction has been unexplored. Hence, this research aims to bring a preliminary understanding in regards to this concern.
Image 5. Example of Uyghur Facebook page
CHAPTER III: LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the relevant theoretical and empirical knowledge on diaspora identity construction online. It aims to provide an understanding of how diaspora Uyghurs experience communication on Facebook and engage in constructing their diaspora identity. A theoretical framework is constructed by drawing on a range of previous literature on the key concepts in this thesis, namely social network sites, identity, diaspora, and diaspora identity construction online. These concepts are discussed in detail and an effort is made to highlight the links that run through all of them. The relationship between identity construction and communication research is explained in order to show how identity construction can be studied from a communication perspective. The presentation of empirical studies provides an overview of how the Internet usage among diasporas for their identity construction has been approached by other scholars. These studies indicate the existence of multiple dimensions of diaspora identity. These dimensions of identity are defined and discussed, providing an important conceptual and methodological approach for the thesis.

3.2 Social Network Sites

In the rapidly changing landscape of communication technologies, the introduction of social network sites has contributed to the variety of online spaces at the disposal of diasporic members and communities to engage in identity construction. This
section introduces the concept of SNSs and three basic features common to most SNSs including Facebook. Facebook is then introduced and the differences between Facebook pages and groups are explained, providing the justification for selection of Facebook groups for the qualitative content analysis in this research, expanded upon in the research design chapter.

3.2.1 The Concept of SNSs

Social network sites (SNSs), also called Social Networking Sites, and began to emerge in the last decade of the twentieth century. As of this writing, hundreds of SNSs have been created and millions of users have been attracted by them. Some of the most popular SNSs are Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Twitter, Flickr, and Bebo. SNSs have provided online spaces for users to represent themselves, to build social networks among people who share interests, information, opinions, and real-life connections, or to use a variety of additional SNS services, such as instant messaging, photo, video sharing, and games and quizzes. SNSs have not only been integrated into the daily practices of individual users, but also been proven to be an effective communication tool for communities from local to transnational level for various purposes.

Ellison and boyd (2013) define social network sites in the web 2.0 era as “a networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site” (p. 152). They choose to use the term social “network” sites rather than social “networking”
sites for two reasons. According to them, “networking” emphasizes relationship initiation, often between strangers and while networking is possible on these sites, it is not the primary practice on many of them. Secondly, what makes these sites unique from other forms of computer-mediated-communication is “not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks” (p. 211). Here, the emphasis is on the relationship between individuals which would not otherwise be made; the individuals connect to each other online because they share some offline connection. Similarly, it is this connection character that emerges most prominently when considering the use of Facebook by the Uyghur diaspora. As findings illustrate in later chapters, members of the Uyghur diaspora connect with each other on Facebook based on a shared homeland, background, culture, and common concerns.

3.2.2 Features of SNSs

Social network sites have three basic features of profiles, friends list, and postings (boyd, 2008). Profiles are the sections where users display information about their name, location, interests, and photos. Making the profile is a process of “type oneself into being” (Sunden, 2003, p.3) and of displaying messages related to the administrator of this account in the ‘about’ section. Users are then asked to identify other users in the system to be compiled on a ‘Friends list’. Once two users become friends, their profiles are linked automatically and what is publicly visible on one account becomes accessible to the other and vice versa. The visibility of the profiles pages varies between SNSs. It mostly depends on how the user chose settings. For example, on Friendster, anyone with or without an account has access to all profiles. In contrast, Facebook allow users to choose whether they want their profile to be
public or to limit for Friends only, which is the same case for MySpace. Therefore, the primary ways in which SNSs are differentiated from each other is the “structural variations around visibility and access” (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 212).

In addition, SNSs allow users to communicate with each other through upload postings. Users can exchange information and opinions through uploading textual messages, photos, and audio-visuals, or comments to these postings. This section on Facebook is called the ‘Wall’ where communication occurs and content of the communication as messages are generated. This is also where this research is focused on in order to examine the messages of the Uyghur Facebook users in relation to the representation and construction of their identity. Further, while the messages on profiles display information about that account, the Friends list enables users to develop their social networks. In this research, the focus is on messages uploaded in profiles and walls rather than Friends list. Therefore the focus will be on content creation and sharing rather than development of online social networks among users.

### 3.2.3 Facebook Pages and Groups

Facebook, as one of the most attractive social network sites, possesses three basic features - profiles, friends list, and postings, common to all SNSs (boyd, 2008). It allows both individuals and collectives to register accounts. Individual accounts which enable individual users to register a Facebook account for his/her personal use are not included in the examination of this research as stated earlier. Thus the focus here will be on collective Facebook accounts.

Collective Facebook accounts can be created either as a Facebook page or a Facebook group. A Facebook page “allows real organisations, businesses, celebrities
and brands to communicate broadly with people who like them” (Facebook official site, retrieved on 5th November, 2012). Therefore, Facebook pages should only be created by these entities on which making a page is a preferable platform to promote something, for example, “London Uyghur Ensemble” is a page dedicated to introduce Uyghur culture and to announce activities organized by the London Uyghur Ensemble.

Facebook pages are open for the public by default. Anyone can view all the information on the page including messages on profiles and uploaded postings. Anyone can join a page simply by clicking ‘like’ at the very top of the page; invitation requests are not needed to be authorized. Nevertheless, uploading postings is manipulated by the administrator of the page meaning postings always have to be uploaded from the same source—the creator/administrator. This implies that the communication is controlled by what the administrator wants to share on the page wall. Although anyone who liked this page can upload comments, they do not have the right to upload postings. This is the main difference between Facebook pages and groups on which every member of that group has equal chances to upload postings.

Facebook groups “provide a closed space for small groups of people to communicate about shared interests” (Facebook official site, retrieved on 5th November, 2012). Anyone can create Facebook groups in order to have an online space for close circles of people to share information and opinion based on common interest. Facebook groups have members who join the group through sending a request to the group’s administrator. The request is either authorized or declined by the group administrator, or by accepting an invitation sent by either the administrator or other members of the group. Groups offer flexibility in terms of visibility. There are three privacy options for groups as ‘open’, ‘closed’ or ‘secret’. Open groups are visible to
everyone and expose all the messages uploaded on profiles and walls. Closed groups on the other hand show only the name/title of the group and ‘about’ section. The secret groups are only visible for its administrator and members. They are unsearchable through the search function on Facebook. For this reason secret groups could not be included in the research. Only the administrator and those who are invited by the administrator can join the group as members and participate in group communication in secret groups.

Uploading postings is not controlled by the administrator on Facebook groups as is the case on Facebook pages. All of the three types of Facebook groups provide equal chances to everyone in the group, including the administrator and the members, to upload postings and comments on the group wall. As such the communication occurs on a Facebook group’s wall presents not an exchange of information and opinion in a manipulated way as it is on Facebook pages, rather in a sharing way in which every member can take part. Therefore, Facebook groups are more suitable to examine communication among Facebook users than Facebook pages. Facebook groups enable like-minded people to come together online to share information and ideas without facing exclusion. This is also the reason for choosing Facebook groups, instead of pages, for a qualitative content analysis in this research.

Nevertheless, collective Facebook sites have been suited for diaspora people for their transnational communication online. The ‘walls’ have operated as online platforms where diaspora members and communities share information, opinions, stories, experiences in everyday life, through which their identity unfolds naturally. Analyzing messages produced through communication on Facebook walls have been of great interest among scholars who are curious about who shares what information on Facebook, and for what purpose. Throughout the world, Facebook has become an
important platform of discussion and dissemination of information and opinions relating to a range of issues, from posting personal pictures of friends and family, the creation of a sense of belonging and community across a range of local and global scales (Ellison & boyd, 2013; Mckay, 2010; Miller & Slater, 2000). Although studies on Facebook usage are increasing, empirical studies specifically on Facebook usage in relation to diaspora identity construction are very limited. Nevertheless, available literature on this topic is presented in coming section of diaspora identity construction online. Firstly however, the key concepts of identity and diaspora are discussed below.

3.3 Identity

In this section, the concept of identity is examined. This concept has been widely discussed, and prominent approaches to understanding identity are explored here (Yep, 2002; Erikson, 1980; Goffman, 1984; Ashmore, Deaucx, & McLaughlin, 2004). Then the concept of identity construction is explained from a communication perspective from Hecht (1993) and it illustrates how identity construction can be studied through examination of online communication, particularly on social network sites, such as Facebook.

3.3.1 The Concept of Identity

3.3.1.1 Identity is complex: ‘I’ and ‘we’

Identity is a complex concept. Everyone lives with a sum of identities. One person might say ‘I am from China, my ethnicity is Uyghur, the region I live in is in Central Asia, I like Uyghur traditional food and wear traditional ethnic clothes in festivals, I
am a father/mother and work as a teacher, I agree/disagree with xx’s political views’. These are manifestations of various dimensions of an individual identity a person may represent. Identity is “a person’s conception of self within a particular social, geographical, cultural, and political context” (Yep, 2002, p. 79). It is a product of how he/she makes sense of the social world in which he/she lives (Yep, 2002). This definition reflects a dual meaning: identity is a sense of who I am as an individual who experiences unique qualities, such as personality, gender; meanwhile, it states identity is a sense of who we are as part of a collective and a particular social world (Yep, 2002). The concept of identity then can include as simple a notion as gender identity of a person to as complex as various dimensions of identity including ethnic, national, political, social, cultural, religious and racial identity of a collective/society whose members feel bonded together through these dimensions of identity. The combination of personal identity held by individuals and shared multidimensional collective identity is what makes identity as complex as it is (Yep, 2002).

3.3.1.2 Identity develops over time

Identity is not fixed; it develops over time (Erikson, 1980). Every individual goes through a process of identity development starting from childhood (Erikson, 1980). This is a process of reflection, observation, commitment, and exploration through which individuals perceive everyday social interactions, accumulate knowledge, and experience based on social values and standards of a particular social context (Erikson, 1980). Identity is held to be a subjective feeling of sameness and a stable sense of self accumulated within a given social context, and is mostly salient during adolescence and young adulthood (Erikson, 1980). This stable identity is not fixed though; it will be resolute or changed depending on the choices individuals make.
during their life (Erikson, 1980). For instance, Uyghurs, who grow up in an Uyghur society, build up their identity through observing and reflecting on various aspects of the society and are most likely to develop a stable identity based on the same social norms, traditional culture, historical, political, and social situations provided by that context of Uyghur society. Yet, this stable identity may change in relation to one’s life experiences and some dimensions of identity may be stronger or more visible, and other dimensions less so (Erikson, 1980).

3.3.1.3 Identity develops through social interactions

Identity also depends on social interactions - daily communicative interactions among individuals (Goffman, 1984). From a sociological points of view, Goffman (1984) suggests identity is not only subject to the reality of social world in which an individual grows up as suggested by Yep (2002), but also subject to social interactions. Individuals interact with each other, share symbols and meanings, generate their thoughts and views, and build an increasingly complex picture of their identity (Goffman, 1984). Social interactions enable individuals to observe, reflect, and internalize the social values, norms, and culture of a particular society and lead them to accumulate a sense of belonging to that social context (Goffman, 1984). These interactions bridge the individuals with the collective/society that they belong to; consequently, bridge their identities with identities of that collective or society (Goffman, 1984).

3.3.1.4 Collective Identity

Ashmore et al. (2004) defines collective identity through explaining the relationship between individual identities and collective identity. Individual identity is subject to his/her acceptance or acknowledgement towards the collective, social world to a
large extent, in which the individuals live in (Ashmore et al., 2004). In other words, one’s identity is defined by his/her sense of positioning in a larger collective, variously referred to as a collective identity. Thus, Ashmore et al. (2004) draw a definition for a collective identity as “one that is shared with a group of others who have (or are believed to have) some characteristic(s) in common” (p. 81). Such commonality among individuals can be reflected on ethnicity, culture, political opinions, religion, or even occupation. This definition implies that basic components of a collective identity shall include individuals identifying themselves as members of a collective and having a sense of belonging and attachment to that collective (Ashmore et al., 2004).

To sum up, complexity and continuous development are the main characteristics of the concept of identity. And this complexity and ongoing development is common to both individuals and collectives. Identity is about self and self in relation to collective/society, about developmental process and formation of ideas, thoughts, and about social interactions among individuals within a collective, social world. In the following section an explanation of how communication studies perceive identity construction is presented. The following section will provide a further important understanding of the concept of identity for the purpose of this research.

3.3.2 Identity Construction, Communication and Facebook

From a communication perspective, Hecht (1993) states identity is constructed via communication. Hecht (1993) defines identity construction as a “natural communicative process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages are exchanged” (p. 78). Hecht’s (1993) definition of identity construction brings attention to on both the process of communication and to the messages produced
through that communication. The process of communication here refers to the social interactions between individuals and the messages produced through social interaction. Hecht (1993) states messages are expressions of identity as they represent the communicator. Communication can be therefore studied in order to examine identities both of individuals and collectives. Here the collectives refer to “groups or networks” that the individuals belong to (Hecht 1993, p. 80). Identities emerge out of these groups as identities of collectives (Hecht 1993). As such, examining messages from communication among individuals who belong to a collective is a way of observing the identity construction of that collective. Hereafter, this understanding is applied to the concept of examining identity construction of a collective in this research.

Hecht’s (1993) understanding of identity construction has been widely applied in communication research, particularly, for examining identity construction online (Tyma & Leonard, 2011). Identity is constructed through communication; communications may occur both offline and online (boyd, 2006; Hine, 2000; Tyma & Leonard, 2011). Online communication occurs on online spaces, social network sites, previously discussed (Hine, 2000). Users on these spaces encouraged to upload various messages including texts, videos, audios, and photos, post comments, and respond to the comments (Hine, 2000). Applying Hecht’s (1993) definition of identity construction, both the process of online communication as well as the messages that are transacted through that communication can be targeted for studying identity construction (Hine, 2000). To explain this further the Uyghur Facebook communication, the focus of this research, is taken as an example.

According to Hecht’s (1993) definition of identity construction, the online communication among the Uyghurs on Facebook can be understood in two ways.
Firstly, their online communication can be considered as social interactions (Hine, 2000). Uyghur Facebook users, interacting and communicating with each other online, are actively representing and negotiating both individual and group identity. Secondly, their online communication can be considered as textual (Hine, 2000, p.50). Here texts refer to the messages produced through interactions among the Uyghur Facebook users. These messages are the content of the information and opinions as “temporally shifted and packaged form of interaction” (Hine, 2000, p. 50). It is necessary to highlight here that there is no fixed line between these two ways of understanding the communication on Facebook. Yet, “the distinction is useful in so far as it plays out different ideas about what constitutes the two phenomena” (Hine, 2000, p. 50) and provides analytical insight into diaspora communication.

According to Hine (2000), messages help to illustrate the understanding authors or Facebook users have of the reality they inhabit. The messages are user-generated content indicating about the authors, as signs of the authors representing themselves and as a way to demarcate their identity online (boyd, 2006; boyd & Heer, 2006; Bucy & Gregson, 2001; Hine, 2000; Tyma & Leonard, 2011). Therefore, in examining identities of the Uyghurs on Facebook, messages produced through communicative interactions among the Uyghur Facebook users are appropriate data for the purposes of this research. Moreover, the message not only represents the authors themselves, but also represents the online collective to which the authors are belonging to (Goffman, 1984; Hecht 1993).

The question emerging here is how can communication on Facebook help understanding a collective identity, the identity of the Uyghurs as an online collective?
Facebook, as one of the online spaces, enables its users to come together in groups, as collectives to communicate (Hine, 2000). Like-minded people come together based on same interest and share information and opinions as a naturally occurred collective online. A Facebook group created by the Uyghurs, for example, is formed by its members-individual Uyghur Facebook users, is like a collective. Communication among these individuals is the process of them performing their identity so that it accumulates this specific collective’s identity (Goffman, 1984). Messages produced through their communication represent their identity as a collective identity shared by the members (Ashmore et al., 2004; Goffman, 1984; Hecht 1993). As such, this is how identity construction of the Uyghur diaspora, as a large collective, can be explored through an examination of their communication online.

3.4 Diaspora

The aim of this section is to explain the concept of diaspora and diaspora identity construction. Diaspora is explained from two scholarly perspectives: categorizing diaspora so that it helps deciding who can be considered as a diaspora; and, understanding the diaspora as a process of shaping a social relationship among diaspora members with same origins and migration routes. Both of perspectives will help to conceptualizing the Uyghur diaspora. Then, diaspora identity construction is explained through a discussion of what triggers diasporas to engage in identity construction and which direction their identity construction may go: original towards their homeland or towards their host country.\(^6\)

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6 Host country refers to the country where members of diaspora settled temporarily or permanently.
3.4.1 The Concept of Diaspora

The concept of diaspora is frequently used in relation to transnational migrants (Cohen, 1997; Georgiou, 2006; Georgiou & Silverstone, 2007; Karim, 2003; Kissau & Hunger, 2008). It originally came from a Greek noun means “the scattered” or “the dispersed” people and at first referred to the dispersal of the Jews from their homeland (Wahlbeck, 2002, p. 229). This concept has been applied widely to theorizing human mobility within a variety of disciplines. Basically it refers to a group of people that migrated from their original homeland and settled down in other parts of the world temporarily or permanently. There are two main ways scholars explain the concept of diaspora. Scholars such as Safran (1991), Cohen (1997) and Bruneau (1995) explain diaspora as a mode of categorization and typology. Some other scholars, such as Vertovec (2000), understand diaspora as a process.

Safran (1991) defines diaspora by setting criteria for identifying diaspora as expatriate minority communities. For Safran (1991), diaspora are groups:

- that are dispersed from an original “centre” to at least two “peripheral” places;
- that maintain a memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland;
- that believe they are not- perhaps cannot be fully accepted by their host country;
- that see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return, when the time is right;
- that are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland;
- of which the group’s consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by this continuing relationship with the homeland (p. 83).

This criteria provides a foundation for recognizing a diaspora and emphasizes homeland orientated aspects of diaspora. This definition is widely accepted in literature as a list for identifying if a group of people away from their homeland can be categorized as diaspora or not. Cohen (1997) expanded these criteria and included
purpose of dispersal from a homeland which is not considered in Safran’s (1991) original criteria. Cohen (1997) categorizes diaspora according to the purpose of dispersal from a homeland as follows: labor diaspora, such as Indians in Fiji; imperial diaspora, such as British; trade diaspora, such as Chinese; and cultural diaspora, such as Caribbean peoples in the United Kingdom. This classification helps to clarify the diaspora discourse from its cultural, social dimensions and the conditions of diasporic formulations. Furthermore, Bruneau (1995) categorize diasporas by examining the main reasons for their migration. According to Bruneau (1995) there are three kinds of diasporas: the entrepreneurial diasporas, such as Chinese or Lebanese; the religious diasporas, such as Jews; and the political diasporas, such as Palestinians and Tibetans.

Safran (1991), Cohen (1997) and Bruneau (1995) consider diaspora’s history, typology, especially the ongoing relationship and connectivity diasporas have with their homeland. On the other hand, Vertovec (2000) argues that the way of categorization based on these considerations is not enough to explain the concept of diaspora. Vertovec (2000) emphasizes consciousness in the minds of diaspora members and explains the concept of diaspora as a process. Vertovec (2000) studies diasporas through their relationship both with their homeland and with the host country in which they live. As such, Vertovec (2000) states three meanings of diaspora: as a social form; as a type of consciousness; and as a mode of cultural production.

In the first meaning, Vertovec (2000) describes diaspora as a social form and suggests that diaspora refers to a process of shaping social relationship among diaspora members from the same origins. This relationship includes the members of diaspora to maintaining a collective identity, fostering diasporic solidarity and
maintaining close ties to the original homeland. The second meaning is that of diaspora as a consciousness reflecting the imaginary coherence diaspora members develop in order to connect both to their homeland and to the host country. Diasporas do so when they experience exclusion and discrimination in a host country; on the other hand, this negative experience may stimulate the transnational bonds among diaspora members. In the third meaning of diaspora, Vertovec (2000) describes diaspora as a mode of cultural production, particularly concerning young diaspora members who may experience hybridization of culture as “facets of culture and identity are often self-consciously selected, syncretised and elaborated from more than one heritage” (p. 154).

In the second and third meaning of diaspora, Vertovec (2000) emphasizes the relationship of diaspora with their host country. This emphasis is beyond the scope of the present research. Nonetheless, the first meaning described by Vertovec (2000) is of relevance to the nature of the Uyghur diaspora; the Uyghur diaspora is globally dispersed yet is emerging as a collective subject - an identified ethnic group which constructing their identities with continuous connection with their homeland.

Moreover, Demmers (2007) 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” (p. 9). In this definition, Demmers emphasizes the importance of and identification with the experience of dispersal and, in turn, diasporas as having a homeland orientation. This definition also combines Safran (1991) and Vertovec’s (2000) explanations of the concept of diaspora: it includes both the norm of original homeland as Safran (1991) emphasizes and the commitment diaspora members could
put in the relationship with other members to maintain their connections with their homeland as Vertovec (2000) suggests. As such, the definition Demmers (2007) gives to the concept of diaspora is considered the most suitable definition to the present research.

3.4.2 Conceptualizing the Uyghur Diaspora

Similar to the Tibetan diaspora, the Uyghur diaspora could be categorized as political or refugee diaspora. However, although Uyghurs have dispersed to other places due to more or less similar reasons as Tibetans, it is not appropriate to put the Uyghur diaspora in categorization of either political diaspora or refugee diaspora. This is because some Uyghurs either within political organisations or on their own are politically active for promoting political claims for Uyghurs, yet they are very few in comparison with an Uyghur diaspora population of over 1.5 million. Further, Reyhan (2012) cogently argues not all Uyghurs are refugees, and Uyghur diaspora is consisting of, for instance, a refugee community, a scientific community and students, and is still under construction (p. 5).

