

Chapter 27

Cultural Identity Preservation Through Social Media: Refugees and Community

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores cultural identity negotiation on social media for a specific refugee group. Previous research indicates the importance of a sense of community and cultural preservation in regards to establishing and maintaining a cultural identity for this specific group. The group, Meskhetian Turks, is an example of ethnic identity and an established ethnicity through shared history and struggle. This chapter focuses on the virtual implications of the group's identity in social media. More specifically, it explores how social media platforms serve as a cultural unifier, where cultural identity is maintained and perpetuated in the face of an unattainable physical homeland.

INTRODUCTION

Social media is a part of everyday life for many people around the world. People use social media sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to express opinions, connect with people, share life events, and perform identities. Ease of reach and global connectivity make social media immensely influential socially, politically, and culturally for many cultural groups of nationalities, social and economic classes, races, sexualities, and ethnicities. The last group, ethnicities, is the focus of this chapter.

More specifically, the chapter aims to explore how refugee groups utilize social media for purposes of ethnic identity establishment and maintenance. To achieve this goal, one specific ethnic group's social media utilization is analyzed. The group, called Meskhetian Turks, are refugees, who are scattered in nine countries. Hence, without any physical borders or political systems to unite them, the group's social media utilization provides an example of ethnic identity's visibility and strength. To this end, the chapter first provides a framework for ethnicity and ethnic identity, then examines literature regarding ethnicity

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and ethnic identity in social media, after which two studies regarding Meskhetian Turks are explored. The main objective of the chapter is to examine the influence of social media on ethnic identity formation and preservation, which helps further research on both ethnic identities and intercultural new media.

BACKGROUND

Defining Ethnicity

Culture is a social construct (Applegate & Sypher, 1988) established and maintained through communication (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2007). It is a continually changing learned process of norms, values, beliefs, and perspectives (Sarbaugh, 1988). These shared cultural components (Martin & Nakayama, 1999) emerge as a bond that “forges a group’s identity and assists in its survival” (Orbe & Harris, 2001, p.6). Each cultural group creates its own unique identity, as a result of which, culture is subjective (Samovar et al., 2007). Cultural group members establish and maintain their identity through traditions, rituals, practices, and artifacts (Fong, 2004), thus, culture is, first and foremost, a communicative process.

Communication is how people, as “active interpreters” (Applegate & Sypher, 1988, p. 42), learn and make sense of the cultural context (Samovar et al., 2007). Moreover, cultural group members perform their identity through communication (Collier & Thomas, 1988; Fong, 2004) by taking part in the traditions, rituals, and practices. Hence, communication and culture are inseparable.

Culture and the consequent identity it creates are terms “employed broadly to include related concepts such as subcultural, national, ethnolinguistic, and racial identity” (Kim, 2007, p. 238). There are numerous cultural groups such as nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion. These groups are not independent from one another and exist through a mutual influence on each other. Nonetheless, they all present a unique identity for their respective members.

This chapter focuses on one of these concepts: ethnicity. Ethnicity is a problematic and complex term (Volkan, 1999). It is often conflated with other terms, such as nationality, race, religion, or language spoken. Ethnic groups may have overlapping components with different groups defined by race, religion, language, and such; nonetheless, ethnicity is a unique designation, which establishes a distinct cultural identity. Ndhlovu (2007) states “ethnicity or ethnic identity refers to common descent and common cultural or linguistic heritage that is shared because of kinship relationship” (p.131). Kinship is the crucial term in this statement. Ethnicity is a self-categorization of its members for the purpose of negotiating an identity (Wilkinson, 2011). Its borders are more transparent compared to other cultural groups. These transparent borders may be the reason why ethnicity is often conflated or used interchangeably with other terms, such as nationality or race. However, ethnicity is a unique identifier, separate from other cultural identifiers. It is important to make the distinction, because ethnicity creates a unique communicative identity. Conflation of ethnic identity with other group identities, such as nationality or race, results in negligence of cultural distinctions.

Nationality, for instance, refers to citizenship within political borders (Anderson, 1991). Nations have a physicality to them (Anderson, 1991) and are defined by borders. There are political and economic aspects associated with belonging to a nation. Nationality, consequently, provides tangible symbols, such as flags, anthems, constitutions, and historical places (Anderson, 1991). Overall, national identities are visible through these symbols and representations.

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