Identity, Responsibility, then Politics:
The Uyghur Diaspora, Facebook & the Construction of Identity Online

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Panel: Social Media & Communication Technology
Central research concern:

How is social media being used by Uyghurs to facilitate the construction of diasporic identity?

What characteristics does the emergent diasporic identity exhibit?

Approach:

Mix-methods quantitative \((\text{mapping})\) & qualitative \((\text{interpretive content analysis})\)
Who are the Uyghurs?

- A significant **ethnic minority** of Turkic origin within People’s Republic of China, moderate Sunni Muslim; pop. 10 million
- ‘Homeland’ – Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), Western China – incorporated into Chinese state in 1949; long history of both independence from & control by China
- Post-Mao Chinese policy of Uyghur **assimilation** into Han Chinese;
- Significant Han migration into XUAR resulting in increased **tension & disenfranchisement** of Uyghur communities
- Recent widespread Uyghur discontent – internal social & political unrest;
- Significant outward **migration & diaspora since 1980s**, est. Uyghur pop. outside China: 1.5 million

![Fig. 1 Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), China](https://example.com)
Diaspora & Diasporic Identity

- “...collectives of individuals who identify themselves, and are identified by others as part of an imagined community that has been dispersed from its original homeland to two or more host countries and that is committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland” (Demers 2007, p.9).

- A collective of ‘one true self’ through which diasporic members share history, culture and identity outside one’s homeland. Involving discovering and bringing to light, in various forms of representation the ‘oneness of diaspora’.
Diasporas Online

Internet communication generally regarded as centrally important in understanding contemporary diaspora & a key location of diasporic identity construction:

“The internet has allowed most of these communities to discover and rediscover this shared imagination and commonality; it has taken even further the potentials for developing diasporic culture of mediated, transnational and partly free from state control communication” (Georgiou 2002, p.3)

‘Virtual ethnic communities’ (Elkins, 1997)

Internet important for facilitating social, political and economic networks within diasporic communities – contributes to overall strength of diasporic project (Tekwani, 2003)
Methodology / *Exploratory research*

**Stage One:**

'**Mapping**' diasporic social media

- **Quantitative** content analysis of Uyghur Facebook use, generating **typology** of social media use.
  - Accessibility
  - Frequency of updates
  - Naming conventions
  - Popularity
  - Geographical location
  - Language use
  - ‘About’

- Only pages/groups by Uyghurs

**Stage Two:**

**Thematic analysis** - Diasporic Identity in production

- **Qualitative** content analysis of selected sites identified in Stage One:
  - Identity themes:
    - Political
    - Ethnic
    - National
    - Cultural
    - Religious
  - Language theme
  - Naming convention theme
  - Users’ Perceptions of facebook
Mapping the Uyghur Diaspora Online

Fig. 1 Uyghur Facebook sites: Thematic categorization

Fig. 2 Frequency of updates of Uyghur Facebook sites

Fig. 3 Naming conventions of Uyghur Sites
Mapping the Uyghur Diaspora Online

Fig. 4 Popularity of Uyghur Facebook sites; No. of ‘likes’/or members

Fig. 5 Country of Location of Uyghur Facebook sites
“countries where there is a strong Uyghur population, like Central Asia, are not necessarily the most developed digital spaces”

Fig. 6 Language Used on Facebook sites

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Multi-lingual 32%
Uyghur 24%
Latin Uyghur 15%
English 13%
French 1%
Closed 12%
Arabic Uyghur 3%
Thematic Analysis/Identity

Uyghur Diasporic Identity: emerging unity & tensions

• Identity: ethnic, language/culture & religion aspects –rediscovering; diasporic identity construction not linked to host country; Han Chinese: as the identity ‘other’; fears & anxieties over preservation of distinct identity & language

• Responsibility & Representation – Educating the diaspora - “You are representing Uyghurs when you go abroad ...”; “we shall care about how we act not only for ourselves but also for being as Uyghurs”

• Political Identity – discussion of political issues; platform for raising political awareness

• But Facebook remains one-way communication platform/ ‘informative user experience’; not interactive enough to engage the Uyghur diaspora at large scale.
  • i.e. one post about political persecution in China was seen by 227 Group members, but attracted no comments
Uyghur Ethnic Identity

- Differentiation from Han Chinese – XUAR not used; ‘East Turkestan’ commonly used in English posts; variety of Uygur terms - “Weten” (motherland/home country), “Wetinim” (my motherland/home country), and “Yurt” (hometown) are used to refer XUAR.

- Cultural differentiation; avoidance of important Chinese dates and festivals and celebration of Nowruz (Persian/Central Asian New Year);

- Use of Islamic terminology – indicating nascent ‘Islamic’ identity, not yet solidified
Preservation & Use of Uyghur Language, in Resistance to Chinese Assimilationist Policy & Among Diaspora:

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

• “The challenge we are facing now is losing our language while overseas, even more tragically Uyghurs youth are ignoring this issue.”

• “[h]ow can we (Uyghurs living abroad) make sure that our children overseas learn their mother language without feeling additional pressure on top of their current study?”

“Hey!!! This person can speak Uyghur language!”
Uighur Language School in South Australia

LIKE & SHARE our page with your friends :D
Sharing is caring!
Expressing discontent/resistance for ethnic discrimination in XUAR

“Kongzi had grow beard, why Uyghurs cannot?” The word “禁” means prohibited.

Kongzi, also called KongFuzi: Confucius, (551–479 BC)
Uyghur Political Identity

• Uyghur issues & political solidarity

“Brothers, sisters, please have a look at this (video link) tragedy in XUAR, and also let the people in your host country know about it. Let the world know about the tragedies that Uyghurs are facing under Chinese oppression!”

• Tension over ‘naming’ Uyghur homeland vs political independence from China:

“we are not building our new country, but we are restoring it. So let us discuss how we can liberate our motherland from Chinese authority first” or “it is not a time for us to argue about the name now, it can be decided it in our parliament in the future”.

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

Limitations & Past Political Constrains
Fear of Expressing Political Identity

“your actions online can be detected”  (facebook posting)

Raise the flag or not!

— **Do not:** “Uyghurs will not want to take a photo with this flag on it, so let’s not set up the flag and do not make this social activity political”

— **Do:** “we have to have clear goal towards the freedom of our mother land, the Uyghurs who do not want the flag can miss this picnic, and they are not welcome”

— **Middle way:** “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”
Conclusions

Selected Findings:

An emerging **young** Uyghur diaspora identity ‘under construction’ taking place “through everyday interactions” on-line

✧ **The ‘mapping’ of Facebook use establishes extent & character of Uyghur Facebook use & identity construction**

✧ **Cultural, ethnic & political identities are being actively negotiated & developed through social media use**
  - Emerging and under construction
  - Existing within political limitations/fears and tensions
  - Weak alignment between political activists and diaspora
  - Dominance of certain users who act as opinion leaders
  - Contextual to the country of residence
  - With strong language/cultural links

✧ **Evidence of awareness** about the role **online social media** play in sustaining their diasporic communities
Thank you!
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