There are also questions regarding Uyghurs living outside China being designated as a diaspora; it is also certain that the Uyghur diaspora fits into the criteria specified by Safran (1991). In addition, they have been already mentioned and studied as a diaspora in the international media and academic field. Yet Uyghur diaspora itself, especially political organisations, who are claimed as the voice of Uyghurs, have not officially applied the exact word ‘diaspora’ to themselves except for one organisation’s name includes the word Surgun which has a closer meaning with

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7 Tibetans, due to ethnic contradictions and discontent with the Chinese government regime, have dispersed to other countries and have produced a refugee flow that continues today (Houston & Wright, 2003).

Nevertheless, naming Uyghurs abroad as diaspora has a meaningful function for Uyghurs. Reyhan (2012) states three advantages of designating Uyghurs living outside China as a diaspora: it is more suitable for Uyghurs abroad, especially due to the fact that not all the Uyghurs abroad can be considered as refugees; international political organisations, such as NGOs, supporting the Uyghur cause at a local or international level can apply the name ‘diaspora’ for the Uyghur for better presenting Uyghurs’ political claims; Uyghur political activists outside China may find diaspora as a name under which they can foster unity among Uyghurs abroad and their collective identity construction.

Seeking to construct a collective identity is not unique for the Uyghur diaspora. There are many diasporas, as shown in previous studies, in the process of on-going construction of their identity. Indeed, research on identity construction has tended to be a focus in the field of diaspora studies. In the following section, an explanation is given about diaspora identity construction.

### 3.4.3 Construction of Diaspora Identity

#### 3.4.3.1 What triggers the Identity Construction of Diasporas

Diasporas start engaging in identity construction due to their experiences of separating from their homeland and migrating to new environment/host countries (Hall, 1997; Loukili, 2007; Mandaville, 2011). Separating from their original homeland, and experiencing new social, cultural, political, and ethnic contexts of the
host countries, diaspora members start reshaping their identities. While living in their homeland, the diaspora members had already engaged in developing their identities within the context of the homeland (Goffman, 1984). Common historical experiences, cultures, traditions, and social norms from the homeland are the things that these members share and provide the basis on which they develop their identity as “one people, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning” (Hall, 1997, p. 223). These stabilized and fixed identities are challenged when the diaspora members migrate to a new environment of the host country where they encounter other cultures and social norms dissimilar to their own. Consequently, the experience of migration tends to lead migrants to develop a sense of loss and displacement (Hall, 1997; Mandaville, 2011). Ainslie (2001) expresses the feeling of loss and displacement as below:

When an immigrant leaves loved ones at home, he or she also leaves the cultural enclosures that have organized and sustained experience. The immigrant simultaneously must come to terms with the loss of family and friends on the one hand, and cultural forms (food, music, art, for example) that have given the immigrant’s native world a distinct and highly personal character on the other hand. It is not only the people who are mourned but the culture itself, which is inseparable from the loved ones whom it holds (p. 287).

The feeling of displacement and longing for their homeland triggers diaspora members to rethink their identity consciously or unconsciously and to question themselves about who they are, who will they become, and where should they belong? (Hall, 1997). They naturally start to re/construct their identity based on pre-existent identities outside of the homeland environment of their original homeland (Hall, 1997; Loukili, 2007; Mandaville, 2011). Their identity becomes something that they “must discover, excavate, bring to light and express” through
representations in many ways (Hall, 1997, p. 4) which is perceived as a construction of diaspora identity in literature.

3.4.3.2 Diaspora Identity Construction: Homeland or Host country orientated

There is an ongoing argument on whether the notion of homeland is central to diaspora identity construction in the field of diaspora studies. Some scholars argue that diasporas have continuous links with their homeland; separation from their homeland makes their feelings towards their homeland stronger, and their identities are constructed based on their strong notion of the homeland (Akyeampong, 2000; Butler, 2001; Cohen, 1997; Elias & Lemish, 2009; Georgiou, 2001; Kadende-Kaiser, 2000; Karim, 2003; Lee, 2004; Miller & Slatter, 2000; Safran, 1991; Schulz & Hammer, 2003; Skrbis, 1999). Other scholars do not reject the connectedness and feelings diaspora have towards their original homeland; yet they argue that the notion of a homeland does not reflect the current realities of diasporas. They point out that diaspora members attempt to adopt themselves in the context of host countries and their notion of homeland is only formed in static and nostalgic terms (Brah, 1996; Hall, 1997; Kalra, Kaur, & Hutnyk, 2005; Tsagarousianou, 2004).

The scholars who believe the notion of homeland is the centre of diaspora identity construction state that the experiences of migration can strengthen the feeling of loss and reclaiming connection for the homeland and, in turn, the diaspora identity is characterized as homeland orientated (Akyeampong, 2000; Butler, 2001; Cohen, 1997; Elias & Lemish, 2009; Georgiou, 2001; Kadende-Kaiser, 2000; Karim, 2003; Lee, 2004; Miller & Slatter, 2000; Safran, 1991; Schulz & Hammer, 2003; Skrbis, 1999). Safran (1991) states diaspora identity is defined by a common consciousness of homeland created through a continuous relationship between diaspora members.
and the homeland. Members of a diaspora maintain a memory and myth about their original homeland, are committed to the maintenance of the homeland, and they aim to return to homeland eventually: all of these create a common consciousness of homeland among the diaspora members (Safran, 1991). Moreover, according to Cohen (1997), the link between homeland and diaspora is imbued with a consciousness of homeland. The consciousness is reflected in the passion diaspora members have for their actual ancestral land/territory, for searching their roots and history, and is buried deep in their language, religion, custom or folklore they try to maintain while they are living outside of the homeland (Cohen, 1997). Additionally, Skrbis (1999) states that homelands can be ‘real’ or ‘imagined’; the homeland is not necessarily a geographical territory but rather is a homeland myth. The homeland does not necessarily need to be a clearly defined entity; rather it can be “a constructed and imagined topos” which has the power to evoke feelings of longing and nostalgia, to induce memories of the past and strong emotions among members of a diaspora (Skrbis, 1999, p. 39).

In addition, to some scholars the notion of homeland is a potent force among diaspora members and communities (Akyeampong, 2000), and is one of the basic components of a collective diaspora identity (Butler, 2001), and is the most powerful motivation of diaspora behaviours (Lee, 2004). Some diasporas are motivated to maintain connections with the homeland so that they strengthen family relationships between those who live in diaspora and homeland as well as engage in homeland politics (Schulz & Hammer, 2003). While some diasporas are encouraged to maintain relationships among diaspora members and communities which enable them to foster a common feeling of belonging to the same homeland (Kadende-Kaiser, 2000; Miller & Slatter, 2000), some other diasporas are inspired to foster a
sense of closeness among diaspora members and communities which enable them to lessen the sadness of being displaced and homelessness (Elias & Lemish, 2009; Georgiou, 2001; Karim, 2003).

In contrast, to some scholars the notion of homeland is no longer the centre of diaspora identity construction. They argue that the construction of diaspora identity is more determined by how the diaspora members integrate into host countries rather than by their sense of longing for homeland (Brah, 1996; Hall, 1997; Kalra, Kaur, & Hutnyk, 2005; Tsagarousianou, 2004). Hall (1997) argues that diaspora “does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secure in relation to some scattered homeland to which they must at all costs return; the diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity, which lives with and though, not despite, difference; hybridity” (p. 252). Therefore, Hall (1997) believes that being diaspora members who live in different social, political, and cultural environments of a host country, it is quite hard, even impossible, to stick to their traditional culture without rejecting conformity to the mainstream dominant culture; as such they must experience a transformation in their life as new settlers and must recognize that they can never really go home, and their identity, which is assumed to be stable, will be hybridized with the mainstream culture of the host country.

Similarly, Tsagarousianou (2004) indicates that the notion of a homeland is no longer solely focusing on the original homeland; instead it is shifted to focus on the process of integration of diaspora members into the host country. Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk (2005) also agree that the relationship between diaspora and their homeland will be affected by various circumstances associated with settlement in host countries. For
example, new communication technologies, such as Facebook and other information and communication technologies (ICTs), are available for their communication with the homeland, compensating for the feeling of loss and nostalgia so that the diaspora members focus more on their settlement and integration in the host country (Kalra, Kaur, & Hutnyk, 2005; Tsagarousianou, 2004). And the shared sense of belonging to the original homeland may stay in the minds of diaspora members in a form of nostalgia: yet critical changes happen during the process of integrating in the mainstream culture of the host country (Hall, 1997; Kalra, Kaur, & Hutnyk, 2005; Tsagarousianou, 2004).

Nevertheless, the current trend in diaspora studies has shown that the identity construction of more and more diasporas is centering on the notion of homeland. Members of many diasporas are acknowledging the relationship between them and their homeland, developing ties within their diaspora based on shared ideas and concerns related to the original homeland, and participating in the construction of their diaspora identities. This participation could be related to ethnic, cultural, religious, national, or political concerns associated with the homeland and may differ between diasporas, this will be explained more in coming section. This participation has introduced diasporas who are very concerned about their people and circumstances in the homeland and are creating communities based on a strong notion of homeland. Moreover, this participation has been facilitated through the use of the Internet providing online spaces where geographically dispersed diaspora members and communities connected to each other and communicate with each other at transnational level from anywhere they have access to the Internet.
3.5 Empirical Studies on Diaspora Identity Construction Online

Contemporary transnational experiences, such as connectivity, communication, and identity representations of geographically dispersed people, are inseparable from rapidly growing new communication technologies, particularly the Internet (Kissau & Hunger, 2008; Panagokos & Horst, 2006). Internet services, for instance, websites, emails, forums, and social network sites, allow unprecedented connection and communication beyond national borders (Kissau & Hunger, 2008; Ward, 2005). The Internet thus is suited for the demands and need for transnational communication of diasporas whose members are living in several countries and continents. Diasporas take advantage of the Internet’s capacity to link people across boundaries to maintain connection and everyday communication not only with their homeland, but also among diasporic members and communities from different parts of the world, as well as to engage in exploration of their imagination of their homeland and diaspora identities (Brinkerhoff, 2006; Elias & Lemish, 2009; Georgiou, 2001; Kadende-Kaiser, 2000; Karim, 2003; Lee, 2004; Miller & Slatter, 2000; Mano & Willems, 2008; Parham, 2004; Schulz & Hammer, 2003; Skjerdal, 2011). The Internet usage has taken an increasingly important role in contemporary lives of diasporas and become an integral tool of everyday diasporic transnational communication (Diamandaki, 2003; Karim, 2003; Miller & Slater, 2000; Kissau & Hunger, 2008; Tsagarousianou, 2004). As such, in diaspora studies, it is highlighted that diaspora use of the Internet forms an indispensable part in understanding current diasporas and their identity construction (Georgiou & Silverstone, 2007).

Internet usage and identity construction of diasporas has been explored and demonstrated mostly through empirical findings in the field of diaspora studies.
Empirical studies are chosen because of the nature of the concept of diaspora identity: diaspora identity is complex-multidimensional, and there is not a fixed theoretical foundation to measure different dimensions of it (Phinney & Ong, 2007). The identity of a diaspora as a collective is unlikely to refer to only one identity; it is a multifaceted concept that may include one or more of identity dimensions, such as political, ethnic, national, religious, and cultural identities (Fong & Chuang, 2004; Phinney & Ong, 2007). Different diasporas may represent different dimensions of identity in accordance with which aspect is of most concern in their cases, which will be demonstrated in the following sub sections.

In addition, the different dimensions of diaspora identity do not have fixed boundaries that can differentiate them from each other; in some cases they can overlap and they cannot be measured (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Therefore, currently, empirical research evidence is equivocal as to what extent different dimensions of identity contribute to the construction of a collective diaspora identity (Ashmore et al. 2004; Phinney & Ong, 2007). Empirical studies provide understanding of which dimensions of identity are displayed by diasporas. Empirical studies of diaspora identity construction online, in turn, illustrate not only how diasporas use the Internet to express their identity, but also how these expressions online represent the construction of diaspora identities.

According to findings from previous empirical studies on diaspora identity construction online, five dimensions of diaspora identities are discussed; ethnic, cultural, national, political, and religious identity. Structuring this section around these dimensions is considered an appropriate way to present related literature and it provides the foundation upon which the presentation of the research findings is based. Furthermore, in this literature review priority has been given to the empirical
studies that analyse identity construction on diaspora websites and Facebook sites. Although the amount of literature available on diaspora website studies is ample, studies on diaspora Facebook, social network sites in general, are quite limited.

3.5.1 Ethnic Identity Construction Online

Ethnic identity is “the perceived membership in an ethnic culture that is enacted in the appropriate and effective use of symbols and cultural narratives, similar interpretations and meanings, and common ancestry and traditions” (Hecht, 1993, p. 30). Individuals perceive their membership belonging to, and attached to, an ethnic group which they share in common, such as homeland, language, cultural traditions, history, ancestry, values, and religious practices (Fong & Chuang, 2004; Hecht, 1993; Wonneberger, 2004), hence ethnic identity is multifaceted. Ashmore et al. (2004) and Phinney & Ong (2007) suggest necessary components of ethnic identity include:

- self-identification: individuals’ self-identification as members of a particular ethnic group;
- ethnic group attachment: individuals’ sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group;
- exploration of ethnicity: individuals’ effort to explore and to understand their ethnicity;
- ethnic behaviours: individuals’ ethnic related activities, e.g. practicing ethnic culture, speaking their own language;
- and positive evaluation which refer to individuals showing a positive feeling of being members of a particular ethnic group.

Studies show that ethnic identity construction is well portrayed in the daily online communication of diasporas (Diamandaki, 2003) and is reflected through one or more components of ethnic identity. For example, Kang & Yang (2011) note that the Taiwanese diaspora members in the United States use the Internet to upload textual narratives leading them to raise important questions about their ethnic identity.
Observation of online communication demonstrates that they attempt to construct their ethnic identity by talking about who they are not: for example: they self-identify themselves as Taiwanese (i.e., tai-wan-ren), instead of calling themselves Chinese (i.e., zhong-guo-ren). They reject the old Chinese identity by making a clear distinction between Taiwan and China (PRC) and appear to be creating a new ethnic identity as Taiwanese or Taiwanese American (tai-mei-ren). And the Internet, providing online spaces where individuals share their experiences of recognizing their own ethnic identity, is demonstrated to have a critical role in this process of ethnic identity construction of Taiwanese in the United States (Kang & Yang, 2011).

Kadende-Kaiser’s (2000) study on Burundian diaspora identity construction and its use of the Internet demonstrates that diaspora members use a website named Burundinet as an ethnic forum to explore knowledge about their ethnicity. The members come together online to exchange information and opinions about their homeland, and to publish articles on the Burundi history, culture, politics, and geography which enable them to accumulate a sense of belonging as an ethnic group and to create an online community constructing Burundian ethnic identity (Kadende-Kaiser, 2000).

Similarly, a study on a Greek diaspora website Hellas presents the same theme. Tsaliki (2003) states that the Greek diaspora members make their transnational communication possible through the use of the Internet and Hellas serves as an online space where they come together to exchange information, emotions, and memories through which they articulate a shared sense of belonging and continuously construct their collective ethnic identity as Greeks (Tsaliki, 2003). Moreover, the Filipino diaspora (Ignacio, 2005), the Trinidadian diaspora (Miller & Slatter, 2000), and the Palestinian diaspora (Schulz & Hammer, 2003) also foster a
sense of closeness among co-ethnic diaspora members by adopting the Internet for their transnational everyday communication.

Furthermore, language usage in online spaces has also been seen as an important aspect of diaspora identity construction (Barton & Lee, 2013; Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Edwards, 2009). Some diasporas use their mother language or the language of their original homeland in online communication which plays a pivotal role in representing ethnic identity and reinforcing a sense of sharing a common language and belonging to a diaspora ethnic group (Candan & Hunger, 2008; Merolla & Ponzanesi, 2005). For example, Anchimbe (2005) points out that one of the main factors that keeps the Anglophone diaspora together as a diaspora ethnic group is their common use of the English language, inherited from British colonialism of the 19th and 20th centuries. Although language is not the ultimate factor or point of unity, it plays an unavoidable role in, identifying the diaspora members and spreading common values in case of the Anglophone diaspora (Anchimbe, 2005).

Therefore, in the diaspora identity construction of some diasporas ethnic identity plays a role in stimulating the need to connect oneself with others who share the same ethnic background and to communicate, through which a sense of co-ethnicity is created among diaspora members and communities. The Internet, on the other hand, provides opportunities for them to have everyday communicative interactions with co-ethnic peers, whom are facing the same questions regarding their ethnic identities, they exchange ideas, narratives, and information to interact and assist each other’s ethnic identity construction process online despite physical distances.
Cultural identity is defined as “the identification of the communication of a shared system of symbolic verbal and nonverbal behaviors that are meaningful to group members who have a sense of belonging and who share traditions, heritage, and similar norms of appropriate behaviour” (Fong & Chuang, 2004, p. 5). Culture is multifaceted and encapsulates the values, beliefs, symbols, traditions, heritage, behaviors, and practices common to a particular group of people (Orbe & Harris, 2001, p. 6), in this case diaspora members. Moreover, cultural identity construction is not only simply about the members sharing those multiple components of culture, but also about practicing them so that the cultural identity of that ethnic group of people is articulated (Brown, 2004; Fenton, 1999; Fong & Chuang, 2004; Orbe & Harris, 2001).

Diasporas show a demand for cultural practices as a result of experiences of separation from the original homeland and a desire to maintain links with the homeland through cultural representation leading them to construct their cultural identity in relation to their homeland (Ainslie, 2001; Hall, 1990; Karim, 2003). Cultural representation provides an “imaginary coherence” for a set of identities; thus, diaspora identity reflects a sort of collective “one true self” through which diasporic members share culture (Hall, 1990, p. 224). It involves discovering and bringing to light, in various forms of representation, the stable oneness of diaspora and reflects a connection which diasporas have to their homeland (Hall, 1990). It can be reflected through listening to traditional music, introducing traditional food, or organizing cultural festivals that enable diaspora members to find ways to live with traditional culture of the original homeland (Ainslie, 2001; Rigoni, 2002).
For instance, the Amazigh diaspora members represent their cultural identity on the Internet through sharing cultural information, images, symbols as well as norms, components of their traditional culture, on a website named *Amazigh-Net* (Merolla, 2002). Representing culture online is a way of maintaining and promoting Amazigh traditional culture, and is a contributive factor in the construction of an imagined Amazigh transnational community online (Merolla, 2002). Other studies also illustrate that sharing images relating to traditional culture, providing traditional music, songs, films, publishing literature, books, articles, poems, proverbs, announcing current cultural events, and spreading artistic genres produced offline are common ways of how diasporas represent and construct cultural identities online (Kanat, 2005; Mallapragada, 2000; Merolla & Ponzanesi, 2005). Studies also indicate that diasporas represent, maintain, and live with their culture because culture is an important factor in how diaspora members perceive acceptance into a diaspora group, differentiate themselves from others, and share a common sense of connectedness with other co-ethnic members in diaspora (Ashmore et al., 2004; Collier & Thomas, 1998; Phinney & Ong, 2007). Meanwhile, culture forges a diaspora’s ethnic identity and assists in its survival (Orbe & Harris, 2001).

### 3.5.3 National Identity Construction Online

National identity is a person’s sense of belonging to a nation and it refers to “a person’s legal status or citizenship in relation to a nation” (Fong & Chuang, 2004, p. 30). For example, individuals who hold citizenship of the country of China have a national identity as Chinese. On the other hand, national identity is also a feeling of shared experiences of national symbols in the hearts and minds of the members of a nation, and in this case the nation is an ‘imagined’ one (Anderson, 1983, p. 6) like
the Kurdish diaspora members feel they belong to the ‘imagined nation’ of Kurdistan; which does not officially exist. Without a sense of national identification, individuals would experience a deep feeling of loss as “having a nation is not an inherent attribute of identity but it has come to appear as such” (Gellner, 2006, p. 63).

Empirical studies on diaspora suggest that diasporas both with their own nation and without a nation-state, aspire to engage in national identity construction online. For instance, Chinese Han diaspora, which has its own nation state as China, is encouraged to engage in nation-building online, to enhance national consciousness and to fulfill their responsibility in improving the national image of China (Ding, 2007). Likewise, Chinese Han diaspora in the United States and Australia also negotiate their national identity to represent an essentially Chinese identity centered on traditional Confucian ideology and to foster a sense of communion and belonging among Chinese diaspora members through communication online (Wong, 2003).

Meanwhile, national identity construction is significant especially in diaspora communities without a nation-state. These communities use the Internet “to introduce themselves to the international community as independent ethnicities or nations” (Candan & Hunger, 2008, p. 125). The Internet has allowed most transnational communities “to discover and rediscover the shared imagination and commonality” (Georgiou, 2002, p. 3) and currently, the national identity of some diasporas is being formed based on their imagination of nation online (Candan & Hunger, 2008; Sheyholislami, 2011; Tynes, 2007).

Studies on Kurdish diaspora illustrate how members of this diaspora use the Internet to represent their national identity and to strengthen national consciousness to an
extent that they build a nation online. Candan & Hunger (2008) and Sheyholislami (2011) state that Kurdish websites are common spaces where the diaspora Kurds share national symbols and signs, such as a map of Kurdistan, the Kurdish national flag, as well as the national colours (red, green, and yellow) which are granted a central role in transporting a national identity and strengthening national pride. Moreover, diaspora Kurds also widely share messages about Kurdistan history and national heroes online which enable them to form communal memories and connect them with their history, which is very important for them as, in the real world, they do not have a nation (Candan & Hunger, 2008; Sheyholislami, 2011).

Tynes (2007) notes national identity of the Sierra Leonean diaspora is articulated through a representation of nation on Leonenet, an email forum. Diaspora members communicate online with a focus on rebuilding and rebinding their nation Sierra Leone, which was destroyed during the civil war in the 1990s. They share all possible information about their Sierra Leone, exchange opinions about history, strengthen social interactions among individuals, discuss local and international policies which may affect their nation, and suggest solutions for the problems of their weakened nation, as such contributing in the construction of their nation in the absence of the state (Tynes, 2007).

Examples of the nation building online of the Kurdish and the Sierra Leonean diaspora indicate how a nation can be imagined and national identity can be constructed. As globally dispersed, members of a diaspora could feel strong emotional attachment to their nation despite the lack of face-to-face daily interactions and create and share national symbols helping them imagine of the nation they would like to belong to. The nation is “imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of
them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their nation” (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). The Internet, on the other hand, has become an essential tool in imagined nation building of diasporas whose members are dispersed worldwide, yet, be able to come together to engage in transnational communication online in online spaces (Mutlu, 2007).

3.5.4 Political Identity Construction Online

An increasing number of studies demonstrate that the Internet is a powerful medium for diasporas to bring members and communities together to engage in political discussions and expressions through which they articulate political identity (Adeniyi, 2007; Bernal, 2006; Georgiou, 2002; Mandaville, 2003; Tekwani, 2004). Diaspora political activists and organisations are in the forefront of the Internet adoptions: they take advantages of the Internet as high-value medium for exchanging political information and ideas, promoting political claims, making connections with political parties and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and organizing fundraising and campaigning for political activities; and consequently, contributing to the emergence of a new diasporic political culture within diaspora (Adamson, 2001; Bernal, 2006; Diamandaki, 2003; Gladney, 2003; Kanat, 2005).

A study of Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora concludes that this diaspora is among the most politically activated group of exiles, not only maintaining the political awareness of diaspora members and communities and promoting their political cause, but also practicing militant resistance to their national government (Tekwani, 2004). Adopting emails, chat rooms and websites for their transnational communication, Tamil diaspora has developed diasporic networks to sustain connections and immediate information sharing within transnational diasporic communities,
meanwhile, to counter government propaganda, to keep aloft the Tamil cause and gain attention to issues happening in their homeland.

The Eritrean diaspora has adopted the Internet and their political communication and mobilization online has enabled them to engage in shaping diaspora political culture and participating in homeland politics (Bernal, 2006). Through the Internet, they mobilize demonstrators, raise funds, debate over the formation of Eritrea national institutions, and influence the national government (Bernal, 2006). In comparison, the Nigerian diaspora members use the Internet as a platform where they express political concerns and articulate a new diasporic oppositional political culture within the diaspora (Adeniyi, 2007).

Nevertheless, political participation on the Internet is still in question. For example, Mamadouh (2001) points out that Moroccan diaspora’s Internet usage plays an important role in the articulation of diaspora political identity, yet, there is a lack of participation in political debates. Although sharing politics-related information and opinions in chat rooms and forums help with the formation of politically conscious social movements, engagement in political discussions is under-developed despite members creatively using pseudonyms (Mamadouh, 2001).

Bravo (2012) also concludes that participation in online communication on online spaces can be different between diasporas. Bravo (2012) states that in the case of Costa Rica diaspora, the online spaces, such as websites, Facebook, and Twitter are not effectively utilized as common spaces that encourage communication between users, rather they are mainly used as news resources where diaspora members are informed about their home country’s foreign policy. By comparison, in the case of the El Salvador diaspora, those online spaces are extensively and effectively used to
encourage diaspora members to participate in online communication and to strengthen relationships with their homeland (Bravo, 2012).

3.5.5 Religious Identity Construction Online

Not only are ethnic, cultural, national, and political identities embraced online, but the Internet is seen by some diaspora as a means for expressing and constructing religious identity. The term of religious identity associated with diaspora refers to “being a dispersed people sharing a common religious heritage” (Vertovec, 2004, p. 2). Studies show that some diasporas represent and construct religious identity through their daily communication online. For example, Chiluwa (2010) describes that the Nigerian religious identity is represented through the use of religious greetings in emails among members. Greeting forms, like any other politeness marker, such as ‘Hi’, express warmth in daily life (Waldvogel, 2007, cited in Chiluwa, 2010). In the context of Nigerians, religious greeting forms, such as ‘God bless’, prayers, or well wishes in opening and closing of email messages, are used as a means of reinforcing relationships through religion among Nigerians and play significant roles in developing thoughts and lifestyle of Nigerians. Likewise, daily online communication of the Trinidadian diaspora demonstrates that religious identity is contributing in the formation of collective awareness among Trinidadian diaspora and the Trinidadian Catholic priests serve pastoral roles for this diaspora through the use of the Internet (Miller, & Slater, 2000).

Although there is limited literature available on religious identity construction of diasporas (Baumann, 2000), it is acknowledged that religion plays an important role in diaspora identity construction. Religion “can provide additional cement to bind a diasporic consciousness” in the case of widely spread faiths among members and
communities of diasporas (Cohen, 1997, p. 189). Religion can assume greater importance for diaspora members that affiliated religiously (Peek, 2005; Vertovec, 2004) and defined as well as differentiate themselves from others (Peek, 2005).

3.6 Summary

This chapter provided the conceptual and theoretical framework of this thesis, exploring social network sites, identity, diaspora, and diaspora identity construction online in relation to theoretical and empirical studies. Identity is a complex concept which encompasses both individual identities and the identities the individuals perceive by placing themselves within collective groups, such as diasporas. This chapter has illustrated how the Internet has raised important questions about how transnational communication can facilitate diaspora members and communities to construct their identities away from their homeland and without national borders.

As empirical studies suggest diaspora identity construction displays different dimensions of identity between diasporas. In each diaspora case, empirical studies have highlighted different aspects of diaspora identity and the representations of identity. Key to this representation is the recognition that diaspora identity is a multidimensional concept. While political concerns lead to strengthen political identity in the cases of some diasporas, ethnic identity construction is more significant for others. As such, the literature also indicates the importance of analyzing diaspora identity from different dimensions and taking into account the specifics and particularities of each diaspora group.

It is important to note that empirical studies on diaspora identity construction surveyed in this chapter mostly have examined diaspora websites, forums, or emails,
while few studies are mentioned on diaspora identity construction on social network sites. This is due to the fact that studies investigating identity construction on Facebook and SNSs in general, have centered on the user profiles, whether or not individual users represented their offline identity in online spaces (boyd & Heer, 2006; Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012), and on the impact of SNSs upon the lives of teenagers and youth (boyd, 2008; Lenhart & Madden, 2007), not on identity construction of diasporas as collectives. Despite the increasing number of studies on diaspora identity construction, there is a need for further theoretical and empirical studies on SNSs, and this research is expecting to contribute towards filling this literature gap.
Image 6. Uyghur Facebook pages shown in search on Facebook
CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter, the main methodological issues are presented and discussed as follows: firstly, the justification for adopting a content analysis approach for studying identity construction online is outlined; secondly, the method of data collection, sampling, and data analysis procedures are presented; and finally ethical considerations for doing research on Facebook are discussed.

4.1 Content Analysis Approach

Content analysis was chosen as the most appropriate approach for studying identity construction from a communication perspective in this research. Content analysis relies on “interpreting and coding texts in order to tease out the identities that they represent” (Donald & Amanda, 2009, p. 85). As discussed earlier, identity construction of a specific group of people, Uyghur diaspora in this case, can be studied by examining their communication through which they are representing their identities and the message components of their communication can be objects of an examination of this specific group’s identity (Ashmore et al., 2004; Goffman, 1984; Hecht 1993; Hine, 2000). Thus the reason for analyzing the messages produced through communication on Facebook sites is that the messages, such as written online texts, are reflections of identities of Uyghur diaspora. A content analysis approach has thus been chosen as the most suitable for studying the case of Uyghur diaspora identity construction in this research.

Further, according to Neuendorf (2002) content analysis is “a summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method” (p. 33). It
enables researchers to approach any kind of text systematically and provides the possibility to identify and analyse message units. The main concepts in content analysis are units of analysis, sampling, and coding. The unit of analysis is the message component. Each individual message is treated as meaningful in its own right and the messages are frequently summarized quantitatively (Neuendorf, 2002).

The first step of content analysis is sampling after which the construction of a coding scheme is the critical step. Coding refers to categorization of message. The coding categories need to reflect accurately the content of the communication, and the coding scheme is written out in great detail in order to guarantee reliability among coders of the text (Neuendorf, 2002). The coding can take many forms, such as a specific word (e.g. use of a given word ‘rain’) or general themes or concepts (e.g. themes applied in this research). The relevancy of units of analysis, sampling, and coding for this research is explained in detail below. Relevant literature will be discussed in regards to why content analysis can be applied for online communication research, with Facebook studies as an example.

Applying content analysis has been popular in media and communication research and started as analyzing messages in traditional media, such as advertisements on television, and articles in newspapers. Speeches by politicians have also been studied very often through the content analysis approach. More recently, SNSs, such as Facebook, have been studied by applying a content analysis approach. They are cyberspaces where communication occurs (Hine, 2000). Like articles in newspapers, online communication is “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 textual data from online spaces for research purposes (Barton & Lee, 2013; Tannen & Trester, 2013; Macri, 2011; Wilson et al., 2012).
Applying content analysis for studying online communication has been of great interest scholarly (Fernandes, Giurcanu, Bowers, & Neely, 2010; Ignacio, 2005; Kang & Yang, 2011; Kissau & Hunger, 2008; Mao, 2005; Plaza, 2009; Tynes, 2007; Sheyholislami, 2011; Zhao et al., 2008). Previous studies of diaspora have proved that studying messages from online communication is an important dimension of studying diaspora communities using these online platforms to construct a shared imagination of their identities and homelands (Kissau & Hunger, 2008). For example, Ignacio (2005) collected postings as data from an online newsgroup named soc.culture.filipino to examine identity construction of Filipino diaspora online. Similarly, Kang and Yang (2011) collected textual data from websites to understand ethnic identity construction of Taiwanese diaspora in the United States. Results of such studies support the applicability of content analysis in studying identity construction online.

As such, in designing a content analysis, I recognized that the online communication among members of the Uyghur diaspora can be understood as textual interactions through which they exchange information and opinions between members. Since the communication on Facebook is stored and available for anyone wishing to browse back in time, and available outside the immediate circumstances in which they were produced, the message components can be treated as texts in their own right and thus render themselves appropriate for the purposes of this research.

Since this research was an exploratory study, it made an attempt to capture an overall picture of Facebook usage among Uyghur diaspora in an initial ‘mapping’ stage. At its quantitative content analysis stage, the overall Uyghur presence on Facebook was described. Identity construction related data came through examination of discussion archives where communication occurs among diaspora members; this was the
qualitative content analysis stage. Content analysis was applied in both stages, yet naming them differently was due to the differences in examination targets and to differentiate between this two stage processes. This does not mean that the same material is assessed twice.

In the first stage of the current research, profiles of Facebook sites were examined. Message components from profiles, such as names of sites, number of members in groups and of likes in case of the pages were collected as data. Content analysis of this data not only provided an overall view of the nature, composition and extent of the Uyghur diaspora’s Facebook use, but also offered some understanding of identity representation of Uyghur diaspora identity. Importantly, the first stage was an essential step for providing a sample frame from which groups were selected for qualitative content analysis for the second stage. In the second stage, content analysis of messages from discussion archives of selected Facebook groups was conducted. Message components here refer to uploaded postings on Facebook walls, including textual messages, images, videos, and audios. Data from this stage provided deep insights into how Uyghur diasporic identity is being communicated and constructed online in regards to ethnic, political, national, cultural, and religious dimensions of identities.

4.2 Data Collection Methods

This research adopted a non-participant observation approach to data collection from selected Facebook postings. Non-participant observation is also called nonreactive data collection or passive observation referring to observing and to collecting data.

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8 Facebook Groups have members and Facebook Pages have likes by default.
without being involved, so that participants’ behavior is “not affected by the data collection procedure” (Collis & Hussey, 2009, p. 154; Janetzko, 2008, p. 162). Here observation refers not to people, but to the content of the communication already existing online. This method fits within a content analysis approach in which researchers are enabled in “finding research materials where they naturally occurred, retrieving routinely accumulated record, and capturing human behavior through passive observation” (Fielding, Lee, & Blank, 2008, p. 9). It helps to make the enquiry “based on careful observation and measurement of the objective reality that exists out there” (Creswell & Clark, 2007, p. 5).

As mentioned above, Facebook sites provide a ready source of rich content available for the research and do not necessarily need the researcher’s participation. Collecting this type of ready data on Facebook sites can be done without the researcher getting involved and it is often applied in communication research. Collecting naturally occurring data on the Internet as texts for content analysis is similar to the way in which newspaper letters used in previous communication research (Hine, 2000).

Moreover, in order to grasp an overall picture of Uyghur diaspora on Facebook and to understand the communication through which this diaspora negotiates identity, data was collected through a three-month period; from January to April 2013. Publicly available messages from profiles of 117 Facebook sites and from discussion archives from four Facebook groups within that three months’ period were examined. All data was saved in Portable Document Format (PDF) through applying screenshot function in the Windows system and was stored in personal computer as well as in two USB data storage devices. Hence, the potential loss may occur due to messages online being deleted at anytime was prevented effectively.
4.3 Sampling

Facebook sites, both pages and groups, created by organisations, associations, communities, and groups within the Uyghur diaspora, excluding individuals’ sites, were examined in this research. The target was not the numbers of those organisations or any other, but instead the numbers of Facebook sites they might have created. Due to the fact that there has been no previous research dealing with Uyghur Facebook usage, there was no ready sampling frame to adopt. The sampling frame, informed by the probability sampling method, refers to “a complete list of all the cases in a population from which samples will be drawn” in a research; the sampling frame must be as “complete, accurate and up to date” as possible (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012, p. 262). As such, a sampling frame is to be established by the researcher if no suitable list exists. Hence in this research, the first task was to create a list which would be the sample frame including all the Facebook sites created by the Uyghur diaspora. After which a smaller number of Facebook sites were selected for second stage. These two stages of sampling are described in the following two sections at ‘Identifying Facebook sites’ and then ‘Sampling for content analysis of Facebook sites’.

4.3.1 Identifying Facebook sites

In order to generate a representative list of Facebook sites created by the Uyghur diaspora, firstly a search engine on Facebook was used. This search engine was also able to exclude all the individual Facebook sites through its filtering function. Since

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9 “Search is a tool to find people and content on Facebook” (Facebook official site, retrieved on 5th January, 2013). To search on Facebook, one needs to log in to individual Facebook account first, then after typing keywords into the search bar at the top of Facebook, a dropdown menu appears with
Facebook is prohibited in China, no Facebook sites created by Uyghurs in China were available.

In this searching process, the following two step selection technique was developed:

Step one: keywords referring to the Uyghurs were carefully considered and were used to create a list for searching\(^{10}\):

- Uyghur, Uygur, Uighur, Uigur (different ways of spelling the name of Uyghurs with Latin letters);
- East Turkistan/Turkestan, *Sherqiy 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, such as French, Japanese, German, and Chinese.

Initially 639 Facebook sites related to Uyghurs were identified (February, 2013) as shown in the Table 2:

\(^{10}\) The researcher herself is an Uyghur and this fact provided the language and socio/cultural knowledge necessary for the selection of key words.
From this first search, it is important to notice several points as follows:

- The word Uyghur is commonly accepted and used in site titles of most pages and groups. In contrast, the word Uigur is less accepted by the Uyghurs.

- The usage of the word Uygur is also outstanding. It is due to its popular usage in Turkish language. Most of the pages, specially groups which have this word on their title are created by Turkish people who use Uygur as a pen-name. For example, Cenk Uygur, the main host and co-founder of the Internet and talk radio show ‘The Young Turks’.

- Several pages and groups created by Turkish people concerning Uyghurs have the word Uygur on their title as well.

- Only two pages and three groups created by Uyghurs applied the word Uygur on their title.

- More than half of the pages which have the word Uighur and Xinjiang on their title are Facebook pages of Wikipedia aiming to introduce Uyghurs and the Uyghur region.

- The words Sherqiy Turkistan (East Turkistan in Uyghur language), East Turkistan, or Doğu Türkistan (East Turkistan in Turkish language) are explicitly showing political intention. Only four pages and none of the groups, applied Sherqiy Turkistan on the pages’ title. Thirteen pages and groups included the word East Turkistan/Turkestan on their title.

- By contrast, the word Doğu Türkistan has quite high usage. Except several introduction pages from Wikipedia, other pages are created by Turkish people. Turkish people show their sympathy to Uyghurs by creating pages and groups which have likes or members over ten thousand. Uyghurs though have two pages and five groups included this word on the sites’ title.

Table 2. Facebook sites related to the Uyghurs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key words</th>
<th>Facebook sites</th>
<th>Uyghur</th>
<th>Uighur</th>
<th>Uygur</th>
<th>Uigur</th>
<th>Xinjiang</th>
<th>Sherqiy Turkistan / Turkestan</th>
<th>East Turkistan / Turkestan</th>
<th>Doğu Türkistan / Turkestan</th>
<th>These words in other languages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pages</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>6/3</td>
<td>30/30</td>
<td>89/0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>4/7</td>
<td>57/0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From this first search, it is important to notice several points as follows:

- The word Uyghur is commonly accepted and used in site titles of most pages and groups. In contrast, the word Uigur is less accepted by the Uyghurs.

- The usage of the word Uygur is also outstanding. It is due to its popular usage in Turkish language. Most of the pages, specially groups which have this word on their title are created by Turkish people who use Uygur as a pen-name. For example, Cenk Uygur, the main host and co-founder of the Internet and talk radio show ‘The Young Turks’.

- Several pages and groups created by Turkish people concerning Uyghurs have the word Uygur on their title as well.

- Only two pages and three groups created by Uyghurs applied the word Uygur on their title.

- More than half of the pages which have the word Uighur and Xinjiang on their title are Facebook pages of Wikipedia aiming to introduce Uyghurs and the Uyghur region.

- The words Sherqiy Turkistan (East Turkistan in Uyghur language), East Turkistan, or Doğu Türkistan (East Turkistan in Turkish language) are explicitly showing political intention. Only four pages and none of the groups, applied Sherqiy Turkistan on the pages’ title. Thirteen pages and groups included the word East Turkistan/Turkestan on their title.

- By contrast, the word Doğu Türkistan has quite high usage. Except several introduction pages from Wikipedia, other pages are created by Turkish people. Turkish people show their sympathy to Uyghurs by creating pages and groups which have likes or members over ten thousand. Uyghurs though have two pages and five groups included this word on the sites’ title.
The word Turkestan is less accepted by both Uyghurs and non-Uyghurs.

These 639 Facebook sites were narrowed down to include only those created and used by Uyghur diaspora members. In this elimination process, any other Facebook sites created by non-Uyghurs were eliminated. This selection included considerations of several aspects; firstly, sites were used if the information on their ‘about’ section indicated that the site was created for/by the Uyghur diaspora; secondly, if the administrator of a site and participants on that site were of Uyghur ethnicity (this was decided by looking at their names, photos, and Uyghur language usage); thirdly, if the uploaded postings were related to the Uyghurs and/or the Uyghur region (this was decided by looking at what do those postings talk about). This process of elimination was detailed and time consuming yet fruitful. As a result, the sites selected were clearly created by the Uyghur diaspora. The eliminated sites included those created by:

- International Organisations concerned about Uyghur issues (i.e. Uyghur Human Rights Project);
- Turkish and Central Asian organisations; individuals for supporting Uyghurs politically, (i.e. Doğu Türkistan - Sherqiy Türkistan - Източен 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);
- and those sites that have the word Uyghur on their title but have nothing to do with Uyghurs (i.e. PAKISTAN TAHREEK-E-INSAF UYGHUR UTH WING).

After this elimination, 99 pages and groups were identified as Facebook sites created by organisations, associations, communities, and groups of Uyghur diaspora. Yet, the search was not restricted at this point. Through additional Facebook links showed on
those 99 sites, an extra 18 pages and groups created by the Uyghur diaspora were identified.

It is important to note that all the sites were included in this ‘mapping’ process despite duplications among these sites. For example, there were three groups with the same site name\textsuperscript{11} \textit{East Turkestan} (creators and location are unknown). Two pages and four groups have almost the same name of \textit{Doğu Türkistan Maarif ve dayanışma derneği}, differing only by one or more letters in their title. Their creators are the same, but postings on Facebook walls\textsuperscript{12} 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 site of \textit{The Uighur Society in United Kingdom} had only one update since its creation in June 2011. These duplicated sites and inactive sites were all counted in the categorization process described.

As a result, altogether 117 Facebook sites, which include 56 pages and 61 groups, shaped the sample frame for this research. They were identified in order to ‘map’ the overall usage of Facebook among Uyghur diaspora. These sites were also used to select Facebook sites for the second stage qualitative content analysis as explained next.

4.3.2 Sampling for Qualitative Content Analysis

It was unrealistic for the scope of this research to conduct a qualitative content analysis for all the 117 Facebook sites identified in the first stage, thus a second stage sampling was necessary. In this stage, a smaller number of Facebook groups were selected based on a purposive sampling method (Reinard, 2008).

\textsuperscript{11} Site name refers to the names/titles of Facebook groups or pages.
\textsuperscript{12} Facebook walls are a place like a forum where the users upload postings and comments which can be in various forms, such as texts, images, videos, and audios.
The reason for choosing Facebook groups instead of pages is due to the difference between Facebook pages and groups in regards to who can upload postings on them. As mentioned earlier, on Facebook pages, although anyone can make comments on postings, only the administrator of the page has the authority for uploading postings. By contrast, on Facebook groups, every member of the group can upload postings including the administrator and members and send comments as well. As such, all of them have an equal chance to upload postings. Given these differences, Facebook groups were considered more suitable for examining communication on Facebook.

Four groups were chosen from the 61 Facebook groups identified at the mapping stage. The selection was based using purposive selection criteria including accessibility, thematic category, frequency of updates, and popularity. Hence, publicly open, categorized as Universal, frequently updated groups with over 100 members were chosen. Accessibility refers to whether the group is open to the public. In open groups, postings uploaded on their walls are intentionally open for viewing and consumption. On this basis, 18 closed groups were eliminated. Then according to the thematic category, groups created for specific interest such as sports, politics, culture, business, entertainment, or education were eliminated, further narrowing the sample to 23 groups categorized as Universal - characterized by broad and general postings the Uyghur related issues and concerns. The reason for choosing Universal groups was that this research aimed to observe how identity is constructed in everyday communication practices and identity issues are embedded in general everyday discourse. Moreover, choosing Universal groups helps to avoid potential bias resulting from examining specific interest groups, such as those specifically established for political or cultural purposes. After this, frequency of updates and popularity were used to further narrow the selected groups. Those
groups which showed no updates during the data collection period (January to April, 2013) as well as have less than 100 members were eliminated. Consequently, four groups at the end were left to be examined for the qualitative content analysis. These four groups are based in the UK, Germany, and Turkey, with one unknown location.

4.4 Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

Data collection and analysis were simultaneously conducted in this research. Data analysis refers to the processing of raw data into coding categories in content analysis. Thus, creating coding categories was prioritized within this research methodology where having considerable knowledge about what kind of data would be appropriate to collect and analyse is needed. “There must be a clear conceptualization of the construct of interest, for it is the congruence between conceptualization and operationalization (measurement) that constitutes basic internal validity” (Babbie, 1998, cited in Neuendorf & Skalski, 2009, p. 203).

Message components from Facebook profiles and walls were collected as raw data. This raw data included textual messages, images, videos, and audios materials. The reason for not limiting the data only to textual messages was that “images, emblems, and symbols may all serve as the messages one might analyse for the measurement of collective identity” (Neuendorf & Skalski, 2009, p. 207). Human coding, one of two main ways in which content analysis methodologies code data was applied in this research. Human coding is “the application of a set of written rules for measurement to a set of messages by individuals” (Neuendorf & Skalski, 2009, p. 206). It is the widely applied way of making categorization of raw data based on interpretation in identity studies. The other way, involving computer-assisted content
analysis, was not judged as suitable for this research as it refers to “automated machine coding of text messages” through which lists of words are counted on computer (Neuendorf & Skalski, 2009, p. 208), for example counting how many times a specific word is mentioned in an article.

The table below shows the coding categories for the first stage of data collection, and the questions under which primary data was collated and analysed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Categories</th>
<th>Enquiries in raw data collection</th>
<th>Data Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Privacy Setting</td>
<td>Is the site publicly available?</td>
<td>Closed or open to public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic Categorization</td>
<td>Which topic is dominant on Facebook sites?</td>
<td>Universal, politic, culture, entertainment, business, sport, religion, education, language, community, online news.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of Updates</td>
<td>How often are postings uploaded?</td>
<td>Closed, not updated, rarely updated (less than 20 updates), Occasionally updated, and frequently updated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popularity</td>
<td>How many likes does a Facebook page have? How many members does a Facebook group have?</td>
<td>Popularity turned out from under 100 to over 1000 likes or members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country of Location</td>
<td>In which country is the Facebook page or group located?</td>
<td>More than 18 countries including USA, UK, French, Australia, and Turkey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Usage</td>
<td>Which language is mostly used?</td>
<td>Different languages including Uyghur language in Arabic or Latin script, English, Chinese, French, and Turkish languages are used.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3. Overview of First stage data collection and analysis procedure*
Data was collected from profiles of 117 Facebook sites and was analysed in order to be placed in the appropriate category, as displayed in Table 3, thus providing an overall understanding of the Uyghur diaspora presence on Facebook.

In the second stage, data was gathered from discussion archives on walls of four selected Facebook groups. The data included all types of messages including textual content, as well as images, videos, audios in postings, and comments. The main question in this stage looked at what identity related messages were available on Facebook. Hundreds of postings were reviewed and it was found that not all messages were identity-related. Therefore, some data had to be excluded. A process of ‘extraction’ was applied and non-identity related messages were inspected and extracted (Neuendorf & Skalski, 2009, p. 212). This ‘extraction’ was based on those postings relevant to identity and was developed with reference to the theoretical literature on identity construction and communication described above and the researcher’s own ‘insider’ knowledge of Uyghur culture and identity. Data was analysed in order to identify emergent themes within messages involved on the walls. As a result, themes like concerns about social, political, religious situations in homeland, concerns about diaspora situation, ethnic concerns, and concerns about culture, history, education, and language emerged.

Codes were subsequently developed based on these themes. As a result, five codes emerged including different dimensions of identity: political, ethnic, national, cultural, and religious. The main question here was which dimensions of identity are represented? Putting data into these categories of identities was based on the literature review about representations of these identities. Data was analysed according to the relationship among messages under each code. Yet it has to be mentioned that these identities often have no distinctive boundaries and they tend to
overlap. Therefore, analyzing the data under these codes was the most challenging part in this research that involved an interactive process of coding, comparison, and tacking back and forth between theory and data (Kozinets, 2010, p. 128). Further, nearly all messages from the discussion archives were in Uyghur language and they were translated into English. In the whole process of data collection, special concerns were given to privacy on Facebook, explained in following section.

4.5 Ethical Considerations and Privacy on Facebook

One critical issue about Internet studies is the ethical considerations regarding privacy and anonymity. Although the Internet has been seen as a public space and its content is available for everyone, the question is “should researchers thus be able to cite them [authors] without permission?” (Herring, 2004, p. 53). This is a relevant question in regards to how the information, messages, on Facebook sites is collected for the analyzing object. However, it is argued that the question of privacy on Facebook is less compromising in this research due to the reason that Facebook is a public space, no individual persons objected to the research and all the quotation samples are anonymised.

Firstly, whether or not each Facebook site was open to the public was the main concern. Creators of Facebook sites can set the level of privacy on the site. If they choose ‘Public’ (everybody can view), all their uploading are intended for open viewing and consumption by everyone. Even on the closed sites, part of their profile information, such as site’s title, popularity (number of members), is publicly available by default. Based on the understanding of privacy settings of Facebook sites, in this research publicly open Facebook sites both groups and pages formed the
The closed sites, 18 of them, were sampled in the first stage of data collection mainly for their publicly available information. As such obtaining information from Facebook has been conducted within the limitations of Facebook privacy setting.

Secondly, the object of analysis in this research was the textual, photographic, and audiovisual messages on Facebook profiles and walls, not the Facebook users or the administrator of the sites or the participants who uploaded postings and comments. Therefore this research does not involve individual people and does not associate with bringing any ‘harm’ to these individual Facebook users. Nevertheless, as data obtained online at some point still involved individual people even if it was not immediately apparent, it may be still necessary to consider ethical principles to protect the individuals’ privacy (Markham, & Buchanan, 2012). The privacy of the individual Facebook users is guaranteed as there was no need to provide personal information of any Facebook users in this specific research. In addition, these Facebook users were anonymous to the researcher as except that I could identify them as Uyghurs by the words they use in their names or photos on Facebook. Most of the Facebook users are usually anonymous as they use created names on Facebook and they rarely reveal any damaging personal or private information directly in postings and comments.

Thirdly, all the quotation samples were anonymised in this research. Although the quotes were publicly available, they were still anonymised with no indication given of the writer’s identity and any other potentially revealing information has been disguised. In addition, the quotations were all translated in English, so that their original version in Uyghur language, either in Latin or Arabic script, cannot be traced through Google searching. I also did not provide the names of the Facebook sites
from which the quotation were taken to reduce the risk of being identified. This might not still prevent the writer from being identified (Herring, 2004). However, the aim is to minimize the potential risk as much as possible as there is a fear among the Uyghur diaspora due to state surveillance. It is also important to mention that, following a publication of a conference paper based on this research in June 2013, which is searchable on Google, I found that some of the quotations mentioned in that paper were deleted from Facebook. This reaction from the Uyghur Facebook users proved that there is sensitivity among them and, in turn, confirmed that making both quotation samples and names of Facebook sites anonymous was a right decision to guarantee the privacy in this research. Taking into account these explanations, it can be assumed that the issues of anonymity and privacy of Facebook sites are not a problematic aspect of sampling and obtaining online information in this research.

4.6 Summary

To sum up the main methodological approach and issues involved in this research, a two-stage content analysis was employed. The first stage of content analysis was quantitative in nature. In this stage, a representative list of Facebook sites created by the Uyghur diaspora was generated, and 117 Facebook sites were identified which shaped a sample frame for this research. Further, data was gathered from profiles of these sites and was organized into categories according to privacy setting, thematic categorization, frequency of updates, popularity, country of location, and language usage. The role of this stage was to provide an overall understanding of the Facebook usage among the Uyghur diaspora.
The second stage content analysis was qualitative in nature in which identity construction of the Uyghur diaspora in everyday online communication was examined. Four groups which are open for public, frequently updated, *Universal*, and have over 100 members, were selected from the sample frame. Data-messages produced through communication among the Facebook users was gathered from discussion archives on Facebook walls and was analysed and organized into several emergent themes. These themes then were coded into five categories in relation to five dimensions of identity including ethnic, cultural, national, religious, and political identities. Findings from this stage were used to examine how the Uyghur diaspora identity are being represented through daily postings on Facebook, which dimensions of that identity are represented, and to what extent each dimension contributes to the construction of a diaspora identity of the Uyghurs.

During the whole process of data collection, privacy settings of Facebook sites were totally respected and only publicly available messages were collected for the purpose of this research. Further, both quotation samples and names of the Facebook sites were anonymised as the research sought to ensure Facebook users’ privacy as much as possible.
Image 7. Uyghur Facebook groups shown in search on Facebook
5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents empirical findings from content analysis of messages posted on Facebook sites. This research involved two stages of data collection: firstly, the ‘mapping’ the Facebook usage and secondly, a subsequent qualitative content analysis of selected sites. Thus findings from each stage are presented and analysed in two sections. This chapter is largely descriptive in nature and highlights key findings in preparation for the subsequent discussion. It is also important to note that due to ethical considerations and sensitivities, all references to Facebook users, whose posings were used, and to names of Facebook sites, which might help identify them, were removed.

5.2 Mapping the Uyghur Diaspora Facebook Use

In this section, findings from messages on profiles of Facebook sites are presented and analysed. Data is organized into six categories including privacy settings, thematic categories, frequency of updates, popularity, locations, as well as language usage on the Facebook sites. These categories are critical for developing an overall picture of the Facebook usage among the Uyghur diaspora. Mainly because they provide an understanding of whether or not the sites are publicly available and whether they are active in terms of updates; the purpose the sites are created for; which countries the sites are located in and how popular they are among the Uyghur diaspora; and finally, what languages are used on them. This process has another
important purpose – the selection of suitable Facebook sites for qualitative data analysis in the second stage.

5.2.1 Privacy Settings

The privacy settings refer to the accessibility of Facebook sites. The basic distinction is between those sites which are open to the public, and those which are not. While Facebook pages are open by default, Facebook groups can be either open or closed. Facebook pages and open groups expose all their contents - including the information about the page or group and any updates - on their walls. On the other hand, closed groups show only limited information such as the group’s name and ‘about’ section if anything is written in it by the administrator and its members. Although limited, public availability of that much information was enough reason to include closed groups in this research.

Of the 117 Uyghur administered Facebook sites identified by the research, 99 were open to the public. This total comprised 56 pages, and 43 open groups, while eighteen groups were closed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Privacy Settings</th>
<th>Pages</th>
<th>Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Publicly available</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4. Accessibility of Uyghur Facebook Sites*

5.2.2 Thematic Categorization

Thematic categorization refers to the purposes that the sites are created for, such as politics, culture, religion, education, business, or entertainment. This categorization
was mainly based on the information from the ‘about’ section where the reason for creating the site is stated by the site administrator. For example, one Facebook page was created to seek “Freedom for East Turkistan” and shows the obvious political motive behind it. Another page was created “to celebrate, demonstrate an appreciation for, and promote an interest in the culture and history of the Uyghurs” which allows to place it in the Culture category.

However, not all of the Facebook sites examined have information in their ‘about’ sections. For this reason, site title and dominant topic on their wall was also taken into consideration. Information for pages and open groups was always available except in two cases. These were categorized as Unknown sites. There were challenges in categorizing closed groups as nine out of the 18 closed groups could not be fitted into any category. They had no information in their ‘about’ sections or anything in their title indicating their purpose and they were categorized as Closed. Apart from these two categories, Unknown and Closed, a total of eleven distinct thematic categories were identified.

![Number of sites](image)

*Figure 2. Thematic categorizations of Uyghur Facebook Sites*
Politics sites, as the term indicates, focus on political information about the Uyghurs. This category comes first and is the most represented, with 29 sites, including 16 pages and 13 groups. These sites were dedicated to “raise awareness of the Uyghur people’s struggle for freedom and justice and support the independence of East Turkistan”, or to claim “independence for East Turkistan” or they state “Erkinliksiz ne kishilik hoquq; Musteqilliqsiz ne erkinlik!” (Meaning: Human rights could not exist without freedom; freedom could not exist without independence). Eight of the Politics sites were located in Turkey, six of them in the USA, one in Netherlands, and one in Sweden. The location of 13 Politics sites was unknown.

Culture sites are the ones which devoted to introducing and promoting various aspects of the Uyghur culture, such as history, folklore, and literature. Among them the sites of London Uyghur Ensemble, Uyghur Culture & History Studies (both located in UK), and Association des Ouïghours de France (located in France) were particularly active.

Some sites were created for specific activities and were categorized as Entertainment, Sport, and Business respectively. While sites for entertainment and sport were not active, only one Business site based in the UK, The Uyghur Online Shop, was active out of the six sites.

The Education and Language sites were categorized separately. Education sites tended to focus on information about studying overseas while the latter focused on the Uyghur language and its study. These sites were located in Australia, Turkey, Norway, and the UK and are all relatively active. The Religious sites were entirely dedicated to Islamic teachings. Among these, a site created in Saudi Arabia, IslamHouse.com, was updated frequently, while the others only rarely.
The Online News sites publish news in either text, video, or audio formats, or through the posting of website links. Prominent examples were the Erkin Asiya Radiosi - Facebook page of Radio Free Asia and the TRT Uyghurche - Facebook page of Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) international news channel in Uyghur language.

The Community sites refer to those created by offline communities or just for sharing interests. Ten groups reflected the offline Uyghur communities. For example, the Facebook group of Gollandiye Yashlar (Youth in Holland) was created by young Uyghurs in Holland to fulfill their online communication needs. Similarly, offline Uyghur communities in the USA (one closed group), in Australia (two groups), in France (one group), in Turkey (one group), in New Zealand (one group), and in Austria (one group) created Facebook sites to enable them to communicate at a local level. However, these sites were either closed or relatively inactive, while only one open group in France was frequently updated. Beside these, there were two groups specifically created for transnational communication among Uyghur women in diasporic communities in different parts of the world. These two groups were also categorized as Community sites as they represent the shared interest of their participants.

The sites categorized as Universal address all the other themes present in this figure and only eight out of 22 were frequently updated. These sites often play the role of universal and general discussion platforms where the Facebook users engage in everyday communication on whatever topics they want to share and discuss.
5.2.3 Frequency of Updates

The frequency of updates indicates the activity levels of Facebook sites and specifically, how often postings are uploaded on their walls. It was determined by examining both the numbers of the postings as well as the dates they were uploaded. These findings were vital for selecting frequently updated Facebook groups for further examination in the second stage. Moreover, they also help to understand the overall activity levels of the Uyghur diaspora’s use of Facebook.

![Pie chart showing frequency of updates on the Uyghur Facebook sites](image)

*Figure 3. Frequency of updates on the Uyghur Facebook sites*

Frequently updated sites refer to the sites consistently updated either on a daily or a weekly basis. They occupy 37 per cent of the total and comprised 43 out of the 117 sites.

Closed sites are the closed groups where updated information is not publicly available. There were eighteen of them and they constituted 11 per cent of the total sites. Not updated sites refer to those sites which have not been updated since their creation. There were four inactive sites, one group and three pages. This might be because it is easier to create pages and groups on Facebook than it is to maintain them. Rarely updated sites were the ones that were updated less than 20 times since
they were created. They comprised of 32 per cent of the total. Occasionally updated sites refer to those which had more than 20 updates in total, but have not been updated since December, 2012.

5.2.4 Popularity

The popularity of the Facebook sites was determined by counting the numbers of likes on Facebook pages and of members on Facebook groups\(^\text{13}\). The statistics are as follows:

![Figure 4. Popularity of Uyghur Facebook sites](image)

Surprisingly, only ten out of a total 117 sites, including four pages and six groups, had more than 1,000 likes or members. It includes three Politics sites (one located in Germany, two in Turkey), two Culture sites (both located in the UK), five Universal sites (one located in UK, one in Turkey, while the others’ locations are unknown). These sites were frequently updated.

However, having fewer likes/members does not mean a lower frequency of updates. Five out of seven sites with between 600 and 999 likes or members were frequently

\(^{13}\) Facebook pages have likes and groups have members by default.
updated which may indicate a recent increase in their popularity. Similarly, nine of 17 sites with between 300 and 599 likes or members, and 13 of 31 sites with between 100 and 299 were frequently updated. In contrast, this is not the case with the sites which have less than 100 likes or members. For example, *London Uyghur Ensemble* based in the UK and *Association des Ouïghours de France* (The Uyghur Association in France) were both frequently updated.

5.2.5 Locations

The location of a Facebook site is determined by the location of its administrator. Therefore, the only way to identify their location of Facebook sites is to check the locations in the profiles of their administrator. As some of the administrators did not publicize their location, the location of 33 sites out of 117 was unknown.

![Country of Location of Uyghur Facebook Sites](image)

*Figure 5. Country of Location of Uyghur Facebook Sites*

It is interesting to note that only three sites were located in Central Asian countries, two in Kazakhstan and one in Uzbekistan, where the largest diasporic Uyghur population reside. By contrast 13 sites were located in the UK where there are only about 100 Uyghurs living. However, it is not surprising that 23 sites originate in
Turkey as it contains the largest diasporic Uyghur population outside of Central Asia. Furthermore, significant numbers of Facebook sites were located in the USA, France, Australia, and Germany, where diaspora Uyghurs are comparatively active offline.

5.2.6 Language Usage

Language usage on the Uyghur Facebook sites is an important element for examining which languages are used by Uyghurs in their transnational communication online. It can be examined through looking at which languages are used on postings and comments on the sites’ walls. Since closed Facebook groups do not reveal the information on their walls, the language usage on these 18 sites could not be examined and they were categorized as Closed.

Findings show that the diaspora Uyghurs were using two versions of the written Uyghur language, one in the Latin alphabet, and another in using Arabic characters (Commonly known as old Uyghur). Sites that used both were categorized as Uyghur sites, whereas those which used only one or the other were categorized as Latin Uyghur or Arabic Uyghur sites respectively.

Besides the Uyghur, other languages such as English, French, German, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, and Turkish also appeared to be used by the Uyghur diaspora. Of these languages, only English and French seemed to be used frequently. Therefore, sites on which English and French are mainly used were categorized as English or French sites, while sites where two or more languages are used were categorized as Multilingual sites.
On 26 per cent of the sites both the Latin and Arabic scripts of the Uyghur language were used. More than half of these sites were *Universal* ones where their content ranges from politics to entertainment in order to have the broadest possible appeal.

Thirty per cent of Facebook sites were multilingual. On these sites, besides the Uyghur language, one or more other languages were used. This indicates the Uyghur diaspora use various languages to facilitate their transnational communications. Interestingly, Standard Chinese language was only used on one page, that of the World Uyghur Congress (WUC).

The Arabic Uyghur script was dominant in three per cent of the sites. Two of these sites were *Religious* sites and postings on them were usually uploaded from specific websites, such as www.istiqlaltv.com which is also in Arabic Uyghur. One of them gets its main source of information from the website of *TRT Uyghurche* (a website of Turkish Radio and Television Corporation international news channel which broadcasts news in Uyghur language). By contrast, Latin Uyghur was used in 14 per
cent of sites. These sites address various themes of culture, politics, sport, and entertainment.

The Uyghur language was predominates on Facebook: 73 per cent of all Uyghur sites examined used either the language’s Latin or Arabic script. English language only sites comprised 13 per cent of the total and, many of them are Politics sites located in English-speaking countries, such as the USA and Australia. In contrast, only one group used French exclusively as it is intended to French-speaking audiences.

5.3 Diaspora Identity Construction on Facebook

Examining identity construction of the Uyghur diaspora from messages on Facebook groups is focus of this research. This section presents the research’s qualitative findings and examines what these messages tell us about the Uyghur diaspora identity. Messages as data were gathered from discussion archives from four Facebook Groups. Messages at first were organised around emerging themes including concerns about homeland, concerns about social, political, religious situations in homeland, concerns about diaspora situation, ethnic concerns, and concerns about culture, history, education, and language. Then these themes were analysed and organized in relation to theoretical concepts presented in identity and diaspora identity literature. As a result, five dimensions of identities were identified including ethnic identity, cultural identity, religious identity, national identity, and political identity. These identities are displayed as dimensions of the Uyghur diaspora identity. It should be noted however, that there are not fixed lines between these identities, as aspects of identity overlap. Yet, distinguishing between dimensions of identity is a useful analytical approach in order to understand more
clearly the constitution of the Uyghur diaspora identity and how it is being articulated online.

5.3.1 Ethnic identity

Findings show that Uyghur ethnic identity is strongly articulated through communication on Facebook. The central theme within the messages that Uyghur diaspora members posted on Facebook Groups is maintenance and development of a coherent Uyghur ethnic identity. In particular, there is a strongly felt need to protect and maintain Uyghur identity in diaspora. Members emphasized that maintenance of the ethnic identity shall start from individuals and individuals shall fulfill their responsibility on properly representing Uyghur ethnic identity as individuals. One member shared her opinion:

When I left my homeland to go abroad, my father stressed again and again that: you will live abroad among people from different culture, you are no longer solely representing yourself as an individual, and you will be represented as an Uyghur. So, give attention for how do you speak, act, and dress. Since I live abroad, I realized that when I explain who Uyghurs are to others, they take example from me as an Uyghur first and compare me with what I am saying about Uyghurs.

Another member also recognized the importance of individual representation of ethnic identity, he posted:

What you said is right, we, who live abroad, are representing Uyghurs, and as such others understand Uyghurs through looking at us. Therefore, we shall care about how we act not only for ourselves but also for being Uyghurs. However, some Uyghurs living abroad and have grown up in a non-Uyghur society may not be aware of this point. I was wondering do those Uyghurs care about their identity. What will be the result of our effort for preserving Uyghur identity?

Further, this post states one possible reason for why the Uyghurs felt strong about maintaining their ethnic identity – they are anxious about losing their ethnic identity.
The young generations, as mentioned in the post, who are in diaspora and grown up in a non-Uyghur society may not have developed as strong awareness towards their identity as their older generation. They may not even “care about their identity”. This posting is one of the many expressing anxiety on Facebook groups.

Feeling anxiety and responsibility about their ethnic identity loss, the Uyghur diaspora members seem to be motivated to take action on maintaining and developing their ethnic identity on Facebook. Thus their ethnic identity construction is manifested from several aspects including self-identifying, sharing knowledge about their ethnicity, preserving the Uyghur language, encouraging each other to have higher self-esteem, and these elements are discussed below.

Uyghurs on Facebook self-identify themselves as Uyghurs. They use words like Uyghurlar (the Uyghur people), biz Uyghurlar (we Uyghur people) to identify themselves as members of Uyghur ethnic group. They are reminding themselves and others who they are and showing how they prefer to be called. As a basic element of ethnic identity, self-identification helps strengthening the sense of belonging to an ethnic group (Ashmore et al., 2004).

Further, seeking knowledge and understanding about the Uyghur ethnicity is significant on Facebook. Findings show that the Uyghurs share knowledge about their own history and literature widely on Facebook. These postings aim to provide information about Uyghur history, some of which is not available in China. There are postings about lectures on Uyghur history as well. An Uyghur scholar discussed why Uyghurs need to study their own history and he stated “a nation who does not know its own history cannot tell about its present and future” and “any group of people can only establish a solid foundation on the basis of lessons learned from history”
arguing the importance of learning the Uyghur history. In addition, sharing Uyghur literature is also given much attention. Uyghur literature has played an important role in teaching traditions and inculcating Uyghur moral values. As such, the presence of the Uyghur literature on Facebook indicates the intention within the diaspora to maintain this traditional knowledge. The postings of Uyghur folk sayings, poems, and traditional songs on Facebook express love for homeland, hope for future, emphasize solidarity within Uyghurs, and in turn, contribute to strengthen Uyghurs’ consciousness of ethnic identity.

Constructing a coherent sense of ethnic identity is strongly reflected in preserving the Uyghur language among Uyghurs on Facebook. As part of ethnic identity, the Uyghur language is under threat as an endangered minority language (Becquelin, 2004). While the Uyghurs living in China have faced forced bilingual education and have been taught in Mandarin starting at preschool level, diaspora Uyghurs are lacking the opportunity to learn their mother language, particularly the young generations. As such Uyghurs both in China and diaspora are increasingly realizing the importance of preserving their mother language. This feeling is strongly reflected in Facebook postings, touching for instance on the anxiety for losing the mother language:

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 who are talking in Chinese [Mandarin language].

This post expresses sorrow for Uyghurs losing their language. It uses the metaphor of ‘distance’ to illustrate the loss of the shared language. It predicts a potential situation in the future where Uyghurs may lose familiarity and connectedness as a result of
losing their mother language. Therefore, this post is calling for protection of the
Uyghur identity through nurturing of the Uyghur language and preferring it over
Mandarin.

Besides worrying about losing the mother language, the Uyghurs on Facebook also
discuss how to maintain and develop their language while in diaspora: “The
challenge we are facing now is losing our language while living in overseas, even
more tragically Uyghur youth are ignoring this issue”. In another post this concern
and the dilemmas come in the shape of this question: “how can we [Uyghurs living
abroad] make sure our children learn their mother language without feeling
additional pressure on top of their current study?” Several members discussed this
issue passionately. They pointed out reasons for teaching Uyghur children the
Uyghur language while also identifying some barriers to doing so in a non-Uyghur
society. The importance of creating Uyghur communities abroad was highlighted.
Suggestions were made that Uyghurs should make an effort to live close to each
other as children learn their mother language faster when they are in an Uyghur
language environment. Others advocated the need for Uyghur language schools for
children as more important. Several members, on the other hand, emphasized the
important role of parents in passing the language to their children by speaking
Uyghur at home.

Preserving the Uyghur language cannot only rely on being concerned and talking
about it. Practical actions have to be taken which ensure the maintaining and
developing of the Uyghur language. The Uyghurs on Facebook also mentioned this
point as seen in one posting below:
Mother language is like your eyes. Other languages are like glasses, microscope, or telescopes. As soon as you lose your own eyes, it does not help no matter you use the best glasses, microscopes! Do not limit yourself with only chanting slogans, take practical actions to preserve your mother language!

As a response, some members put effort to preserve the Uyghur language in a practical way on Facebook. For example, some members uploaded postings to encourage others take steps to maintaining the Uyghur language: a video link showing an Uyghur child reciting poems in the Uyghur language; another video clip showing an Uyghur boy and girl praising the Uyghur language by reciting a prose; a post announcing that an Uyghur language course has been established at a French university, and an announcement for a lecture given by Uyghur scholars about the Uyghur language in Sweden.

Further, some members shared translations between the Uyghur and other languages in a way that the translations can help Uyghur language learners. This led to many discussions among members about the mistakes occurred in translations. As such an atmosphere of learning the Uyghur language and protecting accuracy in translations is observed among the Uyghur Facebook users. In addition, they encouraged using the Uyghur language in more creative ways on new communication technologies. For instance, an Uyghur version for Google, Wikipedia, and Wordpress were introduced. On several postings, Apps in Uyghur language for iPhone and iPad were recommended. A member posted “if you are studying Uyghur language you can try this App - Uyghur Alphabet learning App, it works both in iPhone and iPad”. In another post, a member recommended a website link where children can learn Uyghur language through entertainment: “You can find Children’s cartoon in Uyghur language here; hopefully it is good for the kids learning the Uyghur language”. One member confirmed the increasing atmosphere of maintaining the
Uyghur language by saying: “The most fashionable word for this year is to speak in your own language”.

Moreover, Uyghurs are encouraged to have positive attitudes about themselves through showing disagreement with self-criticism on Facebook. Self-criticism here refers to Uyghurs blaming themselves for their faults. It has been so widely spread among Uyghurs that arguably self-criticism has become a cultural trait and many Uyghur writers published articles on complaining about the drawbacks that exist in Uyghur society, and critiquing the Uyghur propensity for self-criticism. As a result, an atmosphere of lower self-esteem and disappointment is evident among Uyghurs in and out of China. On Facebook, a member questioned this situation “why do we often scold for our faults, why do not we start to be positive?” This post gained attention from many members. One member pointed out how self-criticism undermines self-esteem:

In psychology, it is stated that if one always hears words about weakness and failure, he gets a habit to think about failure before he does anything. It is the same for teacher and student. If teacher keeps saying negative words to the student, his/her words will be discouraging the student from making progress; but if the teacher encourages, the student can do better. So, self-criticism can be psychological obstacle for Uyghurs to be positive.

Some members commented that “the person who is blaming their own people either he/she is concerned about their people, or regret for being one of them”. Others stated that “the faults are on individuals, they shall not be generalized for all Uyghurs; if Uyghurs have faults, we need to correct it, shall not leave them there”. One member showed that he was proud to be Uyghur by saying: “I praise Uyghurs not because I am Uyghur, but Uyghurs are really kind, gentle, sincere, hard-working, and courageous. I do not like the Uyghur who blame and complain very often about faults among Uyghurs”. This discussion is important as it demonstrates attempts by
members of the diaspora to move beyond stereotypical representations of themselves, which may be standing in the way the development of a more nuanced diaspora identity, which may have implications for both online communication and offline diaspora organisation and unity.

5.3.2 Cultural Identity

Essentially, cultural identity is part of ethnic identity; as such it is also called ethnic culture as introduced in literature review. Here cultural identity is discussed in a separate section not for differentiating it from ethnic identity, but for examining culture in terms of how culture contribute to ethnic identity and to diaspora identity more broadly.

Findings show that the Uyghur diaspora members are constructing their cultural identity based on their common sense of belonging to Uyghur ethnicity. The sense of belonging and to having a firm cultural foundation on which to base Uyghur identity is expressed through two main ways on Facebook: representing their culture and acknowledging the need for preserving Uyghur culture.

It is notable that Uyghur cultural identity is represented through photos group members use on Facebook. The profile photos of group members appear on the top side of the group wall as well as beside postings uploaded. Group members are allowed to use any photo representing the ways that members want to be perceived. Many members used images of Uyghur traditional cultural clothes, such as embroidered hats, embroidered shirts, or Etles\textsuperscript{14} skirts and dresses. Some members chose to show the images of clothes as a displayed item.

\textsuperscript{14} Pronounced as /ætlaes/, a traditional, hand-made, and colorful silk fabric.
Some members chose to use their own picture in which they wear those traditional cloths. Some photos shown here as examples:

In the first photo, an Uyghur boy is wearing both traditional hat and shirt as symbols of Uyghur culture. It is assumed that the intention behind choosing this photo as a personal photo on Facebook is that this member identifies himself as an Uyghur as well as intending to displays his cultural identity. Notably, also, he is holding a paper on which the words “I love Doppa (hat)” are written. Here he is referring to his love for the traditional hat he is wearing, for the Uyghur traditional culture more generally. This expresses alliance with the discontent towards prohibitions for wearing traditional Uyghur hats in some schools in the Uyghur region in China.

The second photo is also showing traditional hat and shirt Uyghur men wear. The third photo is represented the traditional hat that Uyghur women wear and traditional cloth Etes Uyghur women use to make dresses and skirts. The girl also paid attention to show the traditional way Uyghur women plait their long hair. Although
these images appear simple, they are expressing the cultural ties the Uyghur diaspora members maintain and nurture in their minds towards their ethnic identity.

Other representations of Uyghur cultural identity on Facebook include images from various aspects of Uyghur life, including traditional Uyghur cuisine, countryside lifestyles, festivals and celebrations, examples are displayed below:

*Image 10.* The Uyghurs and the Heyitgah mosque in Kashgar city

*Image 11.* Making traditional cloth *Etles* on traditional weaving machine

Moreover, the Uyghur diaspora members also expressed their thoughts about preserving the Uyghur culture and introducing it to the people in their host countries. They recognized the necessity for doing this and discuss its importance. A conversation among members took place on Facebook as below:
- There are a lot of things happening in our homeland. I am wondering what the point is for us debating on translations of words here on Facebook?
- This kind of debate on language is also important. It is not against with our responsibility for concerning about issues happening in homeland. Shall we stop all our debates and do nothing but mourning if something happens in there? We shall try to become strong, shall contribute preserving our language and culture.
- Have you looked at those issues happening in homeland? It is impossible to protect the people by making debate on language and culture; people shall be protected first, then it is possible to protect the language and culture of those people.
- What do you think we shall do now? Shall we all go back to homeland and fight? What I mean is that everyone shall do whatever he/she can do with his/her capacity: we shall preserve our language and culture, meanwhile shall introduce them to others.
- It is good to protect our language. But the responsibilities of Uyghurs abroad are not protecting language and culture, instead put effort to tell the world about Uyghur people and the difficult situation they are facing. I noticed that propaganda about Uyghurs is majority in Uyghur language, yet we complain that the rest of the world does not know about us. We shall put effort in this aspect and introduce ourselves to others in their languages.
- It is good that you stating this. There is a journal introducing Uyghurs in Uyghur, English and other languages. Show your support and subscribe for that journal if you like to do so.
- That is good; I am going to subscribe that journal right now then.

This conversation represents a small portrait of the current situation Uyghurs are facing: oppression from authorities in China making life hard for Uyghurs in various ways and a threat losing their culture and language. It indicates that the Uyghur diaspora are seriously concerned about the repression of Uyghurs in China and inform the rest of the world of their plight. It shows that the Uyghur diaspora also need to preserve the Uyghur culture and language as a necessary part of maintaining their ethnic identity. It is natural that individual members of the Uyghur diaspora make any of these two responsibilities as his/her priority. Two members in this conversation had different preferences over which responsibility they think is the most important one. Their conversation started with disagreement and ended with negotiation. This ending suggests that the members respect different opinions, and can negotiate and resolve their disagreements if it is beneficial for the Uyghurs more.
generally. Although holding different ideas, they have in common desire to contribute to improvements for Uyghurs’ situation. Discussion, negotiation, and development of thoughts among Uyghur members like this example are an important process of constructing their ethnic identity.

5.3.3 National Identity

Findings show that the third dimension of the Uyghur diaspora identity is their national identity. As analysed in previous sections, their ethnic identity and cultural identity is articulated through their concerns on protecting and maintaining the Uyghur ethnicity. Their national identity, on the other hand, is negotiated based on how they differentiate their notion of homeland from the Chinese state. This differentiation is expressed through the Uyghur diaspora members articulating a sense of belonging, love and loyalty for their homeland and contradistinction they feel between them and the Chinese Han population within China.

National identity of the Uyghurs refers to their legal status in relation to China as a country. Since they belong to China officially, the national identity of the Uyghurs is Chinese. Nevertheless, findings suggest that the Uyghur diaspora members feel a sense of love for their homeland as a place where they belong, not to China as a state. For instance, while talking about the place where they come from, members preferred to call the place Weten, Yurt which mean motherland, homeland. They did not use the word China, and seldom used ‘Xinjiang’ or ‘Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region’ which are the official names chosen by Chinese authority. This indicates reluctance among the Uyghurs towards Chinese ruling and their love for their homeland, not for China as a state.
Moreover, through the use of Weten, Yurt the Uyghur diaspora is representing a sense of belonging to an original homeland. Notably, these words usually come along with words indicating belonging, such as ours, my in front of them, as such yurtimizda, wetende (in our motherland/homeland). The Uyghur diaspora is longing for their homeland. It is not clear at this stage if they hope to return or not. But one point is obvious from Facebook postings - that they share a common sense of loss and nostalgia for their homeland. A member posted a poem on Facebook expressing his homesickness and loneliness, and hope for the freedom of homeland. Another member put question on the freedom of the homeland by saying “until when we are going to be scattered?” This member stated that his life abroad is a life of homelessness and he would have returned if the homeland was free.

Meanwhile, members showed their patriotism to their homeland. They uploaded messages on discussing their responsibilities, duties, and loyalty for their homeland. For example, a member called upon Uyghurs to fulfill their responsibility for the freedom of their homeland:

Every child of East Turkistan must contribute for the freedom of the homeland at the best of their ability. You are now living in a free world. You must acknowledge your responsibilities as a child of East Turkistan. Do something for your great homeland. Think about the mothers, sisters who are imprisoned. No matter male or female, this is an inescapable responsibility for us. You cannot do everything by yourself, but we can do something when we united.

In addition, national identity of the Uyghur diaspora is strongly defined in contradistinction to that of the Han Chinese population. The most visible form this distinction takes is the refusal to use Han Chinese terminology and to argue for the maintenance of the use of Uyghur language. For example, Group members used
words like *Uyghurlar* (Uyghur people), *Qeindashlar*\(^\text{15}\) (brothers, sisters), *Biz* (we), *Bizning* (ours), *Dostlar* (friends), and *Qerindishim* (my brother and sister) to refer to Uyghur ethnic people. In contrast, they used words like *Zhongguoluqlar* (the people of China), *Henzular* (the Han people), and *Xitay* (the Han people) to refer to people of Han ethnicity. As such Uyghurs preferred to use their ethnic name or Islamic words differentiating themselves from the Han ethnicity.

Differentiating the Uyghurs from Chinese Han people is also reflected on the festivals Uyghurs celebrate. During the data collection period (January to April, 2013), there were the following festivals in China: Chinese New Year on February, and the Uyghur New Year festival of *Nowruz*\(^\text{16}\) on March, 21\(^\text{st}\). On Facebook Groups, there were no signs of celebrating Chinese festivals. On the contrary, Uyghurs posted congratulations for *Nowruz* on Facebook. For example, one member posted the following message “*Essalamueleykum, barliq qerindashlarning Nuruz bayrimigha mubarek bolsun*” (*Assalamueleykum*\(^\text{17}\), 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.

### 5.3.4 Religious Identity

Religion is also a central dimension of concerns the diaspora Uyghurs expressed on Facebook. Uyghurs accepted Islam in mid-10\(^\text{th}\) century and are predominately Sunni Muslims. Islam has permeated many aspects of Uyghurs’ life, culture, social norms,

\(^{15}\) Words used in Islam to call others Muslims.

\(^{16}\) *Nowruz* marks the first day of spring and the beginning of a new year in the Persian calendar on 21\(^\text{st}\) of March every year.

\(^{17}\) *Assalamueleykum* means peace be upon you, the Arabic words used for greeting among Muslims.
literature, and art. Findings show that the Uyghur diaspora members use the Facebook to express concerns about the religious situation, particularly over religious persecutions in the homeland. Further, they use religious greetings widely in daily postings, as well as expressing reliance on religion as a way of seeking help and maintaining ethnicity. In addition, they share Islamic knowledge to spread religion on Facebook.

The first and the most worrying concern of the Uyghur diaspora members is religious suppression in the homeland. Daily postings on Facebook show that there is anxiety about the level of repression the Uyghurs are facing back in China related to not only strict restrictions on their religious practices, but also persecutions due to their religious belief. Postings informing Facebook users about these issues are uploaded frequently. For example, postings inform that Uyghurs under 18 year-old are not allowed to pray in Masjides\textsuperscript{18} in homeland, the ones who offend will go in jail; Uyghur women wearing Islamic clothes, such as Hijab\textsuperscript{19} are not allowed to enter supermarkets. Prohibitions like this were confirmed by other members recounting their experiences of similar cases and suggesting Facebook as a powerful tool for unifying Uyghur experience of religious repression.

Findings also show discontent towards prohibitions by the Chinese authority which extends to restrictions on the Uyghurs’ appearance, such as clothes and beard. For instance, a member uploaded an image as shown below to express his feeling against these restrictions:

\textsuperscript{18} Masjids are buildings for worship in Islam.
\textsuperscript{19} Hijab is a veil that covers the head and body, which is particularly worn by Muslim females beyond the age of puberty as a symbol of modesty, privacy and morality.
As the image shows, discontent with the restrictions and resistance to ethnic discrimination is expressed using irony or sarcasm. This image questions that why the beard, Kongzi grew before, are not allowed for the Uyghur men now. The word 禁 means prohibited in this image. Kongzi is an important person in Chinese history and his ideology recognized as Confucian, the basis of Chinese cultural and national identity (Ward, 1965). Such an example is not rare on Facebook. It seems that restrictions on religious practices on Uyghurs have trigged increasing discontent towards Chinese rule.

Further, Islamic phrases in Arabic language, such as *In shaa Allah*\(^{20}\), *Mash Allah*\(^{21}\), are widely used in daily postings on Facebook. This is worthy to notice because it makes a comparison between Uyghurs in diaspora and in homeland, and may indicate a result from religious learning. Uyghurs in homeland hardly use these phrases in original Arabic; instead they use translations of these phrases in Uyghur language and say *Allah buyrisa, Allagha shukri*. Applying religious phrases in their original Arabic language may indicate that there is an effort for learning the religion.

\(^{20}\) *In shaa Allah* is an Islamic phrase which literally means if God wills.

\(^{21}\) *Mashallah* is an Islamic phrase that literally means God has willed it, usually used to express appreciation, thankfulness and serve as a reminder of God’s will in all good news.
Because understanding the meaning of those Islamic phrases is usually one of the starting points for learners in Islam and applying them in original language is a basic religious practice. This indicates that some of the Uyghur diaspora members have started to integrate religion into their daily life online through using religious phrases on Facebook. The context where these religious phrases used tells more. Findings show that *In shaa Allah* is often used for express their hope for the freedom and for the future of their homeland. For instance, while sharing information on religious prohibitions in homeland, members made comments by saying *In shaa Allah* for expressing their hope for freedom of religious practices in China, followed by *Ameen*\(^22\) from others.

In addition, postings indicate that religion has been seen as a way of not only maintaining ethnicity, but also solving problems that diaspora Uyghurs may be experiencing. While some postings suggested that religion is an important part of Uyghurs as who they are and members post that “we can keep our ethnic identity strong only if we hold on to Islam religion, our language, and our culture”; some other postings indicated reliance for religion as a way of solving problems. Members advised “we shall first resort to *Quran*\(^{23}\) and *Hadith*\(^{24}\), which can give answers to the difficulties we are having now”. Responses to this posting were positive that replying “good suggestion” and stated the importance of religion as spiritual support for overcoming challenges that Uyghurs facing in their life as emigrants in host countries.

Promoting Islamic knowledge on Facebook is the last but not the least point to mention. Although relatively few in numbers, Uyghur diaspora members appear to

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22 *Ameen* is an Islamic phrase which literally means may God accept.
23 *Quran* is the holy book of religion in Islam.
24 A *Hadith* is a saying or an act or approval or disapprovals of prophet Muhammed in Islam.
be quite active in uploading postings with religious content on Facebook. It seems that it is their obligation to post with a purpose of promoting Islamic knowledge online. Articles, e-books, website links, videos, and quotes were frequently uploaded on various topics including Quran and Hadith, prayers, faith, family in Islam, and dealing with stress. It is clear that members upload these postings aimed to spread Islamic knowledge among Uyghur diaspora. They seem to be advocating that religion helps with their current political situations by stating “we became homeless due to the reason that our faith has weakened. In history, we were strong when we had faith”.

5.3.5 Political Identity

Findings show that the fifth dimension of the Uyghur identity is political identity, negotiated primarily through communication on political issues in homeland. The main interest of political communication among the diaspora Uyghur members is sharing information and exchanging views much related to discontent and resistance towards the Chinese regime. Announcing and promoting political activities for members to attend and support is another form of political communication on Facebook. These communications on Facebook are not only a process of awakening political awareness, but also a process of developing political thoughts and different political views among members. Nevertheless, fear in relation to Chinese repression and intimidation clearly results in self-censorship among the Uyghur Facebook users. It appears that self-censorship may be preventing more vocal engagement by diaspora members in political communication on Facebook.

The messages the Uyghur diaspora members shared on Facebook indicate that they are paying close attention to the political issues in the homeland. They share
information and updates about conditions for Uyghurs within China and debate over political strategy in relation to Uyghur causes. A key issue is the internal migration of Han Chinese into traditionally Uyghur areas. Members gave much attention on this topic as it is considered to have an effect on many aspects of Uyghurs’ life in the homeland. The members express concern about Uyghur farmers who are being marginalized by the inward migration of Han Chinese. Specific concerns, for example, about the potential pressure on water supply would be caused by continuous Han migration into the Uyghur province. A member’s posting questions “why the government does not consider that there is not enough drinking water for them?” The members were particularly discontent with the integration of Han graduates into education system as teachers. 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 past the exams! Otherwise, look at this surprise, look, 13,000 Han graduates will come to help in our homeland! Although they are organized to come for internship practices, they will be registered workers in bilingual education system. Hmm, our poor children finish school as illiterates!

Here diaspora members are concerned that local Uyghurs will be excluded from employment opportunities. Further, they are also concerned that Uyghur children are disadvantaged, particularly, because those Han graduates are unqualified teachers. A member posted his personal experience at a school he worked in back in China. He was shocked by a mistake a Han graduate made during an experiment in laboratory. He could not believe that a graduate could make a simple mistake almost causing a dangerous accident. He was told by the school principle to not to expose this issue. Therefore, this member claimed these Han helpers are unqualified in their career/subject. Several other members supported this claim by telling their experiences and opinions on this issue.
The Uyghur diaspora expresses resistance to Chinese repression within China, and expresses hopes for freedom in their homeland. This, for instance, is manifested in the widespread sharing a famous poem named *Wild Pigeon*. This poem is written by Nurmemet Yasin Orkishi, a young freelance writer, who is in jail since the publication of his poem. *Wild Pigeon* is a strong portrayal of Uyghur people deeply unhappy with life under Beijing’s rule. This poem was shared widely among members on Facebook. A member posted a website link where this poem translated into ten different languages, including English, Mandarin, Italian, and German. Comments expressed Uyghurs’ sympathy for Nurmemet “will he rest in peace at Heaven” and using Nurmemet’s own words like “I can die freely”. Members admired and praised Uyghurs like Nurmemet as “freedom fighters”. One member uploaded news announcing another 20 Uyghurs sentenced to life imprisonment by Chinese authority. Responses to this posting call “those people are the ones who fight for Uyghurs”.

Facebook is used as a platform through which the Uyghur diaspora announce political activities, particularly political protests against Chinese regime. For example, a posting called to attend a protest against the Chinese regime on the remembrance of 16th anniversary of the *Ghulja* protest. Announcements like this are uploaded frequently. A member called attention to and support for the Uyghur cause:

Brothers, sisters, please have a look at this (a video link) tragedy in our homeland, and also forward it to the people in your host country so that they can watch as well. Let the world know about the tragedies that Uyghurs are facing under Chinese oppression!

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25 *Ghulja* is the name of a city located in west part of the Uyghur region. On the 5th of February, 1997, Uyghurs in *Ghulja* had a peaceful demonstration and called for equal treatment, religious and cultural freedom. Protestors were killed and imprisoned by Chinese authorities.
It is beyond the scope of this research to examine if the announcements of political activities on Facebook activate Uyghurs in diaspora to attend protests or not. However, these findings show that the Uyghur diaspora members use Facebook for political purposes which are important in the process of solidifying support for political causes among the Uyghur diaspora. Consequently, this Facebook use is contributing to the construction of political identity based on common aim of Uyghurs to strengthen solidarity against Chinese oppression.

On the other hand, communication on Facebook has enabled members to develop their political thoughts through which they find differences on political issues. For instance, the members have fragmented views on the issue of naming the Uyghur homeland. The focus is on whether the priority should be given to reaching an agreement over the naming of the Uyghur territory (XUAR) or achieving substantial human rights and political freedoms first. Some members suggested that having an agreed name can contribute to attaining freedom for the homeland faster by creating a platform for a shared identity name. Others argued that getting independence is more important: “we are not building our new country, but we are restoring it; so let us discuss how we can liberate our homeland from Chinese authority first” or “it is not a time for us to argue about the name now, it can be decided in our parliament in the future”. Some disagreements were expressed using metaphors liking 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 the name East Turkistan, giving historical justifications for using this name. 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 in 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 want to happen to us.

One member explained this idea more clearly by posting an article titled “Is it hostility or stupidity to make East Turkistan case is solely as an Uyghur cause?” 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 (the homeland of Uyghurs) which focuses only on one ethnic 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 to voice their opinion about this important question. This example indicates that there is political awareness rising among the Uyghur diaspora members, but that it is also fragmented.

Indeed, this fragmented and contested identity also becomes visible in arguments around setting up the blue flag of East Turkistan. A brief description of this episode illuminates the contentious nature of Uyghur political development.
A member wanted to set up the blue flag in a park where Uyghurs were to have a picnic. He 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: “Uyghurs will not want to take a photo with this flag on it, so let us do not set up the flag and do not make this social activity political”. Another member indicated the divided opinion and uneasiness about the use of the flag in public display by suggesting: “do 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 argument shows not only how fragmented the political views among the Uyghur diaspora members, but also how some Uyghurs are afraid of being political.

The fearfulness is a significant element in the construction of the Uyghur political identity. It most likely refers to the fear from Chinese persecution and intimidation. This might be the result of the long standing political repression at home and the most recent Chinese authorities controlling and monitoring of the Internet that are
internalized to such an extent that even in diaspora they fear being political. Diaspora members are afraid of the potential threat to their families, relatives, or friends back in the homeland may suffer if they do or say something against Chinese government abroad. Thus they reminded each other by posting: “China can spy your talking on Skype”. If talking on Skype can be detected, the communication on Facebook can obviously be detected as Facebook is a publicly open space. Therefore, they warned Uyghurs to be careful of how they express themselves online and tend to self-censor when it comes to expressing their political identity.

The fear and self-censoring can also be obstacles for online engagement among the Uyghur diaspora. The difficulty in engaging Facebook users in a more active engagement is illustrated with the episode described below. Several members of the Uyghur diaspora succeeded in publishing an academic journal aimed at introducing Uyghur culture and history and encouraging a more active engagement with Uyghur diaspora members. This group used Facebook to announce the publication. At the start, an announcement for the plan for publishing a journal and a website link for detailed information was provided in a post. Subsequently a call for papers and articles from Uyghurs was announced. In another post, a call for providing photos about Uyghur life in diaspora was made as a way of attracting interest and building support for this group. Several members commented on this post and suggested Facebook users who may have interesting and relevant photos. After this, calls for subscription to the publication were posted several times and this call was duplicated among four groups studied in this research. From this it can be seen that a strong effort was made in collecting subscription.

The words used in these posts eventually became more direct in their requests for a subscription. For example, the first two posts called for subscription as follows: “If
you would like to subscribe for this journal, you can do it through bank transaction”
and “good news, you can subscribe online now”. In the third post Uyghurs in
diaspora were kindly invited to make subscription for the journal and a subsequent
post outlined the challenges and difficulties of publishing the journal and the urgency
of getting enough subscription for publishing, framing the subscription as a form of
support. At last, they called for help: “Uyghurs, please support!” While this may be
an idiosyncratic example, it speaks to the limits of mobilization in online forums like
Facebook among the diaspora Uyghurs.
5.3.6 Facebook is Important for the Uyghur Diaspora

Findings show that the Uyghur diaspora members express strong awareness of Facebook as a useful tool of transnational connection and communication. They consider the importance of the Facebook for the Uyghur diaspora. For example, a group administrator expressed the intention of creating that group:

Assalamu alaikum brothers and sisters, I created this Facebook group to find answers for my questions. I have many questions in my mind. But when I was in our homeland I could not find answers either through my own thinking or through asking from others. Now I have a chance to live in a free world and ask my questions from the people who can think freely here. I also hope to share questions and answers with other Uyghurs as well. As we all may know, there are young Uyghurs like me who did not have freedom for their own thoughts, grew up within an education system in which we were not taught in our mother language, were not taught about our own history, and were not trained to think freely back in homeland. That is why I want to share the questions and answers on this Facebook group.

The person indicated clearly the importance of Facebook for him as an Uyghur and other Uyghurs his age, and the impossibility for them to communicate and exchange ideas freely in the homeland. He valued Facebook positively as a platform for Uyghur youth to share information and opinions. He considered that he has created an online platform for Uyghurs to come together to ask and answer questions so that they are able to understand their situation as Uyghurs better. Thus he expressed that Facebook has an important role in improving connections and understanding among the Uyghur in diaspora.

In addition, findings indicate that the Uyghur Facebook users confirm and enjoy the opportunities Facebook provides. This presence online bring happiness for some: “I would call Facebook is a special place to meet with other Uyghurs. I feel happy whenever I get acquainted with a new friend”. Here the capacity of the Facebook to connect the dispersed Uyghurs and bring the distance closer is clear. The search
function of Facebook has enabled the Uyghurs in diaspora to locate old and new friends and to communicate with them. This might be as a factor for the Uyghur diaspora who are living outside their homeland to help them to get rid of loneliness and to feel that they are belonging to Uyghur community online.

Members expressed more reasons for them to be on Facebook:

I could not find a proper place where I can share my several years’ experiences of living abroad until I found Facebook. I remember so many times I came across difficulties and did not know from where I could seek help. Sharing my experiences may give help for some Uyghurs become flustered abroad.

Here this member considered the Facebook as a suitable place where he can share information with others. His intention joining Facebook was not only to become connected with other Uyghurs, but also for sharing his experiences being as a migrant for several years. He felt that he is obligated to share on Facebook, as a member of the Uyghur community. The connectivity on Facebook motivated him to help other Uyghur diaspora members who are experiencing difficulties as migrants, as he did. His narrative also indicates the possibility that diaspora members may use Facebook as a source of information or advice for solving their difficulties. Connection and communication on Facebook with such an intention can be a process for strengthening solidarity among diaspora members. This is not simply generalizing one posting for all the Uyghur diaspora; there were many other postings which support the necessity of such an online atmosphere in which members are willing to help and encourage each other. For example:
I share information on Facebook, because I hope the postings could have given any support, help, or hope for Uyghurs who are dispersed and for the brothers and sisters who are struggling in disappointment, particularly the Uyghur youth who are like me who is deeply feeling homeless abroad. As you can notice, I post about achievements of Uyghur individuals who concern about his/her people and some other readings that I found useful for reading.

I like to be on Facebook to meet with other Uyghurs, particularly with Uyghur intellectuals and with Uyghurs who is contributing the development of Uyghurs. Because knowing their ideas, deeds and accomplishments gives me moral strength and courage; it makes me to feel the inner solidarity that could have existed among Uyghurs.

The above narratives clearly demonstrate that the Uyghur diaspora members look at the Facebook as a platform for sharing, learning, and seeking encouragement from each other. For these members the purpose of being connected on Facebook is beyond simple networking. Sharing and seeking help and advices are one of the motivations to be on Facebook; they do so as they feel they are members belonging to the Uyghur diaspora community.

5.4 Summary

To sum up the main findings, a two-stage content analysis provided a first level of analysis by creating themes and links between key findings. In the first stage, publicly available messages from profiles of 117 Facebook sites created and used by the Uyghur diaspora were analysed. Messages were organized into six categories including privacy setting, thematic categorization, frequency of updates, popularity, country of location, and language usage. Findings indicate that the Uyghur diaspora is taking advantage of the Facebook and have both Facebook pages and groups for their communication for various needs. They use Facebook for a wide range of purposes and interests in politics, culture, education, language, religion,
entertainment, sport, and business, as well as for broadcasting news online. Their Facebook sites are located in more than 18 countries. Most of them are in the UK, Turkey, USA, France, and Australia, while in contrast, few of them are located in Central Asian countries. They use Facebook as a platform where they connect to each other both at transnational and local level. While most of the sites are created for like-minded Uyghurs to be connected and to communicate from any parts of the world and thereby create online communities on Facebook, there are also Facebook sites which are created by offline local Uyghur communities. Although not all the Facebook sites are frequently updated or popular, and the inside stories of closed groups are unknown in this research, it seems that the Uyghur diaspora members continue to take advantage of the opportunities provided by Facebook and to make their presence online.

In the second stage, messages from discussion archives of selected Facebook groups were analysed and were organized into emergent themes. Themes then were organized into five categories according to different dimensions of diaspora identity. Findings show that the Uyghur diaspora identity is emerging and is represented from five different dimensions including ethnic, cultural, religious, national, and political identities. The first dimension of the Uyghur diaspora identity is ethnic identity which is expressed through a common sense of belonging to Uyghur ethnicity, feelings of anxiety about ethnic identity loss, and responsibility for protecting and maintaining this identity. The construction of this identity is manifested through the members’ self-identification as Uyghurs, encouraging higher self-esteem, sharing ethnicity related knowledge and putting effort in preserving the Uyghur language on Facebook.
The second dimension of the Uyghur diaspora identity is cultural identity which is expressed through a common sense of same cultural root as well as through an acknowledgment of preserving the Uyghur culture as part of maintaining the Uyghur ethnic identity. The third dimension of national identity is mainly based on differentiating between Chinese state and the Uyghur region as homeland, and between the Uyghurs and Chinese Han population. The religious identity is also emerging, and expressions of discontent towards religious restrictions in China and promoting religious consciousness is reflected on Facebook. Similarly, discontent towards the Chinese government is also the main aspect of political identity of the Uyghur diaspora. This dimension of identity is manifested through members sharing political information and opinions about political persecutions back in China, calling for attendance at political activities, awakening political awareness, and developing different political views among the diaspora members. It is also clear however, that a fear of surveillance online and persecution by Chinese authorities towards family members and associates in China has resulted in self-censoring. Clearly these concerns explain to a significant extent the abstinence from deeper political activity among the Uyghur diaspora, in the context of widely felt discontent with the Chinese regime as well as from more active political participation on Facebook in everyday settings. Therefore, the findings demonstrate that a collective Uyghur diaspora identity is being constructed through the transnational, everyday communique on Facebook.
Image 14. Example of Uyghur Facebook page
CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an interpretation of the findings and analysis in relation to previous literature. It demonstrates how the findings provide answers for the main research question of *How the Uyghur diaspora identity is being constructed through transnational communication on social network sites.* How these insights fit into the existing theoretical and empirical diaspora studies is also considered. This chapter systematically addresses the main issues discussed in the thesis: diaspora identity construction, and the use of Facebook of the transnational Uyghur diaspora.

Analysis indicates the Uyghur diaspora identity is multidimensional comprising of ethnic, cultural, national, religious, and political dimensions of it. Therefore, each of these dimensions of this diaspora identity and their representations online are discussed in separate sections. Cultural identity, as one of the aspects of ethnic behavior, is integrated into the ethnic identity discussion. Nevertheless, the separation of each category does not indicate neglecting existing overlaps among these dimensions of identity. Doing so provides overall analytical clarity and aids the discussion in accordance with existing theoretical and empirical knowledge mentioned in previous chapters.

The last section discusses the general use of Facebook among the Uyghur diaspora, and more specifically, how Facebook is used for their transnational connection and communication, along with potential influences of Facebook on this usage.

In addition, other important and directly relevant issues such as state surveillance and self-censoring are also discussed. Implications of this study and suggestions for
future research are also stated when it is necessary throughout the chapter. A summary of the discussion is provided in the last section.

6.2 Searching for the Uyghur Ethnic Identity

The ethnic identity of the diaspora Uyghurs is being strongly and coherently articulated on Facebook. It is clear that diaspora members have found a new way to lead a struggle for self-identification, preservation and promotion of Uyghur ethnicity, culture, and language, expression of anxiety for losing Uyghur ethnic identity, exploration of knowledge on ethnicity, and expression of positive feeling of being Uyghurs. These findings indicate that the ethnic identity of the Uyghur diaspora is multi-faceted. It possesses facets which as pointed by Ashmore et al. (2004) and Phinney & Ong (2007) are the necessary components for the construction of ethnic identity of an ethnic group of people. An ethnic group is the reference group within which members identify themselves as members, share culture, feel a sense of belonging, and incorporate their ethnic identity (Ashmore et al., 2004; Phinney & Ong, 2007). The members represent and articulate their group ethnic identity through various components of the ethnic identity construction, including self-identification, ethnic group attachment, exploration of ethnicity, ethnic behaviour-language usage and cultural representation, and positive evaluation (Ashmore et al., 2004; Phinney & Ong, 2007). These components of ethnic identity construction have been found in the context of the Uyghur diaspora and their ethnic identity construction through Facebook which is discussed below.
6.2.1 Self-identification

Self-identification is considered a basic component and starting point of the identity construction of an ethnic group. It refers to categorizing oneself as a member of a particular ethnic group and it enables group members to represent who they are and to differentiate themselves from others (Ashmore et al., 2004; Phinney & Ong, 2007). The findings show that self-identification is significant among the diaspora Uyghurs on Facebook. Diaspora members self-identify as members of the Uyghur ethnic group and would like to be known as Uyghurs. They call themselves as Uyghurs and acknowledge that they are representing Uyghurs while they are abroad. They also express the responsibility of representing who are Uyghurs appropriately: “we shall care about how we act not only for ourselves but also for being as Uyghurs”. These indicate that members are positioning themselves as Uyghurs and representing their identity through their acceptance and acknowledgement towards the Uyghur ethnicity.

Moreover, by calling themselves as Uyghurs, they seek to establish their differences with others. The most prominent ‘other’ in this context is not other groups in the host countries (Wonneberger, 2004), but rather the Han Chinese population. They used words like Zhongguoluqlar (the people of China), Henzular (the Han people), and Xitay (the Han people) to refer to people of Han ethnicity. The use of linguistic differentiation here helps to distance ‘self’ from ‘the other’ in order to call attention to self and to assert an identity that is different from that of the other person” (Fong & Chuang, 2004, p. 11).

Therefore, it is important to recognize that Uyghurs’ self-identification has centered not on defining their identity in the host countries, but rather on drawing limits between what is Uyghur and what is Chinese. For many Uyghurs Chinese Han
ethnicity constitutes the ‘other’, not the different cultures and ethnicities in the host countries. Therefore, the ethnic identity of the Uyghurs is constructed as opposed to an autonomous identity not against host countries, but in opposition to the Han majority back at home. This finding is similar with findings from Kang & Yang’s (2011) study of Taiwanese diaspora whose members are constructing their ethnic identity online through self-identifying themselves as Taiwanese, not the Chinese.

6.2.2 Ethnic group attachment

Ethnic group attachment which refers to a sense of belonging to an ethnic group is considered as a key component of ethnic identity construction (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Attachment indicates a further understanding of who I am within a group after self-identifying oneself as a member of that group. The diaspora Uyghurs show a strong ethnic group attachment on Facebook. Findings show that a common sense of belonging to Uyghur ethnicity is reflected through several aspects. Firstly, the diaspora Uyghurs identified with one another because of a common political struggle, a sense of common fate. They show resistance against ethnic discrimination and share an interest in and concern with what happens to the rest of the Uyghurs who live in homeland. Secondly, a common feeling of loss in relation to their original homeland is expressed. The members also connect to one another because of common history, culture, and language. They are anxious about losing these aspects of identity, and consequently, a sense of responsibility to maintain and preserve them is strongly represented on Facebook. As such, all of these commonalities express a strong sense of belonging that the diaspora Uyghurs hold towards their ethnic identity.
6.2.3 Exploration of ethnicity

With self-identification and ethnic group attachment as a foundation of identity some diaspora members may put effort to explore their ethnic identity further. These diaspora members are developing a “more stable sense of self” within that ethnic group through exploration which refers to a process of learning and “seeking information and experiences relevant to one’s ethnicity” and it is essential to the construction of ethnic identity (Phinney & Ong, 2007, p. 272). Exploration is described as a critical part of identity construction as it leads individuals to develop an identity which is a secure and stable sense of self and less subject to change with new experiences (Erikson, 1980; Phinney & Ong, 2007). Findings show diaspora Uyghurs are enthusiastic in using Facebook to explore their ethnicity, in a similar way of Burundi diaspora members use website to explore knowledge about their ethnicity (Kadende-Kaiser, 2000). Although face-to-face experiences, such as attending a cultural event, is not what would happen on Facebook, sharing and gaining information about ethnicity is what members rely on to increase their knowledge about themselves online. For example, postings on Uyghur history are shared online, most of which is not available in China. Similarly, photos of historical places in their homeland and of historical leaders and heroes are also actively circulated. Importantly too, postings on Uyghur literature and Uyghur traditional customs which educate diaspora members about the thoughts and daily life habits rooted in Uyghur society are shared. Similarly, in cases of other diasporas, sharing and gaining information about ethnicity encourages diaspora members to revive and create collective memories and to articulate common values and a shared sense of belonging (Ignacio, 2005; Kadende-Kaiser, 2000; Miller & Slatter, 2000; Schulz & Hammer, 2003; Tsaliki, 2003). Therefore, exploration of ethnicity contributes
positively to the Uyghurs to gain knowledge of their ethnicity, to encourage them to understand who they are, and to develop a consciousness about Uyghurness among members.

6.2.4 Ethnic behaviour - cultural representation and language usage

Ethnic behaviors are the actions through which ethnic group members express their internal ethnic group self-identification and attachment on their daily life practices (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Ethnic behaviors refer to the shared ethnic related activities, such as speaking or writing the ethnic language, eating the ethnic traditional food, celebrating festivals, and representing ethnic culture (Ainslie, 2001; Orbe & Harris, 2001; Rigoni, 2002). Moreover, ethnic identity construction is not “simply a direct product of shared culture and language, but rather, also of the way culture is represented and language is used in the formation of ethnic identities, both as collective and individual identities” (Fenton, 1999, p. 19).

Diaspora Uyghurs are actively involved in representing the Uyghur culture on Facebook. They represent their cultural identity through sharing cultural symbolic materials, such as photos from daily lives of Uyghurs, festival celebrations, and common collective memories of traditional culture. For many other diasporas, cultural representation online is not only a process of constructing ethnic cultural identity, but also is a way of maintaining and promoting the ethnic culture (Kanat, 2005; Mallapragada, 2000; Merolla, 2002; Merolla & Ponzanesi, 2005). Similarly, cultural representation online is enabling the diaspora Uyghurs to maintain and preserve their ethnic culture which is a vital contributive factor in the survival of ethnic identity (Orbe & Harris, 2001). Moreover, it is based on preexistent cultural identity which the Uyghurs developed but they are reshaping outside of the
environment of the Uyghur region back in China. They are developing a common sense of preserving the Uyghur culture while living in host countries.

In addition, a coherent sense of ethnic identity is strongly reflected in protection of and development the Uyghur language. Language usage not only functions as a means of communicative expression, but also indicates the speaker’s ethnic identity (Barton & Lee, 2013; Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Edwards, 2009; Fong, 2004; Phinney & Ong, 2007). The diaspora Uyghurs articulate a common sense of the value of the Uyghur language and view the language as central to their identity in a similar way that the Kurdish diaspora members see the importance of the Kurdish language in defining Kurdishness (Candan & Hunger, 2008). They also express the need for efforts to preserve and promote the use of the Uyghur language. Findings show that the Uyghur language, in Arabic and/or Latin script, has been used on 73 per cent of the identified Uyghur Facebook sites in this research. Although diverse languages including English, French, German, Chinese, and Turkish are also used, the Uyghur language usage is dominant. Using the mother language in online communication has an important role in representing and constructing diaspora ethnic identity (Anchimbe, 2005; Candan & Hunger, 2008; Merolla & Ponzanesi, 2005).

Furthermore, some scholars assume the Internet usage may bring a threat to endangered languages due to the use of various languages on online (Crystal, 2001). However, the evidence clearly suggests otherwise in the case of the Uyghur diaspora usage of Facebook. And the Internet is to be a savior of the minority and endangered languages (Cormack & Hourigan, 2007), the Uyghur language in this case. Because it appears that the interest, in using the Uyghur language, contributes to its protection and increased use. Expectations and encouragement around the transmission of
Uyghur language from first to second generation diaspora Uyghurs is also clearly expressed.

6.2.5 Positive evaluation of being Uyghurs

Positive evaluation refers to positive attitudes towards ethnicity including “feeling comfortable with one’s ethnicity and having positive feeling about one’s ethnic membership” (Phinney & Ong, 2007, p. 273). This concept is important in the context of Uyghurs because they have been subject to self-criticism which has led them to low self-esteem and negative attitudes about themselves. As identity develops, a stronger ethnic identity based on learning about one’s ethnic group and making a commitment to the group leads to the rejection of negative views (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Similarly, findings show that the diaspora Uyghurs share their opinions against self-criticism on Facebook and are encouraged to have positive attitudes about Uyghur ethnicity. For instance, a strong sense of belonging through uploading postings saying “proud to be an Uyghur” is visible. These findings indicate that the Uyghurs online are developing on ethnic identity with positive connotations about being Uyghur. Positive attitudes such as pride and feeling good about being Uyghur have been part of a development of a stronger ethnic identity. This, in turn, contributes to unifying Uyghur diaspora as members of Uyghur ethnicity.

6.3 National Identity: ‘Official’ vs ‘Imaginative’

The national identity of the Uyghur diaspora on Facebook is constructed through a differentiation between an ‘official’ national identity and an ‘imaginative’ identity that has emerged through a common sense of belonging to their homeland. The first
meaning of national identity here refers to “a person’s legal status or citizenship in relation to a nation” (Fong & Chuang, 2004, p. 30). For instance, the national identity of Americans or Chinese Han people is American or Chinese based on their official citizenship in relation to America or China. Accordingly, the national identity of the Uyghurs is ‘Chinese’ as they are citizens of China and officially belonging to the Chinese nation state. In this context of the Chinese national identity, “all people living in the territories of the People’s Republic of China are seen as Chinese citizens, regardless of their ethnic, cultural and racial background” (He & Guo, 2000, p. 6).

However, “people are not only citizens of a nation; they participate in the idea of a nation” (Hall, 1992, p. 292). A nation is not only a political entity, but also an imaginative nation/community (Anderson, 1983; Hall, 1992). Members of this imaginative nation feel a common sense of belonging in their minds and feel bonded to a symbolic or real homestead (Anderson, 1983; Candan & Hunger, 2008; Hall, 1992). The imaginative nation accounts for its “power to generate a sense of identity and allegiance” among its members (Schwarz, 1986, p. 106). Some diasporas discover and construct their ‘imaginative’ national identity online through exchanging ideas and information, and dismissing national symbols among geographically dispersed members without face-to-face communication (Candan & Hunger, 2008; Diamandaki, 2003; Georgiou, 2002; Sheyholislami, 2011; Tynes, 2007). This is particularly true for diasporas without their own nation state. The Kurdish diaspora is one of the best examples of constructing a Kurdish national identity and building their own nation online (Candan & Hunger, 2008; Sheyholislami, 2011), as discussed in the literature review.
Similarly, findings show that the Uyghur diaspora, who officially belongs to China, express an ‘imaginative’ national identity in relation to their homeland, the Uyghur region inside Chinese territory. Further, this ‘imaginative’ national identity is different from the ‘essentialist Chinese national identity’ which is expressed by Chinese Han diaspora (Ding, 2007; Wong, 2003). The ‘essentialist Chinese national identity’ refers to a Chinese identity centered on an ideology founded by Confucian tradition and “people from various parts of the world who speak the Chinese language and share the Chinese culture are regarded as Chinese, even though they may not be of the same ethnicity and may profess different political beliefs” (Chan, 2006, p. 7).

In contrast, as findings show, the Uyghurs in diaspora represent their national identity through their love and loyalty for their homeland, contradictory feelings they have for the Chinese state, and their patriotism and sense of responsibility for the freedom of their homeland. In addition, the dominant language used on their Facebook sites is the Uyghur language and the culture they promote and express enthusiasm on Facebook for is the Uyghur traditional culture. Hence, national identity in the context of the Uyghur diaspora does stand for a dual identity - official and imaginative. While the first one is ignored, the second one is emerging among the diaspora Uyghurs as seen on Facebook.

Findings also show that this emerging national identity is at an early stage of development. It appears not strong enough to unify diaspora Uyghurs for building an Uyghur nation online compared to examples from some other diasporas. For example, in case of the Sierra Leonean diaspora, the national identity unified diaspora members to join in rebuilding their nation online, to search ways to strength their nation, and to prepare for “the institutional structure to return” (Tynes, 2007, p.
In contrast, the Uyghur diaspora’s national identity online is basically expressions of love and loyalty for their homeland through daily postings on Facebook, and it is still far from fostering the diaspora members to engage in building a nation online. In addition, diaspora Uyghurs expressed a dilemma to use or not to use East Turkistan flag which is one of their national symbols. In comparison, the Sierra Leonean diaspora and the Kurdish diaspora widely used national symbols, such as “Kurdistan map, the Kurdish national flag” (Candan & Hunger, 2008, p. 133), Sierra Leone “flag, constitutions, even soccer teams” (Tynes, 2007, p. 502) to contribute to the building of their imagined nation online. Additionally, while there was no critical engagement in the debates surrounding nation and national identity among the diaspora Uyghurs on Facebook, Kurdish diaspora collectively organized campaigns and formed togetherness and identification within their own nation online (Candan & Hunger, 2008; Sheyholislami, 2011).

Nevertheless, the imagined national identity seems to provide a common feeling of belonging for the diaspora Uyghurs on Facebook. Indicating reluctance to be ‘Chinese’ through expressions of contradictory feelings towards the Chinese Han population, discontent and resistance towards the Chinese regime, and hope for the freedom of their homeland is the common feeling bringing the Uyghurs together as one people from one original homeland on Facebook. Moreover, without a sense of national identification people would experience “a deep sense of subjective loss” (Gellner, 2006, p. 63). Their feelings of homelessness and loss appears to be compensated by their love for their homeland which they prefer to call motherland, homeland, not Xinjiang or Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region which are the official names chosen by the Chinese authority. Although this national identity of the
Uyghurs is too immature to generate cohesion among the diaspora Uyghurs, it seems to be an indispensable part of the identity construction of the Uyghur diaspora.

6.4 Religion as Ascribed or Chosen Identity

Religious identity representation on Facebook shows that the Uyghur diaspora members seem to perceive their religious identity in different ways. For some of them religion is not a salient identity which is described as “ascribed identity” by Peek (2005, p. 223). Ascribed religious identity refers to individuals perceiving a religion subjective to the society he/she grows in and viewing the religion as part of their everyday lives; yet do not engage in critical reflection regarding the meaning and practices of that religion (Peek, 2005). In the context of the Uyghurs, they accepted Islam as their religion more than a thousand years ago; since then Uyghurs perceive religion as an ascribed characteristic of their ethnicity and associate Islam with their individual selves and Uyghur society. Some of them explore their religion and achieve knowledge and reach a status in which religion is their “chosen identity” (Peek, 2005, p. 226). In contrast, some of them are not interested in or are not given the chance (most likely due to religious prohibitions in China) to explore what it really means to be a Muslim and how to practice Islam in a proper way. Therefore, they have limited knowledge about Islam; yet recognize themselves as Muslims through belonging to Uyghur ethnicity and as members of the Uyghur society. Not surprisingly, findings indicate that, a concern about religious prohibitions and persecutions is the main representation of religious identity of the diaspora Uyghurs on Facebook. A religious identity which is much related to discontent with religious restrictions from the Chinese government is being constructed on Facebook.
On the other hand, for some other Uyghur diaspora members religion is a “chosen identity” (Peek, 2005, p. 226). When individuals “matured, they began to view religion not as an unquestionable, ascribed characteristic, but as a chosen identity” (Peek, 2005, p. 226). There may be other factors individuals chose a religion as their first identity. In the Uyghur context, it can be assumed that these Uyghurs who developed a strong religious identity might have explored more about their religion, particularly after coming abroad as strictly limited chances are available for learning Islam in China. Consequently, they may become more religious and choose to be identified as Muslims (Peek, 2005). This does not mean that these Uyghurs put religion over their ethnicity. However, their religious belief is stronger than those who represent an ascribed religious identity; consequently they express their faith through religious practices. As findings show representations of religious identity of the diaspora Uyghurs is expressed through their use of Islamic phrases in daily postings on Facebook, like Nigerians express their religious identity through using religious greetings in emails (Chiluwa, 2010). Further, it is also reflected through some of the members committed to spreading Islamic knowledge on Facebook. As findings show, these Uyghurs, although few in numbers, are playing a role in articulating a sense of collective awareness among the Uyghur diaspora, in a similar way Trinidadian Catholic priests spread religious belief through the use of Trinidadian websites (Miller & Slater, 2000). They may assume the role of religious affiliation (Peek, 2005; Vertovec, 2000) to bring unity to the Uyghurs through a shared faith and emphasize the importance of religion in strengthening their ethnic identity.

Diaspora Uyghurs therefore seem to differ in how they emphasize their religious and ethnic identity. “Although religion is often a significant aspect of ethnic culture, it is
difficult to establish the exact relation between the two – whether religious affiliation is essential to the ethnic community or if religious orientation is ancillary to ethnic identity” (Williams, 1988, p. 12). While some members stress the importance of religion and state that weakening in faith has resulted in the current situation of the Uyghurs as “homeless”, some members show more passion in preserving Uyghur ethnic identity.

It is also important to mention that religious identity of some members may have even been hidden somehow. Because individuals “are able, up to a point, to anticipate validation or rejection in particular contexts and at particular times, this influences the identity claims that they make” (Bechhofer, McCrone, Kiely, & Stewart, 1999, p. 526). Although the Uyghur diaspora is not distinguished by its Islamism or a politicised Islamic identity, some members may choose not to express their religious identity to avoid being stereotyped.

To sum up, the Uyghur diaspora members perceive their religious identity from different points of view. Nevertheless, these differences seem to not causing any division or conflict among the diaspora members. Although it is not sure if religion provides a unifying force for them, the reliance on religion as spiritual support in settling down in host countries and discontent towards increasing religious restrictions implemented by Chinese authority may enforce a common consciousness. As Cohen states while a religion does not directly create a unified diaspora itself, it can contribute to creating a common consciousness binding the diaspora (Cohen, 1997). Such a common consciousness, in turn, plays an important role in preserving Uyghur ethnic identity as well as the construction of the Uyghur diaspora identity and communication on Facebook appears to be important aspect of it.
6.5 Political Identity and Political Participation

There is evidence that political identity construction has been taking place through communication on Facebook. Yet, the extent to which a cohesive political identity is being developed on Facebook is less clear. While the Uyghur diaspora uses Facebook as a platform where they share political information and express their political views, translating interest and expression into political participation and activity appears to present a difficulty.

Findings show that the Uyghur diaspora members use Facebook sites clearly for the purpose of circulating messages about political issues facing the Uyghurs who live in China. They share information and updates about conditions for Uyghur friends, families and associates within China, debate over political strategy in relation to Uyghur causes, political restrictions and persecutions, ethnic discriminations in the Uyghur region, solidify support for Uyghur political causes, such as human rights freedoms, and express hope for justice and freedom. Disseminating and discussing political messages among members on Facebook seems to be an important approach for them to express their discontent against the political regime, and fears and anxieties in relation to Chinese repression and intimidation, as well as encourage political awareness among diaspora members.

As such, the political identity of the Uyghur diaspora is being shaped in relation to their expression of discontent towards the Chinese regime. Clearly, with an aim to express this common feeling, some members were motivated to create Facebook sites dedicated to political information about Uyghurs. As results show, there are 29 political Facebook sites created and used by the Uyghur diaspora, out of an overall sample of 117 sites research sample. These sites came into existence to collate and
disseminate political information about the Uyghurs in China. Meanwhile, these political sites provide a platform where communicative interactions among members awaken their political consciousness. For example, an administrator of one political site states that his Facebook site is devoted to “raise awareness of the Uyghur people’s struggle for freedom and justice”.

Sharing and discussing political issues has been a process in which political thoughts are developed and differing political views are expressed. For example, the fragmentations reflected on the matter of naming the Uyghur region as East Turkistan or Uyghuristan, on the choice of whether to use the East Turkistan flag at a gathering or not. Yet, the reflection of fragmentations seems to be a normal outcome of communication. The findings did not indicate that holding different political views would cause any division or conflict among the diaspora Uyghurs.

Nonetheless, raising and sharing political issues may not encourage the development of forms of participation that contribute to the strengthening of the political voice of the Uyghur diaspora. Online communication is suited to diaspora members living in diverse locations “to connect, share information and analysis, and coordinate their activities” (Bernal, 2006, p. 175). For the Uyghur diaspora members, it seems that connecting with each other, sharing and discussing political messages on Facebook is what they need for expressing their discontent against political regime. However, translating this expression into a strong and unified political voice advocating change of the political situation in the Uyghur region and mobilizing the diaspora members for political activities on Facebook is beyond the level of current political engagement online.
The results suggest that the potential for Facebook to mobilize the Uyghurs in relation to political or activist causes is perhaps limited. Findings indicate a weak relatedness between the general members of Uyghurs diaspora and Uyghur political activists and activities on Facebook. This is evident in the lack of discussions about Uyghur political activists and their lobbying for the Uyghur cause. For instance, announcements of political activities, and protests were uploaded frequently, yet these postings rarely receive responses from members. Facebook could have been used as an active political platform where members affiliate their online communication with their political activists and political activities and attract support for the Uyghur political movement, like members of the Tibetan diaspora have done using Facebook and Twitter (Drissel, 2008).

Possibly, a high level of political participation exists on the other Uyghur Facebook sites, particularly the sites categorized as Politics sites. However, this research has targeted Universal Facebook groups which are publicly open, frequently updated, and having members over 100. There are six Politics groups publicly available and are updated on a daily or weekly bases. Four of them are multiple groups created by the same administrator; the other two groups have low participants under 100 members which did not match the requirements for examination in this research. Most importantly, examination of Politics groups which are dedicated to political content would lead highly biased result in this research, given the focus on everyday online interactions. Moreover, if there were intense political discussions and high level of participation in those political groups, it could have been reflected more or less in the Universal groups that were examined in this research since these universal Facebook groups are publicly open, attract the most number of participants and have the highest level of updates among the Facebook sites created and used by the
Uyghur diaspora. Nevertheless, there is scope for further research into the level of political activity online and the potential role of social network sites in political engagement.

Findings indicate one of the possible reasons the Uyghur diaspora members are restrained in their political engagement might be the uncertainty of members towards the success of the Uyghur political cause. As Drissel (2008) argues, a political movement “must demonstrate to potential recruits that it will be likely to succeed in its mission; otherwise the prospective supporter will be much less likely to embrace the movement” (p. 81). Although the call of Uyghurs for self-determination, and independence at large has been more widely internationalized than ever before (Clarke, 2010; Petersen, 2006; Shichor, 2010), it is unlikely to be successful not only due to the strong influence Chinese government possesses internationally, but also due to the “internal tension and discord” among the Uyghur political activists and organisations (Shichor, 2007, p. 124). Some Uyghur political activists seek for greater autonomy in the Uyghur region, some seek for independence. Such a disagreement “has forced diaspora Uyghurs to identify with one or the other – with none” (Shichor, 2007, p. 124). Thus the Uyghur diaspora members are not given a belief strong enough to possibly encourage and mobilize them to take part in the claim for the Uyghur cause. Gamson (1992) describes such a belief as “a prerequisite for mobilization and collective behavior” (p. 232).

In addition, results suggest fear from surveillance by the Chinese state might be another reason for limiting political participation. China has implemented an electronic monitoring system called ‘Great Red Firewall of China’ to regulate Internet traffic through the country. Individuals who spread politically sensitive writings or view banned websites have been deemed to be “subversive” or
“disturbing to the social order” (Hachigian, 2002, p. 43). The long standing political repression at home and the Chinese authorities controlling and monitoring of the Internet that are internalized to such an extent that even in diaspora the Uyghurs fear from state surveillance. They are afraid of being political which may cause potential repercussions for their family and social circle members. Diasporas are bounded up with political and social situations in their homeland which are to some extent justifying their diasporic life; meanwhile, eventually returning to their homeland, when the time is right, may be part of their diasporic discourse too (Demmers, 2007).

The Uyghur diaspora members have their families, friends, and relatives who have built up a stable life in their homeland. Their concern is that their actions or words against the Chinese government might put those who live in China under threat. There have been examples of police examinations, detections, and persecutions from authorities in families with members living abroad. At the same time, some of the diaspora members may want to return to home when the time is right. Therefore, they face the dilemma of wanting to return home and/or not wanting to cause any instability both in their own life abroad and the lives of those who live back in the homeland or dare to take the risk of voicing their political views against the Chinese regime. This dilemma creates what Demmers (2007) calls “a fear for peace” among the Uyghur diaspora (p. 15). Consequently, the fear for peace could have resulted in a self-censoring tendency amongst diaspora Uyghurs and undermined their sense of freedom of expression even though they are living outside China. The Uyghur diaspora members seem to be monitoring and self-censoring themselves when it comes to expressing their political identity. This is evident for instance in postings from members warning each other to be careful of how they express themselves online as their actions online can be detected.
Self-censoring is not unique for the Uyghur diaspora. For instance, Somali diaspora members self-regulate in relation to expressing political opinions on their diaspora websites (Issa-Salwe, 2008). Although the members of the Somali diaspora have clear opinion about freedom of expression, they do self – censor in some occasions in order to preserve political stability and social harmony by minimizing political contradictions among members at a time of social strife (Issa-Salwe, 2008). It appears that the reason for the Somali diaspora to self-censor is different from that of the Uyghur diaspora. Members of Somali diaspora self- regulate themselves on what they publish online in order to take responsibility for social stability by avoiding potential social conflict within their diaspora. In contrast, the Uyghur diaspora members self-censor themselves out of fear of potential persecution from Chinese authorities. The vacillation between exercising freedom of expression and controlling it, in the Uyghur context, is much more related to state surveillance.

In analyzing the levels of political engagement among the Uyghur diaspora, the features of Facebook should also be taken into account. As an online space, Facebook is open for all its users. Daily interactions and messages on Facebook are publicly available. Publishing on Facebook is automatically available on a global stage. As such, it is not surprising that surveillance is to be expected. Concerns about privacy online may also result in passive participation in political discussions. And this theme is taken up in the following section.

6.6 A Platform for Transnational Connection and Communication

As a widely dispersed group, the Uyghur diaspora members and communities have actively used Facebook as a platform for connectivity and communication. While
transnational presence of the Uyghur diaspora has been enabled on Facebook, the access to the Internet and the host country contexts have contributed to emerging differences among this diaspora. Further, creating Facebook sites has triggered the likeminded diaspora members to form groups online; meanwhile, some features of the Facebook seemed to have an impact on the usage of Facebook.

Facebook has enabled the geographically dispersed diaspora Uyghurs to engage in transnational communication and identity development. Findings show that there is an on-going formation of transnational connectivity among diaspora Uyghurs on Facebook. They seek to be connected to each other and come together to communicate on the Facebook sites they join from different parts of the world. Facebook provides a set of functions and applications particularly search function, which encourage the Uyghurs to locate their diasporic members and communities and to join in from anywhere as long as they have access to the Internet. It is identified that Facebook sites are located in over 18 countries from which the Uyghur diaspora members are participating in online communication; the number of countries could be more than that as the location of 33 out of 117 sites is not identifiable or not clearly stated. From New Zealand to the Netherland, from Saudi Arabia to the USA, Central Asia and Turkey, globally dispersed Uyghur diaspora have made their transnational communication possible on Facebook. The presence of the members is important whether they are active or not in terms of participating in discussions. The non-active members who do not respond to postings, at least, read the postings which give them a feeling of connectivity with other Uyghurs online as findings indicated.

Interestingly, the transnational character of Facebook usage is shown by the fact that a larger Uyghur population does not necessarily mean a higher level of Facebook
usage. For example, in the Central Asian countries which host a population of 1,500,000 Uyghurs, only 3 Facebook sites are available; by contrast, 13 sites are available in UK where only about 100 Uyghurs live. This finding is similar to findings from Reyhan’s (2012) study on Uyghur websites that “countries where there is a strong Uyghur population are not necessarily the most developed digital spaces” (p. 11). Indeed, some of the Uyghur diaspora members may not even have access to the Internet, let alone Facebook. For example, those who live in Central Asian countries live with restricted internet use as a result of state control (Shichor, 2010). However, for the purpose of this research, the attention was focused on the contribution of this relatively new communication platform of Facebook which may stimulate the identity construction and unification of the Uyghur diaspora. As findings show although the Internet access is not universal among the diaspora Uyghurs, Facebook is still a powerful tool for those who are online to be the communicators and participators in the process of identity construction.

Meanwhile, findings show that Uyghur diaspora identity construction is also contextual to the host countries in which the Uyghur diaspora has settled. Uyghurs living in the USA tend to be more political, while Uyghurs living in Europe tend to be more concerned about ethnic identity and preserving culture and language, while Uyghurs living in Turkey tend to concentrate on both culture and religion. One of the possible reasons may be related to the political and social environment of the host countries. Diasporas provided with a facilitating environment, such as political opportunity, financial and organisational support, for their political mobilization in their host country, tend to construct stronger political identity (Demmers, 2007). These supports are available for the Uyghur diaspora in the USA (Yuan & Allison, 2010) which are to a large extent absent in Turkey. In contrast, cultural closeness and
religious similarities between Uyghurs and Turks may be the main element contributing the construction of cultural and religious identity of the Uyghur diaspora living in Turkey. In Europe, particularly France, commitments from active individuals have been contributing to cultural identity construction in regards to preserving Uyghur culture and language. This finding may indicate different trends of identity construction in relation to geographical ideology development among Uyghur diaspora and suggest further studies in Uyghur diaspora identity construction in the context of host countries.

Further, Facebook features have enabled the Uyghur diaspora members to create Facebook sites, particularly groups on which they seek to be connected and to communicate with each other based on similar interests. It appears that the Uyghur diaspora members are taking advantage of the networking possibilities provided by Facebook, and are trying to bring members together based on common interest. As findings show, as many as 117 Facebook sites were created for many specific and generalized interests. For example, there are sites specifically on topics of politics, culture, entertainment, business, sport, religion, education, and language. These sites enabled the diaspora Uyghurs to enhance their knowledge on related topics and above all create networks by allowing communication amongst members with similar interests or concerns. Besides, some Facebook sites have become a significant resource of information about Uyghurs. For example, the Facebook site, *Uyghur*, has developed into a form of an online encyclopaedia which provides a substantial range of information on Uyghurs, including culture, tradition, history, language, literature, cuisine, and current life of the Uyghurs.

Notably, Facebook groups that reflect offline groups are also created on Facebook. Uyghur communities in eight countries, such as the USA, Australia, France, have
Facebook groups for communication among diaspora members living in the same country. Although some of the Facebook sites turned out to be not active in terms of updating and uploading postings, the presence of these groups indicate that Facebook has been emerging as a platform for diaspora Uyghur for their connection and communication at the local level in host countries. In addition, two groups were created specifically by and for the female members of the Uyghur diaspora. This can lead to further exploration of the role the Uyghur women could play in establishing a transnational collaboration among the Uyghur diaspora.

Importantly, Facebook sites have been a platform for the diaspora Uyghurs to share information and exchange opinions through everyday interactions. As Facebook makes it possible for them to upload postings and comments, they call Facebook “a special place” that allows them to communicate with other Uyghurs. In addition, they acknowledge the importance of sharing information on Facebook, and the potential of the online communication for Uyghur diaspora to help build solidarity and unity. Facebook makes it possible for them to upload postings so other Uyghurs can read or comment. Sometimes the comments prompted discussions through which thoughts are developed and differences or similarities in ideas are represented as well. Alternatively, there was a real time communication between Uyghurs on Facebook. However, this research is not trying to generalize by arguing that Facebook use is a means through which the Uyghur diaspora replace face-to-face communication and enclose themselves in Facebook sites. Yet, the high frequency of updates and the wide range of the messages shared by the Uyghurs indicate the increasing importance of the Facebook as a way to close the distance between diaspora Uyghurs through which they construct a sense of belonging to a transnational community of the Uyghur diaspora.
Nevertheless, it is also important to notice that, as a feature of Facebook, sites do not request their members to upload postings or comments. The members are encouraged to do so; yet, they do not have to upload anything. Consequently, it is not difficult for some active individuals to dominate Facebook communication. Evidence from this research indicates the emergence of certain individual members that are playing a dominant role in uploading postings on Facebook, especially in regards to postings with political and religious content. These individuals act as opinion leaders that dominate the public perceptions of diaspora identity and have an impact over the production of identity online (Castells, 2001; Ward, 2005). Clearly, very active users can reach prominence on Facebook and can influence the prominence of the content online through high levels of online activity.

In addition, Facebook imposes no limitations for users in relation to creating and/or maintaining Facebook groups. Members can create as many groups as they want and one consequence of it is the duplications of the groups. For instance, as findings show, there were four political sites created by the same user and were differentiated from each other by slightly different words in their titles. As a result, this duplication contributed to the increase in numbers of sites categorized as political sites. Moreover, Facebook groups are chosen to be continued or discontinued at users’ preference. It is probable that by the time of finishing this research some of the studied Facebook sites will have disappeared from the Internet, while others will have been newly created.
6.7 Summary

In summing up the interpretation of the findings in relation to previous literature as discussed in this chapter, answers for the research questions are provided. The answers to the three sub-questions are presented first. Answering them provides an overall answer to the main research question that looks at how the Uyghur diaspora identity is being constructed through transnational communication on social network sites.

Sub-question One: How is Facebook being used by the Uyghur diaspora?

Research findings indicate that the Uyghur diaspora is using the Facebook for their transnational connection and everyday communication and making Facebook as a common platform where they can engage in diaspora identity construction processes. The findings are in line with existing literature about diaspora and the Internet (Diamandaki, 2003; Karim, 2003; Miller & Slater, 2000; Kissau & Hunger, 2008; Panagokos & Horst, 2006; Tsagarousianou, 2004) showing the construction of identities takes place through everyday interactions, such as the daily postings on Facebook walls. In the light of these findings, the Uyghur diaspora Facebook sites stand out as one of the key areas where diaspora identities are articulated in everyday online communication.

Moreover, Facebook has introduced a new communication space which facilitates the creation of online connections and communication in ways that have never been possible through traditional media for the Uyghur diaspora. The members and communities of this diaspora can break the boundaries of geography and meet and talk with like-minded co-ethnic members all over the world. They share information and opinions through Facebook walls and the online communication seems to be the
most important feature of Facebook as a platform for transnational communication of Uyghurs in diaspora. The Facebook usage unites members to share online identities through everyday conversations and commitments that make their online communities possible (Marcheva, 2011; Oiarzabal, 2012). Nevertheless, as it has been underlined throughout the thesis, it is important to refrain from seeing Facebook and online communication as ‘producing’ diasporic communities; rather this research emphasizes the critical role of online spaces in enabling the transnational connection and communication essential for the development of diaspora communities and their identity construction. Essentially, a community is held together by what members have in common. Online communication is important through which commonality is reinvented and strengthened online.

In addition, it seems that being in exile is a nursery of identity construction of the Uyghur diaspora and Facebook has been a meaningful weight in it. Discovering one’s identity more than they could do in their homeland can be “a substantial share of people who fell from contemporary conflict areas migrate to liberal democracies and western countries” (Demmers, 2007, p.17). Freedom of expression outside China and the Internet has enabled the Uyghurs in diaspora to rediscover their identity free, although self-censorship exists among them, from state control. Like the diaspora Kurds in Germany, they “only discovered their Kurdishness in Germany, where they could express their culture, language and organise themselves without repression” (Demmers, 2007, p. 17). Being exiled and inhabiting online spaces has allowed the diaspora Uyghurs to manifest and express ethnic, cultural, religious, national, and political sentiments.

Sup-question Two: How is Uyghur diaspora identity being expressed and negotiated on Facebook?
Research findings indicate that the Uyghur diaspora identity online has an emergent character, actively being explored and constructed through Facebook use. This identity is homeland orientated and multi-dimensional.

The Uyghur diaspora identity has centered not on defining the diaspora Uyghurs’ identity in the context of the host countries but rather, on preserving the Uyghurs in China, who they claim are on the verge of extinction as a result of policies implemented by the Chinese government and Han Chinese domination in the Uyghur region. As Cohen (1997) states “the old assumption that immigrants would identify with their adopted country in terms of political loyalty, culture, and language can no longer be taken for granted. To the immigrants of old are added millions of refugees and exiles whose movements are primarily dictated by circumstances in their home countries rather than a desire to establish a new life” (p. x.). In addition, communicative interactions among diaspora members with same origins motivate the members of diaspora to maintain a collective identity and close ties with their original homeland (Vertovec, 2000). Similarly, findings illustrate that the main concerns expressed in communication on Uyghur Facebook sites are centered on topics about the Uyghurs and their homeland. Thus the main components of the Uyghur diaspora identity are based on discontent and resistance towards Chinese regime, preserving Uyghur ethnicity, culture, and language, and claiming for freedom of religious practices. Therefore, the Uyghur diaspora identity is constructed with a strong orientation of original homeland and as opposed to an autonomous identity not against host countries, which reflects the insights above, but in opposition to the Han majority back at home.

Further, findings show that the diaspora identity of the Uyghurs is multidimensional: different dimensions of identity including ethnic, cultural, religious, national, and
political, identity have been articulated online. Each dimension contributes to the articulation of the Uyghur diaspora identity to different extent. It seems that political, national, religious, and cultural identities are subsumed beneath the ethnic identity, which thus enables ethnic identity to become a main source of unifying the Uyghur diaspora identity.

While political identity is constructed through awakening political awareness among members, the extent to which this identity can unify the Uyghur diaspora identity and can create a political mobilization among them for a stronger political voice is not clear. Fragmentations on political views exist as well. The national identity of the Uyghur diaspora is emerging through a differentiation between their ‘official’ national identity as Chinese and ‘imaginative’ identity in relation to their homeland. Although national identity provides a common feeling of belonging to an original homeland among the Uyghur diaspora, it is not so strong as to bring Uyghurs in diaspora as a nation online. Similarly, religious identity of the Uyghur diaspora is also emerging. Although there are differences in how the members perceive their religious identity, religion is assumed to be a contributive element in creating a common consciousness and in preserving the Uyghur ethnic identity. Yet, the extent to which religion can provide a unifying force to the diaspora identity is not clear at this stage.

Ethnic identity, on the other hand, seems to be able to provide a unifying force for the Uyghur diaspora identity. The Uyghur ethnicity, as findings show, encompasses various aspects, such as self-identification as Uyghurs, a sense of ethnic group attachment, commitment in exploration of ethnicity, representing and preserving Uyghur culture and language, and positively evaluating being members of the Uyghur ethnic group. Moreover, other aspects represented in political, national, and
religious identity, such as discontent and resistance towards political suppression and religious restrictions, and differentiating the homeland from the Chinese state and the Uyghur people from Han population, also express the hope for preserving the Uyghurs and the Uyghur ethnicity. In addition, cultural identity is integrated into representing and maintaining ethnic identity naturally. All of these aspects demonstrate that the Uyghur diaspora identity is naturally unified around preserving the Uyghur ethnicity.

Sub-question Three: What implications, if any, exist affecting Facebook use by the Uyghur diaspora?

Although Facebook sites do emerge as an alternative space for the Uyghur diaspora to engage in identity construction, it is essential to recognize members’ ambivalence towards the privacy on such online spaces. Research outcomes suggest that the members cannot take Facebook as a space absolutely free from state control; worries about surveillance by the Chinese state might be a serious limitation to Facebook as an online platform encouraging greater participation. Political identity construction, particularly, is being experienced with no promises on development of forms of engagement that contribute to the strengthening of the political voice of the Uyghur diaspora. The Uyghur diaspora demonstrates an awareness that their presence online can be detected by Chinese authorities so that they naturally engage in self-censorship. Given the public character of Facebook, surveillance is expected and an obvious contributing factor in Uyghur self-censorship.

In conclusion, and answering thus the main research question, Facebook and online communication plays an important role in the construction of the Uyghur diaspora identity. The Uyghur diaspora has learned to celebrate the publicity of their diaspora
identity through the use of the Facebook. Facebook is more like a symbolic ethnic reference of the Uyghurs, where they acclaim their ethnic identity, where they represent their culture and search for their history, where they express their longing for the homeland and speak out their political claim. They celebrate using Facebook for connecting between members and use it in their daily transnational communication, though they contain themselves from extensive participation due to self-censorship. That is a result of their participatory relation to the identity: they are producing their identity and Facebook is part of this interactive everyday communication.
The Footprint
Abdurehim Otkur

We started our journey which was too tough as we young,
Now grandsons grown up, war horses can be ridden on.
We were too few journey was hard at the very beginning,
Foot marks left on deserts, we are now named a Caravan.
Cross the desert, cover the tops, leaving footprints behind,
Many left unburies there, they were the men of the men!
Though unburied in open field with the bright red tamarisk,
Flowery graves will be made in a spring by freedom fan.
Footprints left, destiny left, all of them left in the past,
Either it winds or sand moves, will not erase them, never can!
The Caravan keeps going, though the horses are weak and hurt,
The footprints will be followed by grandsons or the great ones.

26 Abdurehim Otkur (1923-1995) was a well-known Uyghur poet whose poems portray various aspects of the Uyghur society and the Uyghur people.
27 This poem is chosen here because it has a symbolic meaning for Uyghurs as it contains element of hope and continuation of their struggle for their rights.
CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

7.1 Restating the Significance of the Research

The main reason for conducting a content analysis of Facebook sites created and used by the Uyghur diaspora is because Facebook, as one of the most popular online social network sites, is used by diverse groups, in diverse locations, for diverse purposes. Hence, there was much to be gained by exploring content and messages shared on Facebook, by investigating how Facebook has been being used by the Uyghur diaspora. Focusing on what diaspora Uyghurs talk about and share online and which identities they are representing on Facebook tells us a great deal about two aspects, firstly the usage of Facebook and, SNSs more broadly, and secondly the identity construction of this particular diaspora.

Indeed, the premise of a content analysis approach is not only that each aspect sheds light on the other, but that one aspect cannot be better understood without the other: what was presented in this thesis should reveal that being diaspora Uyghurs is integral to the use of Facebook for diasporic everyday communication; and that online communication is becoming integral to being Uyghurs in diaspora. In this sense, this research did not simply ask about the use of Facebook, rather, it examined how a diaspora’s members attempt to make themselves publicized in an online space, how they express their identity in this online environment and meanwhile try to mold the online everyday communication in the construction of their diaspora identity.
7.2 Conclusions of Findings

Research findings suggest that Facebook is an important medium of communication that Uyghur diaspora members use in their transnational connection, communication, and their experience of being Uyghurs online. Facebook is a platform with a central role among the Uyghur diaspora to share what is happening and where, with particular focus on concerns about Uyghurs back in their homeland, meanwhile to explore their ethnicity through which members get a clear understanding of who they are and form a stable sense of self. Facebook facilitates communication across borders among members and communities who reside in different parts of the world. Facebook also facilitates the exchange of opinions about their rights as an ethnic group more freely, publicly and passionately than they could do in China.

Research findings indicate that the Uyghur diaspora identity is constructed through continued connection between the diaspora and the original homeland. This is demonstrated by the Uyghur diaspora sharing information on Facebook mainly about various aspects of life in the Uyghur region. This highlights that a sense of communality is emerging as a result of shared common experience and concerns and involves solidarity with co-ethnic members in their collective longing for their homeland. The research points out that the Uyghur diaspora identity centers not on defining their identity in relation to their adopting process in host countries, but rather, on expressing discontent and resistance towards Chinese regime, preserving Uyghur ethnicity, culture, and language, claiming their political rights and freedom for religious practices in China.

Moreover, the identity of the Uyghur diaspora is characterized as multidimensional which encompasses of ethnic identity, cultural identity, national identity, political
identity, and religious identity. While ethnic identity is being constructed with a common sense of belonging to the Uyghur ethnicity and a feeling of responsibility for maintaining this ethnicity, cultural and religious identities are being constructed through common cultural and religious attachments. Political and national identities, on the other hand, are being constructed through a sense of common fate in relation to discontent and resistance towards the Chinese regime. The construction of political and religious identities demonstrates differences in views and perceptions. However, the construction of ethnic identity indicates an emerging unification among the Uyghur diaspora, enriched with elements of cultural and national identities. It appears that ethnic discrimination and the political regime implemented by the Chinese authority impels the diaspora Uyghurs to strongly express an ethnic identity with which they differentiate themselves from the Han population, and between their homeland and China. It seems that cultural, national, religious, and political identities are subsumed beneath the ethnic identity, which thus enables ethnic identity to become the main source of unifying Uyghur diaspora.

In addition, the Uyghur diaspora identity is characterized by its subjectivity, to some extent, to the local context of the host countries where the diaspora is residing. In other words, the Uyghur diaspora identity construction can be affected by contextual situations in host countries in relation to what help they can get for their needs, particularly, in relation to political mobilization, as shown in findings. Additionally, the Uyghur diaspora identity can also be affected by individual dominance in the communication on Facebook groups particularly if some members upload postings actively to an extent that they take dominance in online communication. Yet, this research does not propose any one general explanation for these aspects. Further
research needs to look at specifically what aspects are playing a role in creating these effects and at the technology itself as an active component in this account.

7.3 Recommendations

Indeed, the diaspora Uyghur identity is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, still under construction. Identity changes with time and context. It appears that along with the increase in the resistance towards the Chinese regime and in the transnational communication among the diaspora Uyghurs facilitated by online spaces, the construction of their identity is continuous in its emergence. Although it is more likely that this diaspora identity will stay its orientation to the original homeland, it is hard to foresee towards which dimension the Uyghur diaspora identity will develop in the future. The Uyghur diaspora is in an on-going search for what it means to be the Uyghurs and what future they want for them as Uyghurs, therefore future research with broader scope and analysis is needed. As identities are not static phenomena but exist in continuous development, it is expected that the outcomes of this research will, in time, be built upon by further studies to enhance our understanding of the Uyghur diaspora identity construction which has not received much attention in the past.

Moreover, the content analysis approach with its focus on Uyghurs on Facebook is far from a limitation. It is not only necessary as SNSs are a meaningful phenomenon used by the Uyghur diaspora in various places, but it is also a sound basis for building upon broader generalizations and further studies as the present study provides a point of comparison for future work. No research has been done that attempts to provide an overview of the SNSs usage, online spaces, identity
construction, and the Uyghur diaspora. This field can gain substantially by producing material that will enable researchers to understand the very different cases of social and technical possibility that have developed around SNSs in, for example, Facebook versus Twitter, online identity construction of Uyghurs living in America versus Turkey, or SNSs usage and identity construction of the Uyghur diaspora versus Tibetan diaspora. Each of these is constantly being redefined through transnational engagements with forces such as the SNSs.

Additionally, this research is merely the beginning of an empirical study on the exploration of the Uyghur diaspora identity construction on SNSs, which has used Facebook as an example. This research is expected to establish a foundation for further studies and online communication is only one aspect of examining identity construction. Qualitative studies of interviews with members of the Uyghur diaspora, particularly SNSs users, could shed more light on the understanding of the Uyghur diaspora identity construction phenomenon. An analysis of how the Uyghurs that are not part of the online communities are negotiating their identities and how and to what extent are these experiences being shared online by those that choose or have the skills and resources to use online technologies can provided further complimentary understanding as well.

7.4 Limitations

This study entailed some limitations. To start with, content analysis requires that each of the coding categories must be defined as precisely as possible. In this research, particularly in the second stage of data collection and analysis, the coding categories including different dimensions of identity such as political, national,
ethnic, religious, and cultural, have been defined. However, due to the complex and fluid nature of the concept of identity, these codes can overlapped which makes it difficult to be very precise. Yet, due to clear coding categorization and help from previous literature, the data was placed and discussed within a clear structure. In addition, it was not easy to interpret the findings in this research. Here, the consideration is about the difference that may occur between the intention of the message and the researcher’s interpretation. For example, the quote “proud to be an Uyghur” was interpreted as a strong ethnic identity representation. However, it is also possible that the Facebook user just sent this message without such a strong intention with ethnic orientated thoughts. There are other possible interpretations, but the available data do not allow us to discriminate among them.

Further, the most difficult part for me in the process of this research has been the separation between ‘we’ and ‘they’. As a member of Uyghur diaspora, my identity is also emerging and under-development, a central motivation for this study. Therefore, being objective, not interrogating my own intervention was not easy in analyzing the data. The non-participant data collection method did not allow me to participate in the discussions of Facebook walls so that I can distance myself as much as possible from the discussion topics. Yet, having the same homeland and diaspora background has helped me to interpret the data and uncover what is happening in regards to identity construction of Uyghur diaspora online. What the diaspora members are sharing online and for what purpose reveals the emerging character of the Uyghur diaspora. In addition, I recognize that despite benefiting from the advantages of sharing the same cultural background as theses Facebook users, I might have taken certain things for granted and missed out on facts that seemed obvious to me but could have had significance for others.
Finally, the observations could only account for the communicative interactions among the group members who participate actively on Facebook in terms of uploading postings and making comments. The perspectives of the Uyghur diaspora members who do not use Facebook are not included in this study. Further, the findings in this study are not representative of the practices and perceptions of other diasporas on Facebook or those on other social network sites. Using a comparative approach between two different diaspora usages on Facebook could offer a better insight of the significance of this medium of communication for the diaspora. Since online communication technologies are changing more rapidly than users can keep abreast with them, it would be interesting to investigate through further research whether this networked medium of communication among the Uyghur diaspora sustains over time and how new changes to the medium are incorporated by users in their practices. Hence, the findings from this research cannot be generalized because of the limited samples and use of one type of social network sites. Nevertheless, there is enough evidence to indicate emerging trends in identity construction of diaspora Uyghurs as observed in everyday online communication practices.
REFERENCES


